

ECOCRITICAL APPROACH TO ПЛАХА BY CH. АЙТМАТОВ

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ЭКОКРИТИЧЕСКИЙ ПОДХОД К ПРОИЗВЕДЕНИЮ Ч. АЙТМАТОВА «ПЛАХА»

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*«А ведь еще перед каждым человеком стоит неизбывная задача-быть человеком, сегодня, завтра, всегда»
(Ч. Айтматов)*

Аннотация. Данная статья посвящена экокритическому литературному анализу романа «Плаха» Ч. Айтматова. Актуальность данной работы заключается в вопросах экологии как никогда ранее вставшими перед всем миром в 21 веке и в частности в Кыргызстане. Изучение отражения этой проблемы в литературе является крайне важным и работы Айтматова, часто заключающие темы взаимоотношений человека и природы отличный тому пример. В нашем анализе мы рассматриваем изображение волчьей пары как одних из главных героев, а также изображение окружающей среды и человека. Используя метод пристального чтения (close reading) мы выявили обеспокоенность автора растущим невежеством человека по отношению к природе и исчезновением уникальной флоры и фауны в Центральной Азии. Айтматов предупреждает человечество о будущем, в котором и человек, и окружающая его природа понесут потери.

Abstract. The present paper is devoted to the ecocritical analysis of Ch. Aitmatov's novel "The place of the Skull". The topicality of this paper lays on the questions of ecology that are being at stake globally in the 21st century and that has become relevant for Kyrgyzstan as never before. Representation of the environmental issues in literature is crucial, and Aitmatov, whose works often contain themes of relationship between nature and human is perfect to study. In our analysis we distinguish the wolf pair as main characters, setting and human depiction. With the close reading as the method we reveal the author's concern of growing human ignorance towards the nature and the extinction of unique flora and fauna in Central Asia. The research concludes that Aitmatov warns humanity about the future, where both: human and its surrounding nature suffer losses.

Ключевые слова: Айтматов, Плаха, экокритицизм, волчья пара, место действия, человек.

Keywords: Aitmatov, The Place of the Skull, ecocriticism, wolf pair, setting, human.

With the rise of industrialization, issues of impending or existing hotbeds of environmental catastrophe have become acute. Deforestation, climate change, declining biodiversity, and other

environmental challenges are prompting countries worldwide to undertake campaigns and introduce new laws to regulate, to reduce the negative impact of human activities. Still, the problem exists. And at the moment, our country Kyrgyzstan, “*whose nature and its components are a national asset and one of the main factors of its socio-economic development*” suffers from annually increasing amounts of air, water and soil pollution; erosion, degradation, salinization and waterlogging of arable land; significant amounts of radioactive and toxic waste etc. [5].

The problems of the outside world have always had an impact on the emergence of new trends in literature, same for ecocriticism. Known also as “green cultural studies”, “ecopoetics”, “environmental literary criticism” it is a comparatively new, an interdisciplinary approach that has been evolving since the end of 80s-90s. Cherryll Glotfelty, a co-founder of ASLE (Association for the study of literature and environment) and the first professor of this field in the USA, defines ecocriticism as:

“The study of the relationship between literature and physical environment. Just as feminist criticism examines language and literature from a gender - conscious perspective, and Marxist criticism brings awareness of modes of production and economic class to its reading of texts, ecocriticism takes an earth-centered approach to literary studies” [3].

Ecocritics aim to raise the consciousness towards the relationship between human and nature and if possible tries to find solutions regarding contemporary environmental issues. They make an attempt to step away from anthropocentric point of view to the “*perspective of nature in its own terms*” [4]. In text interpretation they pay attention to nature, man portrayal and the interaction between them [2].

“Language and literature transmit values”, “for how can we solve environmental problems unless we start thinking about them”, - says Glotfelty [3]. He and the list of other authors and scholars as William Ruekert, Henry David Thoreu, Joseph Henry Vogel, Lawrence Buell, Serpil Oppermann, Dana Philips, Gary Snyder set the basis for the approach’s theory (Ecocriticism). However, it is still in its development, there are no fixed assumptions and single way of a theory application. Therefore, the topic of ecocriticism needs to be studied.

For the analysis we chose Chyngyz Aitmatov’s book “*Plakha*”/ “*The place of the Skull*” originally written in Russian in 1986. Our choice of this Kyrgyz author lies not only in his popularity and overall impact, but also in the fact that during his lifetime Aitmatov was an environmental activist himself, who for example, during his lifetime raised the questions of Issyk-Kul shallowing and pollution, and who pointed out the imbalance in the interaction between nature and man [5, p. 44-45]. The novel under discussion was determined by one of the dominant themes of the work as relationship of man and nature.

According to the purpose of the paper, we applied a qualitative method of research with the close reading as a tool, that allows to focus on specific details of the text and thus helps to reveal deeper meanings behind it. Regarding ecocriticism theory, we focused on the representatives of nature and man in this book as a wolf pair, setting and human. Therefore, the analysis consists of three parts, each of which answers the following research questions:

- 1) How is nature represented in “Place of the Skull”?
- 2) How is the wolf pair portrayed? What role does this pair play in the plot of the book?
- 3) How is human represented?
- 4) What is the author’s message?

Representation of the Wolf Pair as a Tragic Character

At the beginning of the novel, the narrator introduces Akbara’s and Tashchainar’s wolf pair

story line, which continues to appear episodically throughout the book and that, becomes central to the end. With the she-wolf as the main object of narration Akbara represents the head of the couple, while Tashchainar implies the physical strengths and protection:

«В этой паре лютых, Акбара была головой, была умом, ей принадлежало право зачинать охоту, а он был верной силой, надежной, неугомонной, неукоснительно исполняющий ее волю» [1].

The author attempts to describe Akbara's life, state and thoughts making them relatable to human. For instance, in these lines we see that she-wolf might feel fear and lack of confidence, might be vulnerable and in need of affectionateness and care from her partner's side:

«... после того как она немного поуспокоилась и пригрелась под широким боком Таишчайнара, была благодарна своему волку за то, что он разделил ее страх, за то что он тем самым возвратил ей уверенность в себе, и потому не противилась его усердным ласкам... » [1].

She-wolf can be jealous of her mate. When Tashchainar comes with the scent of another female wolf, Akbara expresses her anger by biting him and refusing to be near him for a period of time. Another example is when, she-wolf feels happiness of forthcoming motherhood and readiness to care and protect the unborn cubs:

« и тут же Акбара почувствовала как на нее нахлынула нежность-потребность приласкать, пригреть будущих сосунков, отдавать им свое молоко так как если бы они уже были под боком» [1].

We see she-wolf dreaming about eagerly awaited future saigas hunting season:

« ... не только сама добыча была желанна в тот час Акбаре, сколько то, чтобы поскорее охота состоялась, когда бы понеслись они в степной погоне подобно птицам быстрокрылым... В этом смысл ее волчьей жизни» [1].

As people do, Akbara cries and falls into despair after the loss of her offspring *«Особенно надрывалась Акбара. Она голосила, как баба на кладбище...» [1].* She prays to the wolves' Goddess Bury-Anne (the Moon):

« В ту ночь Акбаре как никогда четко и ясно привиделась богиня волков Бюри-Ана, находившаяся на луне. Ее корявый силуэт на поверхности луны был похож на саму Акбару-богиня Бюри-Ана сидела там как живая, с откинутым хвостом и раскрытой пастью.она обратилась к богине, плача и жалуясь» [1].

All these features make Akbara's character "understandable" and therefore it shifts the perception of her as just a wild animal to the living-being not essentially different from us.

Moreover, she-wolf's actions are represented in more positive frame than the majority of human characters in the novel. In contrast with them, Akbara kills enough to survive and avoids needless fights with people spurred by fear. In interactions with humans she-wolf prioritizes the safety of her family to the instant fight. When seeing a human for the first time instead of attacking Avdii she runs away with her cubs. When she sees helpless and dying Avdii again, she wants to take a revenge for the destruction of their home and the death of the cubs, but changes her mind and prevents Tashchainar from attacking. The only time Akbara purposely comes to the man's habitat is because her third offspring is stolen.

The union of this wolf pair and its mutual strength is supposed to lead for their long lasting survival, however as the author points out people's interference do not let it happen: *«Не было им жизни от людей ни днем ни ночью» [1].* The wolf pair attempts three times to raise the offspring. The first childbirth is special and Aitmatov conveys the importance of the moment through Akbara's "naming" her cubs: the oldest as *«Большеголовый»*/ "Big-headed", the middle as

“Быстроногий”/ “Swift-footed” and the youngest that resembled the she-wolf as “Любимица”/ “Favorite”. They meet a soon death in Moyunkum valley during the people’s raid on saigas which made Akbara and Tashchainar to move closer to Aldash lake. There, among the ancient reeds they have their biggest offspring of five cubs that also die due to the fire caused by people who has aimed to clean a new path to the mining places. Wolves go to the Ak-tyuz mountains and then to the Issyk-kul region, where their third and last offspring will be stolen by Bazarbai, an alcoholic shepherd that seeks material purposes. As the result, Akbara and Tashcainar express their anger by torturing people living near, by howling, attacking and killing the cattle: «... Акбара и Ташчайнар нарушили волчье табу и стали нападать на людей» [1]. Driven with despair, the wolves cross the line and start to kill not for saturation but for slaughter: «Полтора десятка суженых маток лежали растерзанные на пастбище. Всех их убили зверски, перерезав горло, убили бессмысленно- не для насыщения, а ради умерщвления» [1].

Akbara loses not only her cubs, but the life partner that leads her to the final revenge, see figure 1 below. She steals Boston’s hope and treasure, an only child Kenzesh. Ironically, Boston isn’t the one who harmed she-wolf, but he is the one who will suffer. It can be considered as She-wolf’s revenge on humanity for all of the sufferings she has gone through. It becomes more tragic when in the end, we see the scene that slightly reminds us the Kyrgyz small epic Kozhozhash [6], where the father kills his an only child the son mistaking him for an animal and thus gets punishment for killing more animals than he needed and causing imbalance. Here, in “Place of the Skull”, Boston while chasing she-wolf, shoots and accidently kills his son instead of wolf. Opposite to Kozhozhash, innocent Boston pays not for his but for Humanity’s sins. This is the end for Boston, his life and his line will never continue. The same is for Akbara. Revenge took place and both sides lost everything.

Nature representation

There are three main settings in the story *Moyunkum valley*, *Aldash lake* and *Issyk-kul region* and all of them are facing destruction, see figure 2 below. It starts from the valley and finds its climax in Issyk-kul as we discussed previously with the symbolic death of future for human and animal (nature).

In introduction to Moyunkum valley Aitmatov refers to it as the “lost world” and proceeds to describe its previous state. He depicts the valley as “great”, “endless”, “centuries old”, and the only place where drought-resistant tamarisk plant can be found, emphasizing thus the importance and the uniqueness of the place with its life circle:

«В этом утраченном мире, в далекой отсюда Моюнкумской саванне, протекала великая охотничья жизнь - в нескончаемой погоне по нескончаемым моюнкумским просторам за нескончаемыми сайгачьими стадами. Когда антилопы-сайгаки, обитавшие с незапамятных времен в саванных степях, проросших вечно сухостойным саксаульником, древнейшие как само время....» [1].

People come here to replenish the meat delivery plan to satisfy strict requirements set by the government. As the result, they kill a big amount of saiga antelope. At this point, Aitmatov touches upon the real event that took place in USSR, thousands of saiga shooting. In post-Soviet time, with the increasing poverty, high demand on antelope’s horns on Chinese market the hunting on saiga became uncontrollable and lead to their nearby extinction [7]. Keeping in mind that the book was released in 1987, we may assume that Aitmatov predicted the issue or at least was concerned with the upcoming danger.

Similarly to the valley, Aldash lake area is called “one of its kind”/ «уникальный» and distinguished with it “centuries old reeds”/ «древние камыши». The lake and plants impede road to

the open mining places of a rare raw material, therefore people decide to burn the plants. Consequently, local animals lose their shelter:

«Все, что веками жило в камышах, начиная от кабанов и кончая змеями, впало в панику камышовых чащобах заматались все твари», and ancient reeds are irrevocably destroyed « и на многих сотнях и тысячах гектаров вокруг озера Алдаш подверглись уничтожению древние камыши » [1].

In Issyk-kul region, the local people encounter a pasture degradation issue that affects scheduled delivery of livestock. One of the main characters Boston addresses the matter but is not heard by others:

«...какие травы, какие пастбища, какие земли были! А что теперь? Пыль да сушь кругом, каждая травинка на счету, а все потому, что запускают в десять раз больше овец, чем на такие площади можно, и овечьи копыта становятся пагубной для них» [1].

Thereby, although the main focus is not given to fauna in this part of the novel, the author brings up the existing problem of soil erosion due to extensive cattle grazing that has been relevant to Kyrgyzstan for years (<https://goo.su/O4fqz64>).

Overall, the settings portrayal gives us an ultimate ecological message: the nature habitat of animals is becoming smaller while human needs are on the rise and flora with fauna on the way to be distinct.

Human representation

«А ведь еще перед каждым человеком стоит неизбывная задача-быть человеком, сегодня, завтра, всегда» [1]. The thought expressed by Avdii in his monologue about the planet Earth and human on it is actually the author's central idea of most, if not all of his books: a human might be the one by description, but it is his everyday choice that makes him called "a human".

Throughout the novel a man is portrayed as a piece-breaker. He invades, extends his activity and fulfills his needs. However, Aitmatov does not necessarily call him evil, he obviously judges, but also tries to give an explanation for his deeds. For example, the Moyunkum valley invasion is explained as people's desperate action caused by the pressure of government to implement the five-year meat delivery plan:

«...важно не только производство мяса, а фактическая мясосдача, что это единственный выход не ударить лицом в грязь перед народом и перед выскательными органами свыше. Откуда было знать им, степным волкам, что и центров в области или звонки; требование момента-хоть из-под земли, но дать план мясосдачи, хватить тянуть: год, завершающий пятилетку, что скажем мы народу, где план, где мясо, где выполнение обязательств?» [1].

The participants of saiga- antelope slaughter a former senior lieutenant Ober Kandalov, Mishash, Кепа, a former drama theater actor Hamlet-Galkin and a former tractor driver and prisoner Uzyukbai are described as the "loosers", "embittered against the world people" with broken destinies:

«Прежде всего, это были люди бездомные, перекаати-поле, кроме разумеется Кепы: у троих из них ушли жены, все они были в той или иной степени неудачниками, а следовательно, были по большей части озлоблены на мир» [1].

Saiga shooting is their way of earning living wage to survive. Illegal drug dealers Grishan, Petruha, and Lyenka look for cannabis business to live a better life. Though, people like them force the officials to burn the plant's growth area. Aldash lake impedes the rare metal mining places.

Not all are "justified". We see Bazarbai, a hardened alcoholic that beats his wife and steals the wolves' offspring to make money for another alcohol. He puts in danger the entire village and

becomes the reason for Boston's loss.

The author states that people are selfish, they are the false Gods that forget of own dependency on nature «...люди, боги овец и они же овечьи рабы, те кто сами живут, но не дают выживать другим, особенно тем кто не зависит от них, а волен быть свободным» [1]. Their ideas may serve for good and evil and they have an opportunity to choose between creation and destruction «...в самых обычных для человечества вещах таится источник добра и зла на земле. И что тут все зависит от самих людей-на что они направят они эти самые обыкновенные для человечества вещи: на добро или худо, на созидание или разор» [1].

The author does not lose faith in humanity, there are good people: «И все-таки мир не без добрых людей...» [1]. Among the positive characters in the novel we distinguish Avdii Kalistralov, a person who wants to become a preacher of a new religion. He becomes a part of saiga shooting team and cannabis collecting gang to learn the motives that forced these people to live like that. In attempt to change them he dies. A minor character, Inga Fedorovna to whom Avdii is attracted to, as a part of Tashkent scientific expedition that is in charge of chemical-biological eradication of cannabis speaks about the way of plant dissemination prevention without damaging the soil. Another example, is Boston's wife Gulymkan a woman that feels empathy towards the she-wolf grief. And finally there is Boston, a hard-working man, loving husband and father that respects the nature, but who is "killed" for the deed of another human that lead him to take a revenge over Bazarbai.

It seems, though good people are not enough and industrial demands, poverty, unemployment, drug addiction, alcoholism will continue to be an obstacle, the reason for the environment suffering. The author portrays people's distancing from the nature which is the issue. We are the part of the nature and with own actions we harm not flora and fauna, but us. People's actions evoke wolves anger, Bazarbai's decision kills Kenzhesh, himself and Boston's family. The wolf loses chance to leave descendants as well as Boston loses his an only child. Aitmatov's message is that we all are linked together, therefore each of our actions will have an effect.

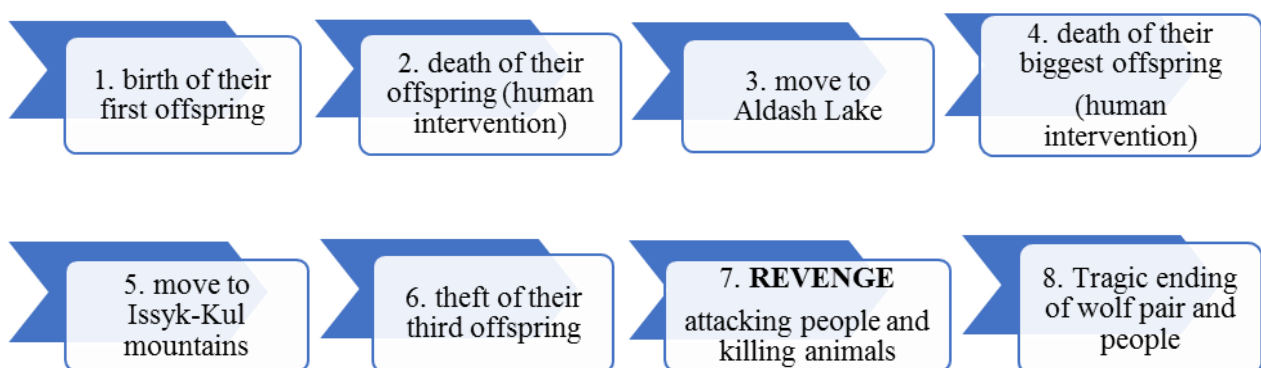


Figure 1. The Journey of Wolf-Pair Characters



Figure 2. Nature destruction in three settings. Source: NABU (<https://goo.su/u9myk8>); NASA (<https://goo.su/Ji47i>); KNEWS (<https://goo.su/3dibwLm>)

Aitmatov is proved to be studied from ecocritical perspective and is appropriate to be called ecocritic himself. During the analysis of the three aspects of “The Place of the Skull” we detected:

a) the personification of a wolf pair, that serves for relatability; the significance of their story line as their symbolic role of a nature that suffers from human; the reference to Kyrgyz small epic Kozhozhash;

b) the reference to the real environmental issues as species extinction, soil degradation, fauna destruction in Kyrgyzstan and overall in Central Asia;

c) the growth of human expansion and the discussion of truth that from one hand justifies the human activity (man’s perspective) and judges it (wild nature perspective); the idea of staying a human no matter what today, tomorrow, and always.

Aitmatov brings the realism to his work. Besides, he makes us view the existing environmental problems from both perspectives. He predicts upcoming ecological catastrophe and calls for keeping the balance with nature as the solution. We conclude that ecological issues represented in the book are crucial and people of the world should strive to keep and protect not only mankind but nature as well.

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