

**Translating Trauma and Culture: Literary Translation of Beimbet Mailin's Famine
Literature**

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Abstract

This paper presents an annotated English translation of two short stories by Beimbet Mailin (1894–1938), one of the founding figures of modern Kazakh literature and a central member of the triad known as the Three Pillars of Kazakh literature. The works in question—*Kulpash* (1923) and *Ashtyq Qurbany* (Sacrifice, undated)—are examined as literary responses to the cyclical phenomenon of *zhut*, the recurring famine of the Kazakh steppe, rather than as documents of any single dateable catastrophe. Through biographical, historical, and textual analysis, this paper argues that Mailin's famine narratives encode a pre-Soviet understanding of ecological and social suffering that only partially intersects with the Soviet ideological framework his later works more explicitly inhabit. The translation methodology is grounded in a three-principle framework termed the sensitive annotation model, which mediates between Lawrence Venuti's foreignization and Eugene Nida's dynamic equivalence. This model treats culturally embedded terminology as invariant, determines the method of cultural glossing by narrative context, and reconstructs emotionally and syntactically untranslatable elements through dynamic equivalence. The paper demonstrates how this framework resolves the structural tension between foreignization and domestication when applied to Mailin's characteristic grammatical style, specifically the *qımyl-syn* subordinate clause system, which resists direct transposition into English without loss of psychological intimacy.

Keywords:

Beimbet Mailin, Kazakh literature, literary translation, foreignization, dynamic equivalence, *zhut*, famine narrative, sensitive annotation model, *Kulpash*, *Ashtyq Qurbany*

I. Introduction

The Kazakh publishing landscape is witnessing an exponential growth, driven by a Kazakh-speaking demographic eager to access global narratives in their mother tongue. Bagdauletqyzy and Rickleton (2024) in Radio Free Europe report that independent houses like *Steppe & WORLD Publishing* nearly doubled their revenue in a single year by bringing global icons such as *Harry Potter* and *Chronicles of Narnia* into the Kazakh language. However, this movement is characterized by a one-way flow. Kazakh readers now have access to titles ranging from J.K. Rowling to popular business literature (Beibitova et al. 2025), but the global English-speaking market remains isolated from the foundational works of Kazakh literature. This capstone project addresses that asymmetry, arguing that the translation of Kazakh literature is not only a linguistic challenge but a cultural and historical one, and demands a fundamental reckoning with how the Kazakh experience is rendered to the world.

The short stories of Beimbet Mailin occupy a distinctive and underexplored position within Central Asian literature. Mailin wrote during the intersection and transition of oral and nomadic traditions of the Kazakh steppe, and the emergent Soviet modernity that brought transformation. As one of Three Pillars of Kazakh Literature, alongside Saken Seifullin and Ilias Zhansugirov, he shaped the earliest conventions of Kazakh prose at a moment when the society, both in his reality and the reality of his characters, was experiencing changes by external forces. His short stories record these with an intimacy and moral precision.

This project explores Kazakh-English translation through the translation of two of Mailin's short-stories, *Kulpash* (1923) and *Ashtyq Qurbany* (1927), accompanied by the theoretical and historical analysis necessary to render translation choices intelligible and accountable. The risk that this translation confronts is what Akkaliyeva et al. (2021) identify as

the ontological distortion of culturally specific terms and ideas. The kind of distortion exemplified by the untranslatable classifications of camels in Oralkhan Bokeev's *The Man-Deer* (1987). Translating texts like *Kulpash* and *Ashtyq Qurbany* demands a translator equipped with knowledge of morphological nuances, including the usage and comprehension of Turkic participle affixes (Adilov, 2024), the sound synchronization of Mailin's rhythmic style, and idiomatic specifics that are frequently lost in translation.

The paper proceeds in three movements. The first movement establishes the biographical and intellectual context of Beimbet Mailin, tracing his formation as a literary figure and his role, as Nauryzabayev (1979) argues, as one who explained communist ideas by "answering people's questions of who is communist, what is their purpose, who they fight against, and who they are with" (p.130). The second situates the stories within the historical context of *zhut*, the cyclical famine of the Kazakh steppe, and argues against the prevailing tendency to anchor the stories to the specific famine. The third introduces and demonstrates the sensitive annotation model, a translation framework that navigates the tension between Lawrence Venuti's foreignization and Eugene Nida's dynamic equivalence by treating cultural terms, emotional register, and grammatical structure as distinct domains requiring distinct strategies.

Underlying all three movements is a commitment to translational accountability, and recognition that every choice in rendering a source text produces interpretive consequences that must be precisely presented. After years of Kazakhstan's independence, translation of Kazakh literature has been increasingly navigated by those whose "genetic language is Kazakh and whose national psychology and mentality is programmed in the translator's viewpoint" (Sagyndykova, 1996, as cited in Kazybek, 2014, pp. 66-67), bypassing the historically debated role of Russian as a mandatory mediator between Kazakh and English (Akkaliyeva et al., 2021).

Mailin's prose is historically dense, grammatically distinctive, and culturally specific in ways that the application of single theory of translation cannot fully comprehend. The sensitive annotation model is proposed as a principled way of inhabiting the tension between modes of translation such as domestication and foreignization.

II. Understanding Beimbet Mailin

The name of Beimbet Mailin is linked with the formation of the Kazakh Literary tradition in the 20th century. Alongside his contemporaries Saken Seifullin and Ilias Zhansugirov, he is referred as one of the “Three Pillars of Kazakh literature,” a triad that defined the transition from oral tradition to modern prose and poetry, and within which Mailin is particularly recognized as a founding figure of the Kazakh short-story genre. His prolific contributions across multiple genres and forms are documented in depth within Temirgali Nurtazin's 1966 work, *Beimbet Mailinnyn' Tvorchestvosy* (Creations of Beimbet Mailin). His legacy remains a focal point of recent discourse, such as the International Scientific and Theoretical Conference of Young Scientists and Students, where speakers emphasized the realism of Mailin's writing and his ability to “depict ordinary people's lives with accuracy” (Tastanov & Murat, 2025, p. 87). However, some interpretations of young scientists and students remain disputable, such as classification of *Kulpash* as a satirical story, which sits uneasy tension and contradicts with the story's tragic themes (Kazbekova & Muratova, 2025). Beyond Nurtazin, significant research is found in the lifelong work of Toqtar Beyiskulov, including *Who Shot Beimbet?*

Mailin was born in 1894, in the province of modern day Qostanay region. Throughout his life, he witnessed the emergence of the Soviet Regime and its collision with Kazakh reality, which would leave a defining mark on his literary voice. While not all of his works explicitly emphasizes the political ideologies of the writer, his broader body of work demonstrates a deep affinity for the proletariat and the socialist transformations such as the formation of kolhoz (Beyiskulov, 1983). Beyiskulov (1983) acknowledges the “ big truth” (p. 93) that Mailin maintained a highly optimistic and empathetic view of Leninism, which gradually becomes apparent in his writings, including one of the source texts of this translation project, *Ashtyq Qurbany*. Beyiskulov (1983) demonstrates Mailin’s viewpoint that is also vividly captured in 1924 poem published in the *Red Qazaqstan* journal about Stalin’s death:

Pledge, while you hug the young tomb,
That you follow the path that he built,
...
Don’t cry!.. Let’s walk on the path that he built
For countless years carrying the flag.

In his short stories, Mailin created various characters who personified communist ideologies through characters like Amanbay in *Bir Adym* (One Step), Raushan in *Raushan - Communist*, Bekbergen in *Bekbergen Mektebi* (School of Bekbergen), Qasen in *Ashtyq Qurbany* (Sacrifice), who possessed a viewpoint different from the rest and as Mailin himself, acted as an influencer of socialist ideas (Nauryzbaev, p. 130). Beyiskulov (1983) juxtaposed two specific stories, *School of Lenin* and *School of Bekbergen*, where central figures are the provincial poor who embraced the revolution and were educated in Party ideology. In these two narratives, Mailin links the arrival of communism to the expansion of educational institutions and the local

opportunity for literacy. Nauryzbayev (1979) argues that “He explained that communists are those who helped the poor and fight against the *bais* by answering people's questions of who is communist, what is their purpose, who they fight against, and who they are with” (p. 130). In this capacity, Beimbet Mailin served as a translator of the Communist ideas to a population largely unfamiliar with them.

Beimbet’s intellectual formation began in childhood. He lost his father Zharmagambet before he turned a year old, and lost his mother Qulghizar twelve years later (Nurtazin, 1966). Raised by his grandmother, he was inspired by her songs and other poets who often visited their home, eventually leading him to compose his own verses (Nurtazin, 1966). He shared his works to his classmates in madrasa and townspeople, though his several attempts to get published in *Aiqap* journal were unsuccessful (Nurtazin, 1966). He was later expelled from the madrasa for criticizing the school chairman’s vanity, yet he continued his education in Troitsk and Ufa, studying mathematics, Russian, and natural sciences (Nurtazin, 1966). At the “Galiya” school, where Mailin received his high school education, he was exposed to the earliest socialist revolutionary thoughts.. Nurtazin (1966) concludes that Beimbet Mailin “formed his life views in the light of the spiritual modernisation environment after the 1905 revolution” (p. 12). His formation as an ideological translator positioned him as the primary witness to the collision of Soviet revolutionary theory and the innate reality of the Kazakh people. This background provides a necessary foundation for understanding the tension that would become the defining subject of his short stories, and his treatment of the famine and social changes of the 1920s.

III. Historical Background of the Famine and Its Resonance with *Kulpash* and *Ashtyq Qurbany*

A recurring error in contextualization of the historical events of Famine in Kazakhstan to Beimbet Mailin's literature is that most of the analysts overlook the general picture of the past. Certain discussions of famine in Kazakhstan and Kazakh famine literature put their focus on the events that happened 1920-1922 and on the Great Zhut (Asharshylyq) that happened in the 1930-1933. While both events are well-documented and represent periods of exceptional mortality among the human population and livestock of the Kazakh steppe, this only frames the scale of more fundamental historical reality. The term famine, or *zhut*, is not an anomaly in the history of Kazakhstan, but rather a cyclical feature of nomadic life. To read and translate Mailin's short stories *Kulpash* and *Ashtyq Qurbany* through the lens of any dateable famine is to misrepresent both the historical conditions that produced the text and the nature of the phenomenon it describes.

According to the Kazakh ethnographic dictionary, the term *zhut* refers not a singular catastrophic event, but to a recurring pattern of famine that was brought about by harsh weather conditions in solstice seasons, winter and summer, and the consequent loss of livestock (Akhmetov et al., 2012). Akhmetov et al. (2012) further notes that *zhut* occurred with regularity every ten to twelve years throughout the XIX-XX centuries, and that nomadic tribes typically required eight to ten years to recover from its consequences before the next cycle began. The most recent recorded *zhut* before the Great Famine in Kazakhstan was documented in the years 1926-27 (Akhmetov et al., 2012), demonstrating that the Kazakh steppe remained vulnerable to this pattern well into the Soviet period. This cyclical recurrence is the interpretive frame without which neither the social conditions depicted in *Kulpash* and *Ashtyq Qurbany*, nor the position of Beimbet Mailin himself can be properly understood.

The inadequacy of the 1920-1922 famine as the specific famine for *Kulpash* becomes apparent upon close examination of the climatic details present in both the historical record and the short-story itself. Scholars such as Alimov have positioned *Kulpash* as a literary representation of the 1920-1922 famine in the chronicles collected by Abdigaliuly (Abdigaliuly, 2021). This correlation is not without bias because the story was published in 1923, in the immediate aftermath of the famine and shares the thematic concerns. However, it remains unproven, and the climatic evidence from the text itself gives reason to question it directly. Ustagaliyev and Aitmagambetov (2023) note that the famine of the early 1920s was characterized by snowless winters and prolonged summer droughts, conditions that devastated both crops and pasture across the different provinces of Kazakhstan. The short story *Kulpash*, however, presents a different meteorological imagery: the narrator mentioned severe winter storms, heavy snowfall, and the progressive immobilization of the central characters under extreme cold. These details are not incidental and represent the plot's primary causal force: it is the weight of winter, not drought or the political seizure of grain, that drives the family's destitution. The climatic signature of *Kulpash* is inconsistent with the documented conditions of 1920-1922 and suggests instead that Mailin was drawing on a more general image and personally grounded knowledge of what *zhut* looked and felt like, rather than reconstructing the specific episode that Alimov's text supposed.

This discovery is further supported by the publication of compositional history of Beimbet Mailin's text. The original Arabic-script publication of *Kulpash*, dated February 13, 1923, establishes that the story appeared in print shortly after the years of the early 1920s famine. However, the preface to that publication indicates that the short stories in that editions were composed during Mailin's school years, situating their creation to the point prior to the famine of

1920-1922: “These stories were written while studying at school and were published in the journal of the newspaper ‘Qyzyl Qazaqstan’ in the years 1922–1923” (Mailin, 1926). This chronology undermines any straightforward reading of the text as a direct response to the 1920-1922 famine. Rather, it positions *Kulpash*, and by extension *Ashtyq Qurbany*, where the author portrays similar weather conditions, as works shaped by author’s experiences of *zhut* as a recurring condition of steppe life.

The most appropriate interpretation of *Kulpash* is one that understands it as a literary rendering of the cyclical *zhut* as a lived social reality, rather than a document of any exact famine year. The story follows Kulpash, a young woman whose family is devastated by famine. Her sister Raushan, who is already attached to the household of a local *bai*, proposes that Kulpash secure her survival by marrying the same man and leaving her family behind. After prolonged hesitation, she agrees. When the worst of the winter stops, she travels back home carrying a cooked piece of meat, only to find her husband and son already dead. There is no political intervention and no figure of external authority who affects the family’s fate. The force that destroys the family is nature itself. The temptation to read specific narrative as coded reference to the colonial and Soviet political context, like grain and livestock requisitioning, Bolshevik administration, and the collapse of the nomadic economy under war communism, must be resisted where the textual evidence does not support it. Beimbet Mailin does not present a family whose livestock has been taken by authorities; he presents a family whose last horse has been lost to the winter itself. The absence of political causality in *Kulpash* is not a gap that needs to be filled by contextual interpretation, but a feature of the text’s realism that reflects the pre-Soviet and larger historical character of *zhut* in a way Mailin understood it.

The deliberateness of this politically inactive narrative becomes clear when *Kulpash* is read alongside *Ashtyq Qurbany*. This story shares the same structural premise: a female protagonist, Damesh, whose family is about to be ruined by famine, is given as a second wife to a wealthy man, *bai*, who as the *bai* in *Kulpash*, remains insulated from the effects of the famine. Both texts draw on the same social logic of *zhut* - the concentration of resources among the wealthy, the threatened family autonomy under starvation, and the *bai* household as simultaneous refuge and trap. However, the resolution of the stories differ. The second half of *Ashtyq Qurbany* takes the form of a letter written by Damesh to a childhood friend, in which she recounts her rescue by a Soviet figure who helps her access education, secure her family from *bai*, and elevate her social position. The story closes with the political causality that *Kulpash* withholds. This contrast is significant in the interpretation, because it demonstrates that Mailin was fully capable of encoding Soviet ideology into his famine narratives. The absence of any such resolution in *Kulpash* is not attributed to the limitations of the genre or the historical context. It rather appears to be an authorial choice that can be studied to render the evolution of Mailin's body of work from pre-Soviet to Soviet periods.

Certain social details within *Kulpash* correlates with the broader historical literature precisely because they describe conditions that recurred across multiple *zhut* cycles. Mussaev (2006) documents that educational institutions were suspended throughout 1921 because "most of the students had to stay at home because of the starvation and absence of clothes," and "teachers didn't get paid for months" because of the financial crisis (p. 66). The idleness of the *Kulpash* and the young character Qali is distinct from this pattern. There is no school to attend and no productive role to occupy. Mussaev (2006) further notes that wandering between villages in search of food became a widespread survival strategy during *zhut*, frequently associated with

the breakdown of former social bonds. The figure of Maqtym, Kulpash's husband, moving from settlement to settlement corresponds to this documented behavior. The *bai* class reflects a condition when the severe reduction of livestock during famine paradoxically elevated the authority of wealthy landowners, promoting that "it was *bais* who saved people from hunger death, not the Soviets" (Mussaev, 2006, p. 34). Jumaghazy in *Kulpash* and Tileumaghambet in *Ahtyq Qurbany*, *bais* in the stories, are best understood within this longer arc of bai economic resilience. The image and social acceptance of *bai* class were evolving throughout XIX-XX centuries (Akhmetov et al., 2017), and what Mailin was portraying is the structural feature of *zhut* that Mailin had encountered personally, when following his father's death, he entered the service of a local landowner (Nurtazin, 1966).

What emerged from this analysis is a picture of *Kulpash* and *Ashtyq Qurbany* as texts deeply embedded in the impact of *zhut* as an ecological and social phenomenon on the Kazakh steppe. The stories; power does not derive from its documentation of any particular famine year but from its fidelity to a recurring pattern of suffering, survival strategy, and social hierarchy that structured steppe traditions across generations. The comparison of two stories makes this especially clear: where Mailin wished to encode a political resolution, he did so explicitly, where he did not, the absence is meaningful rather than incidental. For the purposes of translation, this finding redirects attention towards the experiential and material dimensions of the text: winter, the loss of livestock, the imagery of hungry bodies, the dependency, and the decay of morality. Translation is done within these registers of recurring devastations.

IV. Statement on the Translation Approach

Before examining specific translation choices, it is necessary to define the central theoretical concepts used in the analysis of the translated texts and navigate the translations.

Foreignization is a translation strategy that preserves the linguistic and cultural otherness of the source text, resisting the assimilation of the receiving culture. Lawrence Venuti (1995), the foremost theorist who introduced the term, defines it as practice that “registers the linguistic and cultural difference of the foreign text, sending the reader abroad” (p.20). Foreignization in practice means retaining untranslated terms, preserving unfamiliar syntax, and refusing to make the text familiar to a recipient's viewpoint.

Domestication, also introduced by Venuti alongside with foreignization, by contrast, is the strategy of bringing the source text closer to the reader, adapting its language and cultural references to the norms of the target culture and language. It prioritized readability and natural fluency.

Eugene Nida, who connected this approach with the term dynamic equivalence, defined it as producing in the receptor language “the closest natural equivalent to the source-language message” (p. 12). Dynamic equivalence is therefore a more specific concept, because it does not demand cultural substitution but rather functional equivalence of text's impact. In simpler words, the translated text should produce in its reader an experience equivalent to what the source text produced in its original reader. Nida (2002) clarifies that as ensuring that “no reader of a translated text is likely to misunderstand the corresponding meaning of the source text” (p.6). Dynamic equivalence permits foreignness of content while demanding familiarity of text's impact to the target audience.

Transliteration is the phonetic rendering of a source-language word in the script of the target language without translating its meaning. It is one of the most conservative forms of foreignization, preserving the identity of the word while making it readable to the target audience.

Interpolation is the insertion of explanatory material directly within the body of translated text, without disrupting the prose visually. “*Bai*, the landowner” is an interpolation as the explanation is inserted into the sentence rather than mentioned in a footnote. Clifford Landers (2001) identifies interpolation as “an unobstructive method of foreignization” (p. 93) that allows the reader to absorb cultural information without breaking the flow of reading.

Footnoting is the practice of placing explanatory glosses below the text, linked to the respective word by a superscript marker. Unlike interpolation, footnoting separates the explanation from the text, requiring the reader to move their attention. It is most appropriate where the text itself cannot absorb an explanation without distorting the flow of the narrative.

These six concepts work in productive tension with one another and their deployment must be principled and related to the context. Additionally, Mailin’s prose presents a grammatical layer of untranslatability. His writing style is dominated by a complex clause type known in Kazakh linguistics as *qımyl-syn baghynyngqyly sabaqtas qurmalas söilem*, a subordinate complex sentence in which the dependent clause describes the manner or quality of the action expressed in the main clause. This clause type chains subordinate manner clauses to the main clause without the use of any conjunctions, and therefore it can accumulate psychological and emotional qualities of the actions before the main predicate is ever reached. As the following analysis demonstrates, it is also the point at which foreignization reaches its structural limits. In response to the challenges and methodological tools of translation, the

premise of translating Mailin's texts is to develop a translation framework, that is proposed further, where those established principles are formalized within and can be functioned further in order to further accomplish successful Kazakh-English translations.

The longstanding theoretical opposition between Venuti's foreignization and Nida's dynamic equivalence presents a profound conflict. Venuti is explicitly critical of the domesticating trends that Nida advocates. He argues that fluent and transparent translation produces an "illusion of transparency" that undermines the work of the translator and contributes to the "domination of Anglo-American values" (Venuti, 1995, p.17). From Venuti's perspective, to domesticate Kazakh literature is an act of cultural appropriation, rather than an act to make the text accessible to English readers.

However, foreignization of Mailin's text produces its own literary failures too. Mailin's primary achievement in the text is the coloring of the emotional intensity, such as grief of Kulpash in a freezing room and response of Damesh to mother's manipulation. These effects depend on the reader's emotional access to the characters. Translation with priority in foreignization increases the risk of failure to shape and distort the story of human suffering. This failure becomes structurally inevitable when foreignization encounters complex Kazakh clause systems. The closest grammar that English possesses is adverbial clauses of manners, but these are syntactically detachable additions to a sentence, not a rendered component of it. The translation that forces English into verb-final accumulation of the Kazakh syntax would communicate only incoherent ideas.

Some transformation becomes inevitable. Friedrich Schleiermacher identified the underlying principle in *On the Different Methods of Translating* (1813): the translator "would have to put a foreign content in its place, and would therefore have to escape into the field of

imitation... he will have to create other word associations if he does not want to violate the immediate context.” The translator’s task is not to resolve the tension between two main approaches of translation but to inhabit them consciously and make decisions about which elements of the source are treated as irreplaceable and which are available for reconstruction. Introduced model of translation, proposedly named *sensitive annotation model*, can define those choices as such: cultural terms are irreplaceable, emotional and syntactic functions are reconstructable, and a grammatical structure, whose form cannot be foreignized, but has a function as a stylistic marker of the source text, must be translated with a dynamic equilibrium.

The cultural terminology in Mailin’s texts like *bai*, *qatyn*, *kupi*, *qalqam*, *qaraghym*, presents what Clifford Landers (2001) identifies as the literary pieces that "reference persons, objects, and institutions not readily understood by another culture." and sometimes, should be preserved in the translation. These terms carry embedded cultural encoding of social hierarchy, gender relations, and emotional intimacy that can be destroyed if substituted.

The key distinction that manages their translation is between terms that appear first in narration and terms that appear first in dialogue. Narrative prose is associative and cumulative, meaning that a reader can absorb a narrative explanation without losing the flow and momentum. Dialogue, on the other hand, is immediate and any parenthetical gloss disrupts the illusion of a speaker and their voice. Venuti (2008) recognizes that translation decisions must be explained by “the varying degrees of emphasis that different textual elements receive within the economy of the whole.” As such, the economy of narration tolerates interpolation and the economy of dialogue does not.

In practice, cultural terms appearing first in narration receive interpolated glossing, while cultural terms appearing first in dialogue receive footnoted transliteration. The term *bokebai* in

Kulpash, appearing first in the narrator's description of the main character's clothing, is rendered "bokebai scarf." The term *qaraghy*, a term of endearment meaning "the pupil of my eyes," appears first and only in direct speech, where interpolation would suspend the emotional immediacy, while footnote allows the reader to consult the explanation without violating the register of the spoken word.

The opening passage of *Kulpash* provides the clearest demonstration of the sensitive annotation model, including the rendering of Kazakh *qımyl-syn* complex sentences. The source text opens:

Original: "*Kulpash-tyng köngil-siz-dik-ke tus-ip zhur-gen kun-der-i-ning bir-i edi...*"

Interlinear: "Kulpash-POSS feeling-ABESS-MNZ-PREP get-(Suffix for *qımyl-syn*) day-PL-POSS-POSS was"

Rough Translation: "It was one of the days when Kulpash was not feeling well"

The verb-final structure places the main predicate at the end of a noun phrase that is specifying the kind of day described. Crucially, the passage that follows displays the same structure repeatedly. The physical details of Kulpash's appearance and posture are stacked as subordinate clauses before the main predicate resolves the sentence. The reader arrives at the verb already saturated with the quality of Kulpash's condition. Mailin achieves psychological intimacy by placing manners so it precedes the action.

The rough translation loses this intimacy entirely in these examples of one of the following sentences: "frozen and shaking, leaning with her back to the stove in the corner of the room, sadly, Kulpash sat like a person who is deep in their thoughts." The participle phrases are present, but they are arranged as an awkward English list, detached from one another and from the main clause. This is precisely the structural failure that foreignization of Kazakh complex

syntax produces. The manner clauses become detachable units rather than fusion with the main action, and the effect of psychological immersion is lost.

The final translation addresses this through principled reconstruction: “Lately, Kulpash was wrapped in a quiet gloom... She wore an old dress, worn to shreds, patched here and there, layered it with an old fur coat that looked more like a rug... Her son Qali was laying covered in a mended sheepskin *kupi* coat. ...”

Three specific decisions are visible here. First, the opening is emotionally reconstructed: “wrapped in a quiet gloom” is not a translation directly from Kazakh, but rather incorporation of Schleiermacherian impression on “creating other word association.” It produces in the English reader the experience of the hopelessness that the Kazakh *köngil-siz-dik* produces in its reader. Second, the chain in the *qımyl-syn* complex sentence is broken into short, rhythmically sequenced sentences. This domesticated syntactic form replicates the original’s accumulative emotional movement without reproducing, awkward for English, verb-final structure. Third, *kupi* is retained untranslated in the narration register, with its interpolated gloss within the text itself.

The following passage from the rough translation of *Ashtyq Qurbany* demonstrates the framework’s principle of cultural invariance: “If someone came to our house, especially one of the aristocratic elites, both the master and his wife would never let me near the big house.” When Damesh narrates her experience in the bai household, three culturally encoded terms appear in rapid order: *töre* (noble elite of Chinggisid lineage), *bai* (wealthy landowner), *baibishe* (the bai’s senior wife). The final translation restores all three in transliterated form: “...If someone, especially the *töre* nobles, decides to visit us, both *bai* and *baibishe* will never let me near the ancestral house.” The most opaque term among the three, *töre*, was rendered with a minimal gloss, and *bai* and *baibishe* carry no inline gloss, because footnotes established their meaning at

first occurrence earlier in the text. All such subsequent appearances of the cultural terms rely on that established understanding without the disruption of the speech.

The framework demonstrated across both texts can now be stated as three operative principles of translation:

1. Terms encoding social hierarchy, material culture, and relational intimacy are not replaced with domestic equivalents. Substitution destroys the historical specificity that is Mailin's subject of writing.
2. The method of glossing a cultural term is determined by the narrative method of its first appearance. Narration can receive interpolation, while dialogue is suggested to be footnoted.
3. Elements whose function is emotional rather than cultural are domesticated through dynamic equivalence: the translator reconstructs the impact of the source text in the target language rather than reproducing the linguistic form of the source language.

This framework does not resolve the tension between Venuti and Nida, however, it argues that the tension is the essential part of literary translation. Mailin's prose is saturated with untranslatable historical markers, culturally encoded terms, and irreplaceable grammatical architecture. Therefore, his texts are precisely the literature that makes those principles necessary and makes it possible to exploit it in practice.

V. Conclusion

The translation of Beimbet Mailin's *Kulpash* and *Ashtyq Qurbany* into English is an act that takes place at multiple levels simultaneously: between languages, between literary traditions, between historical periods, and between competing theories of what translation is for. The current Kazakh publishing landscape reveals the potential of that bridge, but also its present limits. This project has argued that building it requires more than linguistic transfer. It requires what this paper terms translational accountability, a deliberate, principled set of choices based on the specific nature of the texts, and made visible rather than hidden in the apparent transparency of the produced text.

The biographical analysis of Mailin established why his texts are sites of cultural density that resist casual rendering. His formation, which happened at the intersection of Islamic education, socialist revolutionary ideas, and Kazakh oral tradition, was shaped by the habits of Maxim Gorky and the immersion of Soviet ideas in Kazakhstan (Zharylgapov et al., 2020; Nurtazin, 1966), and produced a prose voice that speaks simultaneously to multiple registers of experience.

The historical analysis of zhut established the interpretive frame within which the stories' power resides. *Kulpash* and *Ashtyq Qurbany* are not primarily documents of the 1920–1922 famine, as scholars such as Alimov have proposed (Abdigaliuly, 2021), but literary renderings of a recurring pattern of ecological and social suffering that structured steppe life across generations. The climatic and compositional evidence reviewed here supports this reading: the severe winter storms and heavy snowfall that drive the destitution in *Kulpash* and *Ashtyq Qurbany* are inconsistent with the “snowless winters and prolonged summer droughts” documented by Ustagaliyev and Aitmagambetov (2023) as characteristic of the 1920–1922

famine, while the 1926 preface to the collection of stories confirms that the stories were composed during Mailin's school years, prior to that famine. The contrast between the two stories makes the interpretive principle concrete: where Mailin wished to encode a Soviet resolution, he did so explicitly; where the text withholds that resolution, the absence is meaningful rather than incidental.

The sensitive annotation model, developed and demonstrated through specific passages in both texts, offers a translation framework suited to the particular challenges of Mailin's prose. By preserving culturally encoded terms such as *bai*, *töre*, and *baibishe* through transliteration and interpolation, the translation maintains ontological integrity without distortion of their meaning. At the same time, the domestication of emotional subtexts and the restructuring of complex Kazakh syntax ensure that the universal themes resonate with the target reader. Its three operative principles provide a set of decisions that can be applied consistently and justified explicitly. The model does not eliminate the tension between Venuti's foreignization and Nida's dynamic equivalence; it argues that the tension is the essential part of the translator's task when the source text is saturated with untranslatable historical markers, culturally encoded terms, and irreplaceable grammatical structures.

The most immediate consequence of this project is to make two significant works of early Kazakh literature available to readers who could not otherwise encounter them. But the implications extend beyond accessibility. Mailin's famine narratives demonstrate that Central Asian literary responses to ecological and social catastrophe preceded and exceeded the Soviet ideological frameworks. *Kulpash* and *Ashtyq Qurbany* present a vision of human suffering and moral deterioration under conditions of ecological extremity that belongs to no single political period and no single famine year.

The sensitive annotation model is proposed as a transferable framework for Kazakh-English literary translation more broadly, and its application to other texts in Mailin's corpus would test and refine its principles. Equally, the comparative reading of *Kulpash* and *Ashtyq Qurbany* as markers of Mailin's literary evolution invites further research into how his contemporaries navigated the same ideological and ecological pressures. Mailin was executed in 1938, at the height of Stalinist repression, details whose full circumstances remain the subject of ongoing scholarly inquiry, including Beyiskulov's *Beimbetti Kim Atty?* (Who Shot Beimbet?) and the speculations regarding betrayal explored in Sarbalayev's work (Urimbekova, 2025). The path of his career was cut short before its full trajectory could be traced. What remains is a body of work that deserves the careful attention that translation and analysis together can provide.

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Appendix 1

Kulpash

Lately, Kulpash was wrapped in a quiet gloom..... She wore an old dress, worn to shreds, patched here and there, layered it with an old fur coat that looked more like a rug, and covered her head with a tapered piece of *bokebai* scarf. Her face was puffed up, swollen. Out of the cold blizzard Kulpash sat with her back against the stove as she was drowned deep in her thoughts. Her son Qali was lying covered in a mended *kupi* coat. The house was cold. The wind cut through the holes of the patched animal intestine window and drove itself piercing the jaw... There was no fuel to fill the stove..... Neither there was a place to find any..... For three days now, nothing but water had passed her lips. Winter stretched six months long, and hunger followed. Her last hope, husband Maqtym roamed from village to village, asking for charity, leaving at dawn and returning long after dusk. Emptyhanded...

Still, Kulpash spent long days tangled in the delusion that Maqtym would bring something, at least some crumbs. This isn't a new habit of Kulpash, she's had it for a long time. This habit, this fortitude paled her cheeks and sickened her face, tumoring her into a homely woman.

She pitied Qali more than herself. Kulpash was feeding him every drop of broth she could get from the neighbors.

Recently, asking such favors has become a challenge. This whole village was living hand to mouth, holding on to their souls as if they were about to slip free of the bodies. Lately womenfolk stopped sharing a meal with each other. Even the slightest approach towards their plate made them shrink back like a blinking eyelid. Kulpash sensed these changes more than

anyone. She couldn't visit the neighbors anymore, and hungry or full, her pride rarely let her approach neighbors' doors...

Third day without a single scrap of food, but with the rumbling of a stomach, drowning in despair, and losing sight of the world, as if counting time to death... Her worries revolved around Qali. Kulpash frowned looking at her son like a person tied with misfortunes:

“Oh God!... What sin have we committed to deserve this fate?”

She cried. Warm teardrops slide down leaving wet traces on her coat.

Besides the hunger, Kulpash was haunted by yet another worry in the back of her mind. These thoughts kept her awake since yesterday. At the beginning of winter, they didn't have any livestock to butcher with everyone in the town. Maqtym had no other choice but to start seeking charity by mounting the only horse they owned. For that, Kulpash's sister Raushan had come to tempt her.

“You have lived enough with a good-for-nothing husband. Don't waste what's left of your life... This year is not going to be easy, start looking out for yourself...” she said.

Raushan told about Jumaghazy, the man meant to heal Kulpash's wounds.

“He has 40-50 heads of cattle. Bai¹ of his village. Previous qatyn² left no kids. He turned 40 this year. Marry him, you will rise to be a ruler and a noble yourself !...” said Raushan.

Winter had just come then. Kulpash was not yet tormented by the uncertainty of finding a meal each day, so at the whisper of “leaving one man to marry another,” Kulpash's heart leaped into her throat.

¹ In earlier nomadic Kazakh society, owners of the large number of livestock and the leaders of nomadic migration. In late XIX and XX centuries, due to the Russian, and later Soviet, land reforms, the social status of the wealthy class rapidly degenerated.

² Married woman. The modern connotation of the word in Kazakh language is negative, however, originating from ancient Turkic “khatun,” it means a respected woman or a respected man.

“Qaragym³, Raushan, do you even hear yourself right now?” she said.

After two or three months, hunger tightened its claws. Keeping the household became a challenge. As she could no longer endure her child’s hungry cries, Kulpash kept recalling Raushan’s words. Yet to this day, she could not tell if those words were a blessing or a curse. She kept thinking about it, and didn’t even know why kept thinking...

During Kulpash's desperate days, Raushan paid another visit. When she saw her sister, pity overtook her and she wept...

“You see, you’re dying now, God! Didn’t I warn you? Why don’t you listen?” Raushan said.

Kulpash went quiet while retreating into her thoughts. Her heart was torn by the battle of two thoughts: “If I agree to marry Jumaghazy, I would have food to eat and a fine dress to wear...I can not let Qali starve any longer...” she thought; “My childhood sweetheart, we shared our lives. Who am I to bring tears to his eyes?” she thought also. This pyrrhic struggle between those two thoughts left her, already numb, even more paralyzed.

Raushan saw Kulpash was drained of hope and no longer had the strength to argue back like before. Using that moment she said:

“... You will wither very soon living like this. I cannot save you from death, I am also running on fumes. I am also living off Jumaghazy...marry him... ” she said.

Kulpash sighed “What about Qali-zhan⁴?”

³ The term endearment used by an elder towards a child. Derives from “black/pupil of my eye.”

⁴ Suffix attached to names of people to form a diminutive form. Formal translation - soul.

“Oybay⁵, forget the child for now. Save yourself first. You will reach out for the child later,” Rushan said.

Kulpash said nothing about her husband – she weakened to the last degree and watched the strength she once had fade away. Raushan, who was following Jumaghazy’s order, sensed that and began to resolve the matter once and for all:

“...All kind of meals are served at his home: unspoiled qazy⁶, fragrant meats, countless sausages... Never have they ever had a day without bread on the table. When your husband at our house⁷ vowed to take you for a wife he boasted “I wouldn’t find a better wife.”

The mention of unspoiled qazy and fragrant meats made Kulpash’s mouth watered. That very mention of food, as if hunger took over her..., with a racing heart and eyes turning black, word “I’ll marry!..” slipped from her lips.

“Qaragym! Kulpash said, wailing, “Qaragym, do what you must...I don’t know if I am even sane anymore...”

Qali mumbled “Azhe!...,”⁸ trembling inside of the patched kupi.

“Yes, qaragym!” Kulpash said.

“Is dad at home?...”

“Oh, qaragym, God curse your father!”

⁵ Interjection used to express dismay, frustration, pain, or surprise.

⁶Traditional Kazakh smoked sausage stuffed with horse meat, fat, and sometimes fatty ribs into the intestines.

⁷Rashan is referring to Jumaghazy, as she was sent to bring Kulpash to him.

⁸Formally grandmother. In the text, mother.

Maqtym, who left at dawn, still hadn't returned. The sun was sinking. The blizzard parted in an arc, and sunlight flickered through the clouds, spilling through the window Maqtym once patched and reaching all the way to the entrance.

Kulpash sat near the stove. Qali was shivering next to her. Lost deep in her thought, Kulpash sighed heavily a couple of times. These sighs didn't come from the remembrance of women lighting fires and cooking meals before sunset. These sighs were a spark of a sorrow, the illness that tumored in her heart, that gripped her gut and spread like a poison through her body. This poison had been planted in Kulpash's stainless pure soul by her young sister Raushan. As if Raushan were not enough, starvation was adding its own bitter chill. Kulpash was about to do something she had never imagined before. Intending to leave her husband, promising to marry a man she barely knew... was all about to happen tomorrow. How could she leave? How could she part from all this? ... Kulpash herself did not know...

Thoughts about Maqtym captivated her mind since Raushan left. She remembered the first days with Maqtym:

... Summer evening... Maqtym came to visit her for *uryñ*, custom of visiting the house of the bride before wedding. He was then a young man with a stern look, a humped nose, and a slouched body. No matter how he looked in the eyes of strangers, it was clear Kulpash was drawn to him.

Kulpash was drawn to him from first sight. Ever since, their bond never loosened: "only our graves will separate us" they would say when resolving minor matters... Kulpash who would start looking out for Maqtym at the time he left the house for a while ... was the same Kulpash who was leaving him that day. This reckless hunger! Who it didn't make cry, who didn't cry!

Kulpash burst into tears.

Chilled Qali said:

“Azhe,”

“Qaragym?”

“Has Dad come home?..”

The rustling sounds came from outside and the door opened. A human silhouette with dried out cheeks and bulging eyes entered the house. It wore short and tight wrinkly coat, worn out scratchy tymaq⁹, the old boots, crushed at the heel, and had the sack hanging from the shoulder.

It was Maqtym. Kulpash looked up sharply and her face turned sad...

Qali lift his head:

“Dad, is it you?”

“It’s me, qaragym!..” said Maqtym with a heavy breath.

Trembling, he walked to the pillar in the middle of the house with the squeakings of worn out boots.

Qali, eyes wide open, crawled and looked towards the sack on Maqtym’s shoulder.

With tear drops he said:

“Qalqam-au*, it’s empty!...”

Kulpash cried too.

Qali coughed. His shivering legs led him to Kulpash, wrapped up in his kupi and hid his head in Kulpash’s arms.

⁹Men’s winter headwear made from animal fur and leather.

Time passed. In the evening, a dark pit filled the house. Maqtym was still sitting leaning towards the column, occasionally letting out a sigh.

Kulpash sat for a while drowning in her thoughts. At once, startled, she lifted her head and said “Hey...”

Her shaky voice echoed through the house.

“What’s wrong?” asked Maqtym

Kulpash couldn’t speak... didn’t know what to say... tears welled up in her eyes...

“Qatyn, you wanted to say something?”

“Nothing much... Rushan came today...”

“She came for something?”

Kulpash was unable to speak once again, eyes were brimming with tears. After a while she said:

“Hey,”

“What, Good Lord, say it!”

“What are we gonna do?”

“I don’t know”

“Won’t we die?”

“Maybe we will..”

“What...” she hesitated. “What... what if we... part our ways?”

Maqtym looked like he was stirred up. The house felt emptier. Rays of the new moon lit the room...

“Qatyn, what are you talking about?”

“Separate, divorce?”

“Raushan said to, didn’t she?”

“Yes,”

“What about Qali?” asked Maqтым with a lump in his throat before bursting into tears.

“Alas, poverty, alas, hunger, killing us!..”

Qali, who was there shivering between furnace and Kulpash, said:

“Azhe,”

“Qalqam¹⁰, what is it?”

“I’m cold!”

Mid March. A week long blizzard cleared the air just today, and warm sunlight was making the snow sparkle and melt down like sweat. Earth is no longer icy cold like before. Lean livestock went outside of their paddocks and were nimbling at the lea grass and other dung.

A young woman was walking down the narrow track towards the remote house standing solitary from the long-stretched village with nothing around it and barely visible because of the thick layer of snowdrift.

This was Kulpash. Around twenty days had passed since she agreed to a marriage with Jumaghazy. The bloody claws of hunger made Kulpash get used to him too. But there is no Kulpash, whose soul was lifted with joy because of her full stomach. She suffered more during those twenty days with Jumaghazy than the past twenty years of her life. She missed Qali most of all.

¹⁰The term of endearment means “my dear”, “the one I have to protect.”

The night following her re-marriage, she recalled Qali: when Kulpash kissed him goodbye before leaving, Qali, with pursed lips, stood petrified and hurt. Later, this scene appeared in her dreams - pursed lips and eyes gazed on something far away...Even Kulpash's "qalqam" when pressing him to her chest couldn't unfreeze his stone hard stance.

On another day, she dreamed of Maqtym instead. He was also in pain, he was in a rage. Even if Kulpash tried to call after him, Maqtym said nothing...

Kulpash suddenly sensed the loss of her dignity after hurting the most loved ones in this world, her man and child. "Why couldn't I choose to die with them instead?," she thought. She thought about Maqtym. He would always come back home to them, no matter if the old sack he carried day and night was full or empty. This toilsome struggle was only a means to keep his family away from death from hunger. Why did she even think of leaving a man like him?..

Since the day she left, grief stacked on top of grief. Zumaghazy was not home, Kulpash used a chance to glance at Maqtym and Qali one more time. Kulpash drowned in countless brooding thoughts. If Maqtym was not hurt, and was not angry with her for leaving him for another man, she would dare to come back to their good old marriage.

She kept checking her left armpit every two or three steps. She hid two portions of covertly cooked meat, one for Qali, and one for Maqtym.

"Qaragym, I wonder what they say when they see the meat?" she said abruptly.

Upon arrival at the aul, 2-3 barking dogs run towards her. Kulpash took no notice of them. They were Ybyrai's who lived on the entrance end of the aul. Ybyrai himself was standing on the top of the *snow fort* that herders built for the convenience of grazing. Kulpash disregarded him either. Her heart was about to leap from her chest until she reached her home.

Ybyrai noticed her:

“Hey, Kulpash, is that you?” he said. Kulpash made her quick greeting and kept rushing forward. Ybyray, as if he wanted to say something, took a couple of steps down a snow fort and stopped.

Kulpash finally came home. She felt her heart restless when she looked at the door of the shack. Snow blocked the door, no footsteps were visible!... She calmed her breath down, cleared the snow with her foot, and pulled the handle of the door... her heartbeat raced, her eyes darkened and sensed some unexplainable fright. But she couldn't understand what was the source of that feeling. She was too tired to even search for it.

She found some strength to open the door and it made a creaking sound. A cold wind blew in her face. No light was coming through the window, leaving the room pitch black. Kulpash startled, hesitating about entering the house. Still holding the doorknob, she took one reluctant step through the threshold.

“Qaragym!”

The house was quite...

“Qaragym, where are you?..”

“Are you here?..”

Still no answer...

Kulpash had no idea what to do. She looked back full of uncertainty. She ran to the window and shoveled the piled snow on with her bare hands. A glaring beam of sunlight fell on the house floor. It was noon, the sun was raying to the stove...

Only after shaking the snow off herself, her eyes fell on father and son holding each other

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and hunched together over the stove...Her heart softened and tears came to her eyes. Thinking they were asleep, she stumbled in a hurry:

“Qaragym, Qali-zhan, wake up!..”

While running to nestle and kiss Qali, she notices Maqtym with widened eyes, mouth open and teeth crooked!...

In terror she mumbled “Ah...”

She didn’t know what happened and fell clutching her dead husband and child.

Appendix 2

Sacrifice (Ashtyq Qurbany)

Storm. Ice Storm... Not an icy storm, but a bloody storm!... When a wind squalls it suffocates and leaves a person breathless. Snow was not small and slushy, but sharp as thorns; snow could cut through the skin and suck the blood out.

“*Qatyn*¹¹. It's freezing here. Will you find something more to burn?...” said Qairaqbai. Wind crept through the door and window, and frost crept in behind it, settling across the walls of the tiny house.

“What can I do? What else do you think is left to burn? We have already burned this hovel's roof. That day Damesh and I shoveled and burned some scraps left under the snow.”

Shyrynkul sat in front of the stove and stirred out ashes with the rake, firing them one more time. The last embers of the spent reeds flickered briefly, then choked and went cold. Shyrynkul mourned.

“Oh God! Turns out there is no end in this misery!” They had nothing but water to consume. They fell into despair after starving for two days. “What will happen next? What are we going to do?” Tears fell down in heavy drops and washed away her face. Qairaqbai was sitting with his dropped jaw and hazy eyes. Eight or nine years old Tansyq was laying rolled inside father's shabby *kupi* coat. Damesh, who was mourning and starving the most, was sitting with her glance running back and forth between weeping mother and hollow father. Now Damesh looked worse than she ever had. It seemed like nothing was left from that charming look she had just a couple of months ago. It was not only starvation that corrupted Damesh, but

¹¹ Married woman. The modern connotation of the word in Kazakh language is negative, however, originating from ancient Turkic “khatun,” it means a respected woman or a respected man

another disaster. Damesh and Tansyq are Qairaqbai's kids. Tansyq was of no help. Damesh was not a kid anymore, she was turning sixteen this year. Other sixteen year olds were already working in service, or crafting goods at home to take care of their parents. Could Damesh do the same? How was she planning to repay her sincere parents who raised and fed them? They had no food for two days, and how long could they stay like this? What if they couldn't? Would they be willing to wander the street? If they were left on the street, would they freeze to death under Rakhym's saddle pad?... Damesh was burning inside while thinking about it, as if she was the sole reason for her parent's despair. "Dear God, only if I were a man! If I were a man, I wouldn't drag my parents into this cruel fate, even if I had to knock on doors to seek for charity," she thought and cried in pain... A dark void filled the house. It's evening and where was the candle that gives the light? Qairaqbai was resting with his back against the stove. Tansyq hid his head under Qairaqbai's armpit. Damesh was laying looking at Tansyq. Only Shyrynkul sat motionless over her husband's head... Her thoughts deepened. After all those thoughts, her sigh came like something breaking inside her. Outside was a storm, wind whistled, and growled. Sometimes it laughed, sometimes it cried. The dark void hung overhead, and with the sorrowful gusts of the day, it wrapped the world in a choking embrace! It sounded like a crunch on the other side of the door. Someone carefully opened the door and entered the house with hesitation.

"Who are you?"

"I'm a heaven-sent guest"

"Poor one, what were you hoping to get from us? Here we are needing to find something to ourselves, you better check on *bais*¹²!"

¹²In earlier nomadic Kazakh society, owners of the large number of livestock and the leaders of nomadic migration. In late XIX and XX centuries, due to the Russian, and later Soviet, land reforms, the social status of the wealthy class rapidly degenerated

The guest stood for a second squeaking with his legs and spoke with a deadly voice about his grief.

“I’m hungry, I’m wandering on foot, no one has let me through their doors. At least let me spend this night here, please!”

Shyrynkul sighed.

“Come, lay down,” she said. “Hey, get up,” she said and woke up Qairaqbai.

“What do you want?”

“The thing that we talked about, what are we gonna do?..”

Qairaqbai didn’t answer, and kept sitting with his head down.

“Don’t mourn too much, you have to accept the path God created. Will we die living like this, will we succumb?! At least, let me try to tell her if you can’t!

Qairaqbai thought for a while.

“Whatever!” he said.

“*Qalqam*¹³ Damesh!”

“Yes, mother!”

“Wake up. We are so unfortunate. We are about to die here... What are we going to do?”

“What can I do, mother? If I could do something, even if I sacrifice myself, I would save you, but what can I do!...” Damesh choked with tears, and stopped without finishing her words...

“*Qalqam* Damesh!”

“Yes, mother”

¹³The term of endearment means “my dear”, “the one I have to protect.”

“You know that there is something that would save us from death?..”

“Mama, tell me! If it is a duty I can handle, let me handle it. Even if we can’t save ourselves, at least let’s save Tansyq!...”

“If we do it, we can save all of us.”

“Tell me, mama, tell me!”

After hesitating for a moment, Shyrynkul spoke up.

“Qalqam, why would I keep telling you what’s in the past? You know it all too well, you were betrothed when you were kid. Last year your betrothed died. When his brother wanted to get you as a second wife, calling you his *amengger*¹⁴, your father and I were scared to death hearing that and had put everything at stake to get you back. We sold those four-five heads of cow to pay back the bai his *qalym*¹⁵. That day, our only worry was to return you back home from them. All we had dreamt was for you to find your happiness with someone you love. Though, I think this is not what God wants. We are facing an abyss. If we don’t find a way out, it only means our end. Let at least one of us survive. We are about to betray you, we are about to betray you!”

“Mother, am I to be put on sale indeed? If the price is enough for your needs, for your rescue, I can let go of all thousands of my souls, let it be my sacrifice!”

“Can you indeed, qalqam?”

“Indeed, mama!”

¹⁴Marital custom of marrying the widow of the deceased brother by blood.

¹⁵Bridal price. Money or other form of wealth paid by groomside to the parents of a bride. In the text, bai is requesting the bride price back because the bride left her in-laws.

“If so, Tileumaghambet wants you as a second wife. He will not give us any cattle, he only promised to take care of us for the rest of the winter.”

Damesh's heart froze and her whole body was shaking. Tileumaghambet! Tileumaghambet is sixty. *Bai*. His two sons have families of their own. He had two wives, the second died this summer. Oh God, why would he bother with a bride when he's about to die? Even if as a second wife, why wouldn't he get a bride to one of his sons instead?.. They had been ready to sell her, and still the world had not sent a single young man who needed a bride. Damesh sat petrified. Even though she wanted to cry her heart out, she held back and stayed silent, clenching her teeth, worried that her mother might be upset. Warm tears ran from her eyes and fell into the her chest...

The guest lying opposite the entrance at *tör*, honored place, whimpered in sleep. Maybe he was dreaming, he rumbled “Hey, qatyn, your loaf is burning... Take it out of the stove!... Give me a piece! The bread!”

People will do anything for bread. They wander everywhere, facing a hungry death! Girls like Damesh were being sold for pennies to save their parents!... Ahh, hunger, you outdid us all.

“Qalqam, Damesh,” said Shyrynkul, trembling.

“Yes, mama,”

“What will you do?”

“I agree, mother, I do. For you, for the baby Tansyq, even if I had not just one but a thousand lives, I would sacrifice all of them. I am a sacrifice! I am a victim of hunger!..”

Letter of Damesh

“Dear *Raqila*,

Turns out you are alive! Today I heard about your well-being. It's been a long time since we met. Exactly seven years. You were only ten years old... Do you remember on one autumn day, when we went for water, you cried sitting beside the waterhole because you couldn't lift the bucket. "If only I had the strength to lift two buckets, I would have no more dreams left in this world!" you said, but you were young, after that you wished for more: you had no food; your father wandered around asking for charity; your mother died sick, and you with your father decided to move away holding your hands together and leaving that little house you built in a pit during bone-chilling frost. You also said, standing on a pile of white snow, "Does a person who has a peer they grew up with, laughed and played together, even have any dreams?" I couldn't let you go and went to see you off all the way up to the hill behind the village. While standing on that hill, we were freezing and crying, hugging each other. I kept looking at you until you and your mother, staggering, hid behind the summit. When I got home I saw the layer of salt residue my tears left on my chest.

...It was only the beginning of the black day of bloody rain. Then the tragedy started like this. We saw the days you had seen. We went several days without tasting anything and starved to death. Even if my father told us he should ask people for charity, my mother and I insisted that even if we die, he must never beg for charity...

Tansyq's hunger was the most hurtful; the cold took away the colors of his skin and left him with bare bones ...We were about to die. We were ready to die. It was easy only to speak about death, we were scared to really die. Sometimes people can let go of their lone souls, but it turned out hard to die together with your whole family. Even if I wished death for myself, I could never wish the same for my parents, for my only brother Tansyq. Far from wishing for death, I came to feel that if only I could see them saved, I would have no greater wish.

... Even though I was not bound to death, I still died in another way. I sacrificed myself and saved their lives. You know Tileumaghambet, right? Yes, curse his lineage!.. Shameless, married me as a second wife! What I say, did I marry because I wanted to? I had to, had to...

... Tileumaghambet didn't keep his promise. He should have taken care of my parents during winter. In summer, I think that my parents would manage on their own, do something to secure a living. I told my father so. But Tileumaghambet was against it. "You ate my food the whole winter, pay it back!" said this devil. It looked as if I was doing this out of my own will. Father was herding sheep, mother was lighting the stove and cleaning the cinders. Tansyq was being put in charge of the calf. It was heartrending to hear Qanysh baibishe¹⁶ when she hissed like a snake and scolded "a curse upon your house, wicked!" We had no power to fight back, we could only get back to our house in the evening and sit there crying in silence. Hot tears cleared, washed, and slightly lightened our hardship...

...I never thought this life would ever change, nor did I have an opportunity to think. Turns out if one tries their best, tries really hard, they can break any cuffs. I learned it myself... I think it was in May, the day was light and warm. While elderly women gathered at home and we were twisting noqta headcollars for foals, a couple of men entered through the door. One was a pale skinned tall young man. He had a mustache that was freshly growing. He was dressed in a Russian manner, and his hair flowing wildly around the temples... From the moment I saw that young man, I couldn't take my eyes off him. I don't know why, but I felt drawn to him. I felt as if I were waiting for something. As if I were searching for a cure for a wound in him... If someone, especially the töre nobles, decides to visit us, both bai and baibishe will never let me near the ancestral house. If I had something important to do there, they would try to make me leave. I

¹⁶ The senior wife in a Kazakh polygamous marriage.

never had sensed the reason behind that. Only later I decided to put a thought: “Oh God, why are they kicking me out? Do they think I will say something to the guest? If I think about it, I should dare to say something to them,” I convinced myself. Bai and baibishe did the same thing this time, and tried to kick me out. But I sat there arguing. I looked at “tore” thinking he would say something, he was sitting as if he didn’t notice me. Since that woman’s pressure got under my skin the anger took over me. I didn’t know what I saying:

“Are you töre¹⁷?” I said.

“Stay out,” bai and baibishe shouted at me. “Töre” man was about to say something, and looked at bai, and at baibishe, and at me.

When I said “If you are, I have a claim,” he replied

“I am not competent enough, but you can try to tell me,” and smiled.

I guess he sensed my will to start the complaint, bai became enraged.

“Go out, son of a dog, if you are being told so!” and took his cane.

“I have a claim, I will not go out even if you kill me!” I said stubbornly sitting tight, when bai ran towards me with his white cane. My flesh was used to the cane, so I sat defiantly showing my back. I was near death every time the white cane touched my bitter flesh... I looked behind at the moment it went quiet, and God, I would never be that happy. That “tore” was standing with his pistol pointed at bai’s chest! Bai turned pale. His face lost its color, and the cane was on the floor. Baibishe sat there, gray faced, with his mouth open...

“Share your sorrow,” said “tore.” I let out the grief I had been holding like floodwater bursting free.

¹⁷ Damesh mistook the guest as the noble elite Töre, the descendants of the Genghis Khan in the Kazakh steppe.

“I have already succumbed to everything. Please save my parents from the claws of this tyrant!” I said.

“They will be free, you will also be free. Exploiting the poor and trading women instead of livestock are things of the past. The Soviet council will dismantle such things from the roots. You will marry the one you love. Your parents will receive two years’ worth of work in full through the court!” he said.... “Tore” was the chief of education in the uezd. He took us to the city in his wagon. There was a two bedroom apartment. He shared one of the rooms. At first, he was planning to return my parents’ earnings in a few months and move us to the nearby village, but the matters were delayed. Bai never appeared in court, which raised significant suspicion about him. You know, people also have no shame, everyone cares only to excuse the bai, to blow my parents’ and my effort to the wind...

“Tore’s” name was Qasen. We stayed with him for about three months. He carried all our expenses. It was dreadful, we pitied him, but there was nothing we could do. We promised ourselves that after getting our money from the bai, we would repay Qasen everything that he spent on us.

... It was late at night, and drizzling a bit. I was standing at the window immersed in thoughts and imagining the land and the vast plains...

“Damesh, could you come here?” said someone. When I looked behind wondering who it was, a smiling Qasen stood there holding the door of the next room. My heart swelled for some reason... Qasen smiled and calmly said “It’s autumn already. Schools have opened, kids are signing up for classes. You should send Tansyq to school,” he said. I felt an odd kind of joy. “Thank you!” I kept saying. Qasen smiled at me: “Or, do you also want to? If you want to study, I can help you to enroll in the school. There are a bunch of women just like you going to school

already. You are still young. Listen to me and enter the school, study! I will handle the admissions,” he said. I didn’t think that anything Qasen said was wrong. Because I knew Qasen never says anything wrong, I believed he never wishes harm to us.

“Yes, I will study!” I also promised. I started school the next day...

... In the middle of the winter, my father got his compensation from the bai. I wouldn’t be lying if I say it was twice as much as his former wealth. My father settled in the village located ten kilometres away, and because of my studies I stayed in Qasym’s apartment. You know how parents act funny, even if they are about to die they still care about their kid. The day father was about to leave for the village. He called me to talk in private.

“Shyraghym, you are being left alone, take care about yourself. Look after Qasen. Qasen is an angel,” he said. My heart leapt with joy when he said “Qasen loves you.” It might be true. You know I am a fool, maybe I just didn’t sense it. “Parents know their child best” they say...

... I learned to read letters over the course of the winter. I have become capable of writing. Those times became the happiest of my life. I never thought I would see a bright future, but I saw, my dreams are over... Father sent me the horse so I could visit the village. I have said I would never keep a secret from you, I will tell you everything as it is: When I was about to leave the next day, Qasen took me out to the theater. I would often follow him there back in winter. We came back home in the middle of the night. The May night was soothing. You would want to walk outside; wandering around, breathing the sweet air as much as you possibly can... We were walking together... I even thought I was dreaming. Qasen was walking, hugging his hand around me. I think I was walking leaning my head against his shoulder as if I was relying all my weight onto him. I wonder how it exactly happened, but did not want to shy away out of awkwardness. I felt as if I could keep walking like this until dawn, not just dawn, but for my

whole life. I think my soul and body was dreaming about this state!... Qasen, dear soul, has a good nature, he just smiled at me and said:

“Won’t you be angry?”

“No,” I said.

... I married Qasen, and I became his partner for life. My lucky star smiled at me. We have a son, he looks just like his father. We named him “October”... By the way, as I was writing this, I once thought about something. You are way more educated than me, you are studying in good places, and there is going to be celebration of October’s tenth anniversary. I have decided to share with you everything that has happened in the past ten years... You are good at writing, I saw one of the letters you wrote for the newspaper. Write about it, express your congratulations with the anniversary! Tell the story of our past and present it to everyone! Write including that we were enlightened, received education, and became members of society all thanks to the Soviet government! If it weren’t for the Soviet government that brought us to the ranks of civilized people, our bones would be just rotting underground...

... I don’t know what hardship you faced after the moment we parted. But, I am sure, it was not easy to reach your goals. Write, write to the newspaper, let everyone read it, I will also read. Congratulations, congratulations with the happiness you achieved!

Farewell, I kissed your cheeks.

Damesh”