
ABDUVALIEVA, Rahima**The Great Kirghiz**

“Genius is the talent for inventing what cannot be taught or learnt”

(I. Kant).

That was the quote used as a heading for an article by a German journalist, after Chingiz Aitmatov had visited the German town of Kassel for a function which we had dedicated to the 1000th anniversary of the Kirghiz epic poem *Manas*. In German that sentence has a ring about it worthy of our Great Elder – “Aksakal” (“Grey Beard”), as we Kirghiz like to call our famous writer.

What was it that lent greatness to the Kirghiz writer, Chingiz Aitmatov? This is a question that is asked by young people in Kyrgyzstan. I see it as my duty to explain...

Chingiz Aitmatov burst like a comet into Soviet literature in 1957 and after one short year he was already being talked about in many different countries! Through his story *Jamila*, readers the world over came to learn of the Kirghiz people’s existence, their traditions and their distinctive way of life. International recognition of Chingiz Aitmatov went hand in hand with recognition of Kirghiz culture.

For writers in the West, Chingiz Aitmatov appeared like a sphinx – there was no other word for it. How could a son of an “enemy of the people” forgive the social system which had killed his father and continue to create such magnificent works in those conditions? Yet he went on doing so – going from strength to strength throughout the fifty years of his creative life.

The birth of Kirghiz cinema is also linked with the name of Chingiz Aitmatov. Most of this writer’s works have been filmed first in the USSR and then abroad after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Many well-known directors started out in the cinema with screen adaptations of works by Chingiz Aitmatov, such as Andrei Konchalovsky, Larisa Shepitko, Bolot Shamshiev, Eldor Urazbaev, Tolomush Okeyev and Gennadii Bazarov.

Aitmatov’s first work – the novella entitled *Betme bet* (1957) or *Kyzyl zholuk zhalzhalum* (1961) – was written about a deserter. For that era it was an act of rare courage, since prior to that the only person in the Soviet Union to have written about prisoners-of-war during the war of 1941-1945 was the Nobel Prize winner, Mikhail Sholokhov, in his story *The Fate of a Man*. This boldness on the part of a writer making his debut could have ended tragically, if Alexander Tvardovsky had not rallied to Aitmatov’s support. From then on the writer from Kirghizstan always used to give a copy from the first edition of all his new works to both Tvardovsky and Mukhtar Auezov – his older Kazakh friend and mentor.

His bold choice of subject-matter is a thread running through all works by Chingiz Aitmatov. While in his early works *Face to Face*, *Jamila*, *First Teacher*, *Camel Eye* and *Mother Earth* he merely acquainted readers throughout the world with the Kirghiz way of life, in the story *Farewell Gulsary* he gave a critical

account of the social fabric of his country, attracting still greater respect than before for himself as a writer with a philosophical bent. The profoundly philosophical conclusion of his novel *The White Steamship* put Chingiz Aitmatov on a par with internationally renowned writers such as Ernest Hemingway and Antoine de Saint-Exupéry.

The novel was the only possible genre for Chingiz Aitmatov to use in his mature period to express his moral and ethical principles and his world-view. The appearance of each of his novels was a major landmark in the history of Soviet literature and the culmination of this creative path was *The Day lasts more than a Hundred Years*, for which the writer was nominated for the Nobel Prize. *The Scaffold* marked the end of the Soviet period in the writing of Chingiz Aitmatov.

Having been born and bred in Kirghizstan, I can truly say that Chingiz Aitmatov also had a real talent when it came to the titles he selected for his works. It is impossible to convey all the nuances of meaning in translations of his titles into other languages from the original Kirghiz. This is always one of the greatest challenges for those translating his works into European languages, as I often point out to students during my lectures.

It is striking how *The Scaffold* – Aitmatov's last novel written during the Soviet period – also marks the beginning of his post-Soviet writing in Western Europe. In 1986 the writer met Friedrich Hitzler during a visit to Germany, who was to become his 'right-hand man' in his literary activity up to the very end of his life... This novel came out in German in 1986 in Hitzler's translation and that was followed by translations entitled *The White Cloud of Genghis Khan*, *Cassandra's Brand*, journalism, fairy-tales and reminiscences... and *The Eternal Bride*.

The post-Soviet period in our Aksakal's career as a writer was not only memorable as regards the number of works he completed and the range of subjects broached, but also the fame which now attended the life of Chingiz Aitmatov in Europe.



The respect and admiration for the Kirghiz writer was especially pronounced in Germany: whenever the writer came into a room, his readers would fall silent, as if they had glimpsed a halo round his head radiating personal magnetism. Silent homage would be paid to Chingiz Aitmatov, a sign of profound respect.

Our Aksakal had nothing to prove to them! After each appearance the audience would be left sitting entranced, as if hypnotized!

Apart from his inborn talent as a story-teller, which he had inherited from his *Karagyz-apa* (paternal aunt), Chingiz Aitmatov possessed a tremendous capacity for work, forged in the difficult war-torn years of his childhood. It was this industriousness which had made it possible for him to write such an enormous number of works, which have since been translated into more than a hundred languages.

Perhaps Aksakal's most remarkable quality of all was his demanding attitude to his writing and to himself: that was what brought him world renown both during his life and after his death. This was the key to his genius!

Bringing the radiant inspiration to be gleaned from Chingiz Aitmatov's work to people everywhere – that is our duty!

Chyngyz Aitmatov

Chyngyz Aitmatov was a bilingual writer (Kyrgyz & Russian) from Kyrgyzstan. He was an intellectual as well as an advisor to Mikhail Gorbachev. After the collapse of the Soviet Union he helped to strengthen the newly independent Kyrgyzstan in his role as Kyrgyz Ambassador to Brussels.


Aitmatov was born on December 12th, 1928 in Talas, Kyrgyzstan. He lost his father at the age of 10, a victim of Stalin's purges. His father was executed as an "enemy of the people" in 1938. As the eldest son of the family, Aitmatov took over the responsibility of helping his mother to bring up his younger brother and two sisters. During World War II, Aitmatov was a hard-working teenager helping his family to get by in the small village of Sheker.

He graduated as a veterinary surgeon, studying first in Dshambul and later at the Agricultural High School in Frunze (now Bishkek – the capital of Kyrgyzstan). Aitmatov published his first short story in 1952.

He had been working for four years as a vet when he decided to become a writer. He applied for special training and from 1956-58 he studied at the High School for Literature in Moscow. He published his first story "Face to face" in the Kyrgyz language in 1957. His second story "Jamilia" was translated into French by Louis Aragon in the same year and brought him worldwide fame. He went on to become a celebrated author, thanks to his hard work and great talent.

His works have been translated into more than 150 languages worldwide!

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The Life of Chyngyz Aitmatov

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|------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1928 | born in Talas, Kyrgyzstan | 1980 | published "The Day Lasts More Than a Hundred Years" |
| 1938 | lost his father | 1983 | won third State Prize for his last novel |
| 1942 | began to work on the Sheker Village Council | 1984 | Chairman of Kyrgyz Writers' Union |
| 1952 | began writing, attended the Agricultural Institute in Frunze | 1985 | won the Indian J.Nehru Prize |
| 1954 | published his first short story "Ak jaan (White rain)" | 1986 | published "The Scaffold" |
| 1956 | graduated from the Agricultural Institute with distinction, studied at Gorky Literary Institute in Moscow | 1988 | Academy Award of the Japanese Institute of Oriental Philosophy, Gold Olive Branch award |
| 1957 | published his first story "Face to face" in Kyrgyz, Louis Aragon translated "Jamilia" into French | 1990 | Soviet Ambassador to Luxemburg, an advisor to M. Gorbachev |
| 1958 | published "Jamilia" in Kyrgyz & Russian, graduated the Gorky Literary Institute in Moscow, became a correspondent for Pravda | 1991 | Kyrgyz Ambassador to European Union |
| 1959 | joined the Communist Party | 1994 | published "The White Cloud of Chyngiz Khan" in German, Austrian Prize for European Literature |
| 1960 | published "Camel Eye" | 1995 | published "Cassandra's Brand" in German |
| 1961 | published "The First Teacher" and "Goodbye, Aselle!" | 1997 | published "Fairytales" in German, he was awarded the title of Hero of Socialist Labour in Kyrgyzstan |
| 1963 | published "The Mother Earth" and "Tales of Mountains and Steppes". This selected volume brought him the Lenin Prize | 1998 | published his memories "Childhood in Kirgizia" in German, awarded Friedrich Rueckert Prize in Germany |
| 1964 | published "The Red Apple", Chairman of the Cinema Union of Kyrgyzia | 1999 | published the first volume "Selected Works", 5 volumes in Kyrgyz |
| 1965 | published "Farewell, Gulsary!" | 2004 | won the Alexander Men & Leo Kopelev Prize in Germany |
| 1967 | member of the Executive Board of the Soviet Writers' Union | 2006 | the first course of Aitmatov's short stories at the University of Frankfurt for students in Germany, published "An Eternal Bride" in Russian |
| 1968 | won Soviet State Prize for "Farewell, Gulsary!" | 2007 | presentation of his novel "Der Schneeleopard" in Germany |
| 1970 | published "The White Steamboat" | 2008 | died in Nuremberg, Germany. He was buried in Ana Beyit Cemetery in Kyrgyzstan according to his last will. |
| 1973 | published "The Ascent of Mt. Fuji" | | |
| 1975 | published "Cranes came earlier" | | |
| 1976 | won the Kyrgyz Toktogul Prize for "Cranes came earlier" | | |
| 1977 | published "Spotted Dog Running Along the Seashore", won the second State Prize for "The White Steamboat" | | |
| 1978 | he was awarded the title of Hero of Socialist Labour in USSR | | |
- Aitmatov was awarded the title of "Honorary Professor of Arts" by many European Universities as well as in Russia and Japan.

Summary by Prof. Dr. Rahima Abduvalieva

Rahima Abduvalieva

One of the writer's 'comrades-in-arms', who from 1992 was working together with him in Germany to popularize his work in the German language. After Chingiz Aitmatov's death she moved to London and continued this work within an English environment. Dr. Abduvalieva gives lectures on the writer's work in universities of various countries. She is working on the theory and practice of translating the works of Aksakal into other languages. She is also the director of the Aitmatov Academy in Great Britain and chairs the jury which awards the annual International Chingiz Aitmatov Prize. Dr. Abduvalieva is a holder of the Franz Kafka Medal for literature for her translations of works by Chingiz Aitmatov.

