

**Final Capstone Thesis: "The Image of Women in Kazakh Cinematography:  
Representation, Stereotypes, and Social Impact"**

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SOC 498 Capstone Seminar Part I

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May 16, 2025

## **Introduction**

This paper analyzes the portrayal of women in Kazakh cinematography with the focus on whether their representations reproduce or subvert gender conventions and expectations. In examining these representations, the study is able to examine the effects of such portrayals of gender and identity in cinema on wider Kazakhstani societies. The main theoretical framework for the project will be based upon the principles of the feminist film theory, transnational cinema, Goffman's theory of social image, intersectionality and postcolonialism. The project by using cinema as a mirror of socio-cultural and economic processes happening in Kazakhstan from the soviet period till modern days, will examine changes in women's gender roles from the perspective of changing cultural norms.

The purpose of this study is to examine the social representation of women in cinema from both historical and contemporary perspectives, in order to identify and analyze how the social representation of women in cinema has changed in response to changes in society and the use of media to promote gender justice. That's why the main research question guiding this study is as follows: How were women portrayed in Kazakh cinema of different periods, and how did it reflected the prevailing cultural norms and gender roles? The first part of the research question focuses on the representation of Kazakh women in films. Thus, looking at the change in the number of female characters throughout the time, representation of their lives (place of work, study, goals and dreams) but also interactions with other characters, attitudes of other characters towards women characters and the contribution of the female character to the development of the plot. To answer the second part of the question, it is necessary to examine the social representations of women in cinema from both a historical and contemporary perspective in order to capture how these social representations change in tandem with the changes in the social

status of women in society. In addition, the role of cinema as a mirror of society and as a critique of the successes and failures of society will also be considered in relation to women's equality.

The significance and contribution of this research relies on several aspects. First, this research will contribute to the academic debate on gender and media where intense use of social media may support stereotypes and reinforce traditional gender roles and norms, and how cultural construction influences public views of gender and their roles and positions in society through investigating the connection between the movie plots and the norms of Kazakhstani society. Second, it contributes to the achievement of Kazakhstan's development objectives as set out within the framework of SDGs with regard to gender equality for women, focusing on the country's striving to become one of the thirty most developed countries by 2050. In this way, this study will help to inform the current research on gender inequality both in terms of representation in movies and in general social context and also enrich the understanding of the impact of the film as a tool that can either strengthen or weaken gender stereotypes.

## **Literature Review**

### *Role of women in Kazakh society*

According to the 2022 UNDP report of Gender Inequality Index (GII) that includes three main dimensions as reproductive health, empowerment and the labour market, Kazakhstan positions the 42nd place among 166 countries (United Nations, 2024). Figures prove that during the society's development in the Soviet times till nowadays, the role of women in society and the opportunities to succeed in different areas have increased significantly (Kudaibergenova, 2018; Muratovna & Serikbayevna, 2020). Most international documents ensuring women's rights plus protection of motherhood and childhood and equal access to education and employment and social status achievement have been adopted by Kazakhstan (The Law of the Republic of

Kazakhstan, 2009). Nevertheless researchers claim development processes in the country feature unique characteristics that reflect Kazakh society's traditional structure when woman acts primarily as a mother and later on as a matriarch, a keeper of traditions, and the first teacher and educator of children (Moldagaliyev et al., 2015). The traditional rights and opportunities for women in Kazakh society receive strong backing from the traditional laws while maintaining a significant position in anthropology and ethnography (Naizabayeva et al., 2022). The Kazakh people do not impose restrictions on women's activities, as in various Muslim communities, although Muslim elements persistently penetrate into public life, but still have little influence on it, because history positions the Kazakhs more as free nomads (Moldagaliyev et al., 2015).

The combination of traditional value promotion efforts by most societal members as an identity tool and governmental support has sustained a deeply patriarchal society in Kazakhstan (Naizabayeva et al., 2022). Although higher education enrollment rates among women surpass those of male students, as of the beginning of '22-'23 academic year, 308.6 thousand women and 269.7 thousand men were studying in higher education programs (Maulenova, 2023), working men compose a slightly larger group than working women among the employed population (76.6% versus 66.6%) (WorldBank, 2023). Men receive higher salaries than women but work in challenging positions which pay better while women uphold traditional family activities of hosting guests and caring for family relationships and preparing meals together and tending to children given that they also bring home income (Naizabayeva et al., 2022).

#### *Movies as representation and Kazakh cinematography*

Analysis of gender representation in films produced can shed light on ways in which gender roles are constructed in the specific context of Kazakhstan. Cinema, from its very conception, has played a significant role in shaping the social perspective towards women.

Movies are not only the mirror images of culture but act as pre-determinants of such culture being melodramatic about such parameters, particularly, when they fit into the typical stereotype copula. According to Zirong Lu (2023), such representations support stereotypical gender roles as part of the social reality. On the other hand, films that transgress such norms have potential to transform a nation's identity and change the ways gender is viewed. This dynamic is especially important for Kazakh cinema, in which representations of the empowered and autonomous female characters are still rare while the domesticated and dependency discursive formations are dominant (Bezruchko & Stepanenko, 2024). An actor in the Kazakh movie industry, Abay Kazbayev has pointed out that the nation's cinema has grown tremendously in the recent past and has been recognized locally as well as internationally. Reflecting on this progress, Kazbayev noted that films and TV series often mirror the cultural and political transformations within the country: "The film and TV series are always a mirror of the change in the culture and politics of the country" (Times of Central Asia, 2024). Such assertion calls for discussion of the extent to which representation of women on the big screen has changed from being passive participants or objects of sexual desires to active subjects and strong heroines.

The study of gender portrayal of women in Kazakh cinema demonstrates that there was a traditional historical pattern regarding gender roles in society. For instance, women portrayed in the Soviet historical films often appear to be obedient and sacrificing subjects. As a famous Kazakh film critic Gulnara Abikeeva writes in the *Kazakh New Wave* (2021), these representations reproduced clichéd positions of femininity, and Kazakh women were shown as primarily moral and family-oriented. Kononenko (2011) also observes that all the films of Soviet animation and folklore-based films portrayed women as surrendering and caring, which was also the case in Kazakh films during that period. These images that are conditioned by the Soviet

paradigm dominate the modern Kazakh motion picture and such women characters are depicted principally as the sacrificing mothers or the obedient daughters rather than pursuing their own dreams.

This persisting stereotype has socio- economic and cultural influences as well. As discussed earlier, the role of women in Kazakh society to this day is a combination of tradition and opportunities for development. According to the survey carried out among women in Kazakhstan by Halyk Research (Kabzhalalova, 2023), the following factors indicated that gender pay gap by 25% in 2022 and career progression remained rife in the country. Closely connected with this economical subordination in the cinema, women are often represented as being financially dependent on men. They all paint quite a gloomy picture that women should be at home attending to their families rather than chasing after jobs. Islamic cultural norms are ever present in Kazakhstan which has affected how women are depicted in cinema, as well as propping up the traditional stereotype of femininity and women's roles (Srivastava, 2024).

In the modern Kazakh cinematized culture, although there are improvements, the traditional motives about women confined only to the domestic realm are still dominating. Some directors have introduced new concepts and started working on the more nuanced portrayal of women characters but these characters are still limited by the cultural role they have to play. As for example, representation of the women who do not conform to traditional femininity, patriarchal ideology is expressed as an imposition of the submission or of the unchallenged conformity of women to the familial or societal norms. As seen from the cases above, there is a continued conflict between more liberal gender roles and the more firmly fixed cultural and religious attitudes.

In contrast to other cultures, including South Korean, the Kazakh cinema has not been very quick to adopt the feminism themes. Although South Korea has patriarchal cultural values, they have been gradually exploring gender problems through the lenses of feminism as Tangalycheva (2023) mentions. In another study, Raj (2024) conducts research on gender violence in the United States to show that such topics should be addressed in the media. Although the work is based on the experience of the United States, we can argue that it is important to highlight the need to develop in Kazakh cinema the genres that deepen understanding of the gender issues. The same can not be said for Kazakhstan, where cultural and religious influences have kept feminism from the mainstream cinema and the narratives are still represented in stereotypical manner. Furthermore, for any socio-political problems which include gender-based violence, their representation in Kazakh films critically lacks the analysis of gender. Previously, no work was conducted on the analysis of Kazakhstani Cinematography from the point of view of the analysis of the image of women that embrace the cultural, social and political changes of the region. This research frames the analysis of the representation of women in Kazakh cinema within debates on gender, culture and socio-economic factors to examine how and in what ways the movies respond to and construct the reality. Therefore, by identifying these representations, the study will help to advance knowledge of the role of cinema in negotiating and deconstructing gender roles in the context of Kazakhstan and, more broadly, other post-Soviet societies.

### *Theoretical framework*

This research work will be based on several theoretical concepts: feminist film theory, transnational cinema, Goffman's theory of social image, intersectionality and postcolonialism. Feminist film theory helps to explain how gender, power and representation works in the

medium of cinema. The traditional approach of feminist film theory has been to analyze and question the representation of women in films, and ask questions about how and why patriarchal culture is reproduced on the big screen. According to Thornham (2019), this theoretical approach has previously been used to compare the representation of femininity as desirable to men and is an aspect that reproduces the gender power relations in media. Marxist criticism, psychoanalysis and semiotics have all helped reveal how cinema helps to rebuild patriarchy and cast women as subservient or 'fascinating beasts' in order to perpetuate expectation. From this perspective, Murray (2019) is useful in showing how patriarchal narratives map the active and dominant subject positions to male characters and the submissive ones to women. They not only influence the views of women in cinema but their spirit too by defining their social persona of women through cinematic portrayal and objectifying them or restricting their options to public presentation of self. In the specificity of Kazakh cinematograph, where women are typically presented as needing rescue, in terms of family drama and are portrayed in commendable traditional stereotypical manner.

The theory of social image enriches the concept of feminist film theory because it enlightens how media builds and sustains a society's perception of individuals and groups. In Erving Goffman's book "The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life" (1956), like actors on stage, people control the impression and perception of themselves by others, in cinema this role is played by directors for women. According to Goffman's social image theory, cinema is not only an effective mirroring of a society's values, but it proceeds to serve as an active booster of those values for it is considered as an instrument of cultural domination. However, using the given framework, it is possible to pinpoint the aspect that gender construction in the films *Entertainment and Love and Prize* keeps appearing as a stereotyped representation of the

submissive or the eroticised Kazakh woman. They, therefore, determine the manner in which women are viewed in wider Kazakh society and the extent of the structures of oppression that they experience.

Expanding from this, Sara (2023) associates feminist film theory to transnational cinema to show how analyzing films under this theory exposes the plight of women around the globe but with respect to cultural and political differences like being a postcolonial country. The concept of transnational cinema encompasses the impacts of globalization on the cultural and economic aspects of cinema. It is especially important for the analysis of Kazakh cinema as this approach enables one to question if the cinema reinforces or challenges the gendered structures of the global society. The concept of transnational feminism enables us to position Kazakh films in relation to other cinematic cultures, and, thereby, to consider how these films engage with the ongoing dialogue on gender and representation.

Intersectionality theory proposed by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989, where inequalities based on gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity, disability, class and other discriminated characteristics are combined with each other and create a unique experience of marginalization. This theory is useful in analyzing Kazakh films, as it allows us to determine how nationality, education and other factors affect female characters in films. Allowing us to assess whether Kazakh cinema reinforces stereotypes about women, for example, from villages, who are committed to traditions and city women, who are more independent, or, on the contrary, challenges ingrained stereotypes.

Postcolonialism in the context of this study focuses on the study of the cultural, political and economic consequences of Soviet imperialism, focusing on the impact of human control on the current situation of women in Kazakhstan. The theory is applicable to this study as it

examines the formation of cultural knowledge by the colonizer (the USSR) about the colonized people (Kazakhstan). According to Kandiyoti (2007), the Soviet policy of gender emancipation in Central Asia, which is called the "Soviet paradox", slowed down the social transformations associated with modernity, since post-Soviet gender ideologies are not a simple return to interrupted traditions, but represent a strategic use of notions of cultural authenticity to achieve new ideological goals in the context of social fragmentation and growing inequality. It is also noted that the command economy resulted in ethnic stratification, with Slavic ethnicities concentrated in cities and non-agricultural sectors, and indigenous ethnicities in rural areas and agriculture, which had consequences for indigenous women, who had high educational attainment and high birth rates, as well as policies that encouraged motherhood as a social duty, which was consistent with the social values of large families in Kazakhstan (Kandiyoti, 2007). The framework of postcolonialism enables to understand how Soviet colonial rule and subsequent cultural suppression and present-day power discrepancies in Kazakhstan affect gender representations and ethnic identities along with narrative structures in films. The analysis moves beyond from Western feminist principles to study how gender interacts with cultural identity in Kazakhstan because it was once a colonized territory that exists as a hybrid nation.

Most of the above theories were developed for Western society and analysis of their socio-cultural changes which are culturally and socially different from Kazakhstan. As there was no analysis of Kazakh cinematography from the frame of women image, this research aims to fill the existing gap in the literature and scholarship on women's representation in Kazakh cinema through positioning this problem within the context of the region's cultural, social, and political fields.

## Research Design

### *Data Collection Process*

This study uses qualitative research methods, thematic analysis to analyze Kazakh films and digital ethnography to understand the impact of changes in the country on the portrayal of women in films. Nine films from three different periods are used for the analysis: the Soviet period, the post-Soviet period, and the contemporary period. The focus is on how women are represented in these periods to analyze historical changes in gender roles, gender stigma, and expectations over the last 30-40 years. The main sample of the study is nine films from the Kazakhfilm studio, which has been operating from the Soviet era to the present day; three films are from each of the periods. The films are selected according to their Kinoroom ratings among critics, as well as the year of their release. This type of sampling ensures impartiality, the absence of bias, and the coverage of a wider context that includes films of different genres and directors from one production company.

Films were selected based on the following criteria:

- Films produced by Kazakhfilm: since it was founded during the Soviet era, it is currently the largest Kazakh film studio for feature, animated and documentary films.
- Chronological coverage: to ensure time coverage, three films will be selected from each of three categories: Soviet from 1984 to 1990, post-Soviet from 1992 to 1998 and contemporary from 2018 to 2024.
- Popularity and influence: films that are highly rated by critics according to the Kinoroom rating will be selected because they have a deeper representation of society and the role of women in it.

The selected films are:

- Soviet (1984 to 1990):
  - Игла (1988);
  - Тайны мадам Вонг (1986);
  - Чужая Белая и Рябой (1986)
- Post-Soviet (1992 to 1998):
  - Счастье (1995);
  - Тот, кто нежнее (1996);
  - Кардиограмма (1995)
- Contemporary (2018 to 2024):
  - Желтая кошка (2020);
  - Томирис (2019);
  - Рассвет Великой степи (2022)

### *Ethical considerations*

As this research does not involve human subjects, the ethical consideration is limited, and therefore the risks are minimal. But, when analyzing films, the rights of the owners of intellectual property will be observed, all the sources used will be credited. Also, cultural relevance will be observed in order to prevent misinterpretation of the films or their makers. Thus, this structured approach will guarantee a systematic approach to analyzing the evolution of the gender roles as depicted in Kazakh cinema.

### *Data analysis*

This study uses qualitative research methods and thematic analysis to examine the representation of women in Kazakhstani cinema across three historical periods: the late Soviet period (1984–1990), the early post-Soviet period (1992–1998), and the contemporary period of

the last decade (2018–2024). Additionally, digital ethnography is used to contextualize how societal changes in Kazakhstan affect the portrayal of women in films.

For the comparative analysis, first, nine selected films categorized by period, with a brief plot description and the number of female characters (their names and roles) were saved in a Microsoft Word spreadsheet. The spreadsheet also included the occupations of the main characters and their narrative significance (Table 1). A complete table for all 9 films is presented in the appendix.

Movie name	Number of female characters	Women Character		Occupation	Narrative significance
Игла (1988) The story of Moro, who tries to save his beloved Dina from drug addiction but ends up dying himself.	2	Dina (Marina Smirnova)	Main character	Nurse living in Almaty	InSignificant
		Nurse (Ayhan Chataeva)	Minor character	Nurse living in Almaty	InSignificant

Table 1 - Excerpt from the analysis of the film “Игла” (1988)

For a more detailed review of the films, dialogues concerning female characters were manually transcribed in Microsoft Excel and analyzed using coding to count themes that emerged (educated women, strong and independent women, traditional women, and women with deviant behavior).

This study used a variety of tools including:

- YouTube and various websites - for viewing films.
- Microsoft Word - for general organization of film data for comparative analysis.
- Microsoft Excel - for annotations and coding of dialogues and counting of recurring images.

## Findings

### *Soviet Period films (1984 to 1990)*

#### *Игла (1988)*

Rashid Nugmanov directed “Игла” as a Soviet thriller film with drama and arthouse elements at Kazakhfilm studio during 1988. The story opens with Moro (Viktor Tsoi) arriving in Alma-Ata to recover the funds that Spartak (Alexander Bashirov) owes him. Moro resides in the house of his longtime friend Dina (Marina Smirnova). He notices her drug addiction. After dealing with Spartak's informal comrades and handling two racketeers Moro acquires authority yet this act leads to continuous persecution of him. The main character transports Dina to a village by his home which stands near the disappearing Aral Sea. After concealing the morphine ampoules Dina brought secretly he watches her regain consciousness after going through withdrawal. When they are back to Alma-Ata three men approach Moro in the street to take him aside to meet a group of drug addicts. The men give Moro an ultimatum to return the ampoules within ten minutes or they will engage in a different conversation. Moro battles and defeats all attackers who approach him. Coming back home, Moro notices the elastic band on Dina's wrist because she has resumed using drugs. Moro decides to bring Dina to the ocean shoreline for a second time. He leaves to throw the ampoules into flames but a solitary individual (Ernar Abilev) attacks Moro with two stomach wounds during a frigid winter night in the empty park as he pretends to give Moro a lighter for his cigarette.

There are only two female characters—Dina and a minor nurse—and both are classified as narratively insignificant despite Dina being central to the plot's conflict. Dina's role is that of a passive character suffering from drug addiction, with Moro taking active steps to protect, save, and rehabilitate her. Dina shows minimal agency because others act upon her instead of her

acting on her own behalf. Despite Moro's intervention Dina returns to substance abuse which supports the cinematic convention of representing women as weak entities who need male assistance to fight their personal struggles.

Women in patriarchal narratives take position as submissive beings according to feminist film theory developed by Murray (2019). In the story Dina plays a role that propels Moro's narrative forward but she lacks autonomous development as a main character. In addition, according to Goffman's Theory of Social Image, media shapes and sustains the social perception of individuals. The visual portrayal of Dina as an addicted vulnerable woman in "Игла" both matches and possibly strengthens public beliefs about female weakness. Her addiction can be understood as both individual failure and cultural metaphor which the film industry uses to represent social decline through female characters. As a moral protector Moro represents the dominant active role of men compared to the passive weakness of women.

The findings from "Игла" show how the film presents traditional patriarchal female representation which dominated Soviet Kazakh cinema during that time. In the film Dina represents the common cinematic stereotype of women who seek rescue from men yet cannot escape their predetermined destiny. The film upholds traditional gender roles alongside cultural power dynamics between men and women because women characters possess minimal narrative importance during this Soviet film production period at Kazakhfilm.

#### *Тайны мадам Вонг (1986)*

“Тайны мадам Вонг” is a 1986 Soviet adventure film directed by Stepan Puchinyan and filmed at the Kazakhfilm studio based on a screenplay by Stanislav Govorukhin. The film tells the story of the legendary queen of modern pirates, Madame Wong. The plot of the film begins with the Soviet cruise ship sails through the Pacific Ocean. Among the passengers is Madame

Wong, along with her henchmen. Meanwhile, police commissioner Thompson is on their trail—his grandson has been kidnapped by Wong's people, and he must recover the pirates' treasure to exchange it for the boy's freedom. In the end, Thompson successfully rescues his grandson.

In her brief appearances Madame Wong emerges as a pivotal independent female figure who stands out as a unique case of a leading female antagonist within the adventure/crime genre that was typically dominated by male characters. The character deviates from conventional female portrayals which show passive behavior. Wong leads her pirate gang by exercising control over her male followers while making decisions and steering the plot of the movie against conventional female characterizations that need male leadership.

According to Feminist film theory (Murray, 2019; Thornham, 2019) society gives male characters ownership of power and agency. The villainous portrayal of Madame Wong in the plot functions as a dangerous female stereotype without undermining her dominant position which challenges traditional male-dominated narratives. The transnational cinema theory demonstrates how globalization shapes cultural order while developing a specific portrayal of women by focusing on Wong's Chinese ethnicity and exotic nature. Through her "modern pirate queen" character she may activate orientalist stereotypes of mysterious seductive Asian women who are portrayed as deadly but these images rarely appeared in Soviet cinema. Through an intersectionality analysis that connects gender with ethnic identity and social status Madame Wong does not belong to Kazakh ethnicity but the film portrays her as an outsider who achieves power before Commissioner Thompson defeats her. The film concludes by showing that female power eventually yields to male authority thus upholding traditional patriarchal norms that use male triumph over female misconduct as a symbol for restoring political and moral order.

Among the films in the sample, “Тайны мадам Вонг” represents a unique case because it gives women a central position of power in Soviet Kazakh cinema. Under feminist and transnational film theory analysis with intersectionality perspectives the film demonstrates conditional power which turns out to be regressive because the character obtains authority only through evil deeds and foreignness.

*Чужая Белая и Рябой (1986)*

“Чужая Белая и Рябой” is a 1986 film directed by Sergei Solovyov, based on the story “Отрочество архитектора Найдёнова” by Boris Ryakhovsky. The film takes place in Western Kazakhstan. The main storyline tells the story of a teenager, Ivan Naidenov (Vyacheslav Ilyushchenko), nicknamed Sedoy, who caught a white dove. The second storyline tells of the love of Sedoy's father, a shell-shocked military commander and widower, a former artist, for the former actress Ksenia Nikolaevna Startseva, who, having divorced her composer husband, is in poverty and is under the real threat of being left homeless. The woman is forced to sell things from her theater wardrobe. Towards the end of the film, Ksenia Nikolaevna suddenly dies of a heart attack.

Movie “Чужая Белая и Рябой” (1986) reflects Soviet filmmaking traditions which depict women through emotionally fragile and culturally secondary and narratively weak characters. The film shows longstanding gender beliefs which simultaneously helps maintain controlling beliefs about gender roles alongside cultural dominance for Soviet society especially within Kazakhstani society during this period.

Traditional cinematic narratives subdue women because they become objects of male visual attention which they must serve under masculine storytelling structures (Murray, 2019; Thornham, 2019). Despite being essential to the narrative of “Чужая Белая и Рябой”, Startseva

portrays her character as helpless and dependent which makes her need both emotional and possible financial support from her father Sedoi. The “suffering woman” image persists through Soviet Kazakh cinematography since female characters mostly define themselves through heterosexual relationships instead of showing self-motivated independence. The Russian characters dominate the entire film while the Kazakh background serves as mere geography while the culture of both Kazakhs and women remains invisible in this western Kazakhstan setting. This approach follows Soviet cultural norms that position Russians as supreme in the hierarchy above Kazakhs. Through social image theory Goffman explains that people (such as Ksenia Nikolaevna) perform their social roles to fulfill societal requirements. The narrative shows Ksenia as a symbol which represents decline that follows celebrity success. She used to perform dramatic roles before taking on the roles of sufferance and deterioration. The narrative portrays her to epitomize Soviet disillusionment instead of explaining her psychological depth. Her portrayal in the film aids cultural traditions because it upholds restrictive cinematic presentations that contain stereotyped female characters.

“Чужая Белая и Рябой” at first glance offers a sensitive storyline about loss and love. However, the film reproduces dominant Soviet ideologies about women. Women as emotional dependents, invisible Kazakh women, the fragility of women, and Russian femininity as idealized and doomed.

*Post-Soviet (1992 to 1998)*

*Счастье (1995)*

“Счастье” is a short film by Sergey Dvortsevov released in 1995. A short story about the life of a nomadic family in the vast Kazakh steppes. There are no main characters, because each member of the family shown is important in their own way. The film begins with the mother of

the family cooking in a homemade oven in the sand. Shows the youngest character eating porridge and a situation where a cow's head is stuck in a milk can, a problem that all family members solved together. Illustrates the evening time when the father mends the children's old shoes while the mother of the family cleans up after everyone, puts the children to bed and finds time at night to take care of herself and wash her hair. The film ends with the family packing for resettlement and wandering. The short film shows how the value of simplicity and immutability of life in the vast Kazakh steppe is happiness.

The analysis of intersectionality and postcolonial theory reveals how the film gently challenges and supports conventional ideas about Kazakh identity together with gender values and the way of rural existence in the post-Soviet era. Intersectionality demonstrates how different social divisions including gender and ethnicity and class together with location create individualized outcomes of either marginalization or empowerment. Throughout “Счастье” the mother functions as the key intersectional figure since her continuous work of cooking and cleaning and child care and self-care reveals how intersectionality operates in the film. The way she is shown in the film matches typical representations of Kazakh women who perform traditional duties within their homes and families. The character's important position in the story fails to receive any spoken words or storytelling voice because Kazakh cinema continues to suppress female voices despite their prominent screen presence. The film depicts traditional Kazakh rural women who support their families through labor yet remain confined by cultural rules although they actually sustain household operations.

“Счастье” functions as a celebration of traditional Kazakh nomadic heritage while it potentially creates a nostalgic image of unchanging traditional cultures which matches post-Soviet sentimentalism. The film represents a complete departure from Soviet-era

Kazakhfilm productions because it features Kazakh protagonists who inhabit traditional rural settings. This segment shows the Kazakh family as it exists completely visible in its rural autonomous state. Throughout the film there exists no Russian presence and the film avoids Soviet storytelling. The film demonstrates a postcolonial move to restore cultural authenticity by focusing on the authentic Kazakh indigenous identity. When the family moves from settlement to settlement at the film's conclusion it represents both an ongoing tradition and a refusal to accept Soviet policies that sought to settle down and modernize traditional Kazakh ways of life. The postcolonial cinema functions to restore cultural practices that Soviet policies suppressed or altered in the past.

The film faces the danger of showing Kazakh identity through an unchanging rural perspective that simplifies this identity. The film fails to address gender inequality and lacks any visible attempts to deliver education or healthcare or create different possibilities for children's future. The film depicts the mother's endless work as a natural and fulfilling process instead of exploitation to reinforce societal expectations that a woman finds fulfillment through service. Mainly, this reflects that although post-Soviet films are beginning to portray Kazakh women more centrally, they remain trapped within traditional frameworks, rarely shown as independent agents with their own stories.

Overall, the film demonstrates how Kazakh rural women are powerful in action but powerless in voice—central to family life but peripheral in narrative control. The movie serves as a cultural revival project which presents Kazakh nomadic values while establishing itself as separate from Soviet Russified cinema. The film simultaneously celebrates traditional gender roles but especially glorifies traditional female roles. The film showcases an early post-Soviet

Kazakh cinematic conflict between cultural heritage preservation and social and gender inequality maintenance throughout the story.

*Тот, кто нежнее (1996)*

“Тот, кто нежнее” is a 1996 feature film by Abay Karpikov. The story begins with a young man named Danesh, living in a domestic patriarchy represented by his grandmother, mother, and six sisters, who was hospitalized with a broken leg. An old man, his roommate, told Danesh about two relics: a tamga (a gold plate) and a ruby. With their help, once a year, one can find a treasure in the Scorpion Canyon. The tamga was brought from abroad by Arab sheikhs, who will be waiting for a messenger from the old man. After the death of the old man, his sisters give Danesh the ruby and the map of the Canyon, and he sets off in search of treasure. His rival is a bandit Ramazan, who kidnapped the translator Alena, who is able to read the Arabic inscription on the tamga. To save Alena, the girl's boyfriend Gosha and the main character Danesh arrive. Having subjected themselves to the trials of fate and risked their own lives, they eventually manage to get the treasure.

“Тот, кто нежнее” (1996) is a representation of feminist film theory and intersectionality. Despite the presence of numerous female characters, their agency is limited and their depiction reinforces patriarchal norms, positioning women in supporting or symbolic roles rather than as autonomous agents. Danesh is presented in a domestic patriarchy (grandmother, mother, and six sisters), but this patriarchy is symbolic rather than operative. The women, although numerically dominant, are functionally passive—they offer no real leadership or participation in decision-making that might influence the course of the quest. Their image corresponds to the Soviet and post-Soviet image of women as nurturers and custodians of the hearth, reflecting the gender role of women as custodians of tradition and emotion rather than participants in adventure

or exploration. The translator Alena is initially of decisive intellectual importance—she can read the Arabic inscription. However, she is quickly reduced to a damsel in distress when she is kidnapped by Ramazan. Her rescue becomes the central mission of the film, but she plays no significant role in her own rescue or in helping to resolve the situation after her release. This reflects Murray's (2019) notion that women in cinema should “be an object of attention” – Alena becomes an object around which male rivalry and heroism are constructed. Despite the presence of women, narrative agency remains entirely male, in line with dominant patterns where women are significant in appearance but insignificant in influence.

Using intersectional analysis enables deeper understanding of how ethnic and gender identities are portrayed in “Тот, кто нежнее”. Through a Russian actress playing Alena the character displays education and urban living alongside multilingual skills which match the Soviet cultural standards of modern Russian women. This continues the Soviet pattern where Russian women are associated with modernity and intelligence, while Kazakh women are marginalized or limited to domestic or traditional roles. Kazakh women – Danesh's sisters and mother – remain secondary figures. Despite their ‘matriarchal’ existence, they do not participate in the intellectual or adventurous spheres of the story. The social hierarchy represents Soviet colonial remnants because it presents Kazakhs as uneducated people who need Russian intellectual guidance. The film "The Tender One" presents women through symbolic representation while men maintain structural dominance thus upholding conventional gender types as well as ethnic prejudices. Most of the women in the film play either passive caretaking roles or instrumental roles as Alyona.

*Кардиограмма (1995)*

A Kazakh drama about a boy's first perception of beauty, growing up and loneliness is shown in Darezhan Omirbayev's "Кардиограмма" in 1995. The plot revolves around a little boy, Zhasulan, who lives in a remote village and whose mother (Saule), having discovered that he has a serious heart condition, sends him to a sanatorium in Alma-Ata. Upon arrival, he discovers that everyone around him is speaking Russian, which he does not understand at all. This adds an additional shock to his already sad situation, being left completely alone for a whole month, where people treat him coldly and children are cruel. However, Zhasulan falls in love with a beautiful nurse, Gulya, whom the doctor tries to clumsily flirt with and by the end of the film Zhasulan escapes from the sanatorium.

This film presents more than a story about childhood illness and isolation because it displays various power dynamics among institutional and social structures which affect the experiences of characters, especially rural Kazakh women. Zhasulan and his mother come from a distant Kazakh village without Russian language proficiency which creates challenges for communication during their stay at the Russified institution in Almaty. The linguistic disconnect between Zhasulan and his mother represents postcolonial ethnic marginalization because Russian language and culture control both institutional and urban environments following Soviet imperial domination.

Gulya, a nurse, is one of the few female characters in the film and provides warmth and care to Zhasulan. Her character is key from an intersectional perspective, combining gender, class, ethnicity, and professional role. Although Kazakh, unlike most other characters featured in previous films, the nurse represents an educated and independent female protagonist. Her kindness contrasts with institutional coldness, positioning her as a symbol of the cultural

empathy and feminine care often expected of women, particularly in the healthcare sector. Gulya fits the template of the caregiver role—idealized but not central, emotionally significant but not empowered. The depiction of Gulya stands apart from other Kazakh women roles because she uses compassion alongside cultural intimacy to resist institutional authority thus challenging both ethnic and gender power structures. The mother of Zhasulan named Saule makes the decision to send him to a sanatorium although she remains present only for a short duration. Due to her monetary difficulties she must depend on public health services for medical care. Her choice to send Zhasulan away demonstrates maternal sacrifice which functions as a common theme in Kazakh cinema because women gain value through emotional work and keeping silent. The opening scene shows how a powerless woman fights against institutional barriers to protect her child through her presence.

The intersectional perspective reveals the film through the multi-layered marginalization of its characters. By comparing Gulya and Saule as the two main female figures in the life of a young boy, *Kardiogramma* thus offers a more intimate, emotionally charged story than typical films of the post-Soviet era, it still reproduces the structural dynamics where ethnic Kazakh identities and women are emotionally important, but also challenges traditional attitudes through independent female figures.

*Contemporary (2018 to 2024)*

*Желтая кошка (2020)*

“Желтая кошка” is a 2020 film by Adilkhan Yerzhanov, where the main character Kermek returns to his small hometown after several years of imprisonment. Walking around in a Hawaiian shirt and an Alain Delon hat, he is obsessed with the dream of opening a cinema in the middle of the steppe, which cements his reputation as a fool, since the city is ruled by the mafia

and corrupt police. Teaming up with a local prostitute Eva, the main character tries to resist the bandits. Having stolen Eva and the money, the heroes go through many difficulties and in the end, falling into the hands of the Bants, both die. “Желтая кошка” is a film that shows a domestic conflict tied to the conditional social context of post-Soviet corruption and police lawlessness (Kartashov, 2022).

Through its contemporary cinematic techniques the film maintains the reproduction of traditional gender and ethnic hierarchies specifically by its portrayal of Eva. “Желтая кошка” illustrates social challenges involving cultural rankings that society faces alongside mixed identity struggles and enduring control systems through its setting and character social dynamics. The film depicts the corrupt police and mafia control of a desolate post-Soviet steppe town that represents the surviving Soviet administrative structures. The absence of proper institutions alongside statehood breakdown echoes the postcolonial system that kept people without power. Through their act of fleeing Kermek and Eva demonstrate their need to achieve cultural independence along with creative self-governance. The main conflict between Soviet paternalism emerges when the characters pursue their dream of running a cinema thus placing the film in a narrative about reclaiming national identity. The deaths indicate that change efforts will not succeed in postcolonial systems with corrupt patriarchal structures. Kazakh post-independence films maintain a challenge in breaking free from Soviet-Russian ideologies as they tend to replicate existing inequalities instead of fighting against them.

“Желтая кошка” showcases Eva as an important illustration of how film reinforces established gender-based power structures through its presentation of male perspective as well as its treatment of women as objects and its restriction of their autonomy. The movie introduces Eva as a prostitute who functions as a typical cinematic archetype to represent the blurred moral

boundaries and both male lust and social outlawry. The narrative of the film defines Eva's character through her assistance of Kermek until she dies with him. The movie avoids showing us her personal story together with her motives and internal experiences. The physical and emotional presence of Eva remains suppressed because her inner experiences and thoughts receive no representation. The film does not grant Eva her personal dreams or background details or plot developments that exist outside Kermek's story. The visual stylistic elements in the film transform Eva's body and suffering into social symbols of innocence destroyed by society which feminist critics often identify as cinematic reduction of women to failed representations of society. The name Eva connects to original sin in biblical terms which reinforces traditional male perspectives that view women as seductive victims.

Through the narrative of “Желтая кошка” the main character Eva faces multiple forms of oppression because she is a poor rural Kazakh woman in the sex industry. The character faces marginalization from two directions because she is both female and economically dependent and socially outcast. In contrast to Soviet portrayals of Russian women as independent city dwellers, contemporary cinema presented Eva as a Kazakh woman who suffers from rural poverty and underdevelopment while bearing excessive emotional burdens. Eva's actions which deviate from traditional gender norms establish her moral imperfection yet her death becomes her saving grace through a cinematic convention which maintains the opposition between “good woman” and “fallen woman”.

“Желтая кошка” uses crime elements to examine social critique while upholding rigid gender stereotypes alongside ethnic minority status discrimination. The symbolic meaning of Eva exists without a voice while she remains an object for exploitation. Modern Kazakh cinema

upholds traditional female narrative restrictions which maintain the cultural and institutional heritage of foreign rule.

*Томирис (2019)*

“Томирис” is a Kazakh feature film directed by Akan Satayev, telling the story of the Queen of the Massagetae and her victory over Cyrus the Great. The film is set in the 6th century BC in the steppes of Central Asia. The story begins with a brief biography of Tomiris's father, King Spargap. Soon, conspirators kill her father and she is forced to hide in the forests for many years. Now her goal is to regain her rightful throne and unite the steppe tribes. One day, half-dead Tomiris stumbles upon a settlement of friendly people, mainly consisting of courageous and warlike women who are almost Amazons. Having regained the throne, she marries Argun. But after the death of Tomiris's husband and son by Cyrus's people in the ancient city of Babylon, she enters into a legendary battle and kills King Cyrus with the help of her warriors.

The historical epic actively contests prevailing cinematic traditions that dominate Kazakh movies. The film positions a woman in power alongside military command roles breaking traditional gender patterns while it uses international film techniques to build an identity that combines feminist elements with Kazakh cultural strength. The film serves as an ideal demonstration of cinematic works which unite global cinematic frameworks with local narratives to support cultural identity in a postcolonial environment. The film draws its elements from worldwide feminist and historical epics including Wonder Woman and Mulan. Through its story of a female warrior-hero who experiences loss followed by learning and then fights back to victory the film connects with global audiences while telling an authentic Central Asian tale. The film presents real-life heroine Tomiris to recover a pre-Soviet nomadic matriarchy which existed

before colonial contact. Through this act of cultural reclamation the film places Kazakhstan at the center of an extensive civilizational history which moves beyond Soviet history. Through presenting a female protagonist in the lead role Kazakhfilm fights against many years of male dominance in their film studio and their story aligns with the idea that films can both reflect and shape political society.

Through an intersectional analysis we can observe how Tomiris handles her simultaneous roles as a woman and ethnic Kazakh and member of the elite and armed forces to defy conventional female character portrayals in Kazakh and Soviet cinema. The character of Tomiris rejects passive behavior and domesticity which contrasts with most previous Kazakh female characters in cinematic studies. The film portrays her as a calculating leader with emotional control who fights to protect her kinfolk and her nation. The film presents a fresh perspective compared to the usual cinematic portrayal of women who exist only as domestic helpers and obedient wives. Tomiris fights back against Soviet gender archetypes and patriarchal traditions by presenting the Kazakh woman as a powerful historical player. The warrior women of her community serve as a support network for Tomiris. The film transforms traditional gender dynamics by showing female collective power and solidarity instead of traditional heroic narratives. The images create a challenge against historical patterns of exclusion which have limited war leadership roles to masculine identity. Tomiris represents a powerful noble woman who prompts viewers to reflect on social standing. Through its sympathetic portrayal the film reveals how she matures while hiding from danger while facing abandonment and sorrow and suffering which transforms her from an elite figure into someone who has experienced hardship. Through this image the filmmaker generates a connection between royal status and genuine

exposure vulnerability thus creating empathy between the character and viewers despite social differences.

The landmark Kazakh film “Томирис” represents a landmark event that embodies transnational feminist ideals during the cultural revival of postcolonialism. Moreover, the film fights against cinematic history's disregard for women by showing the Kazakh woman as a heroic leader who commands strategic abilities. The film utilizes intersectionality to challenge mainstream gender and ethnic and power dynamics by showing women's power as personal and social entities which stem from their national roots rather than Western models. Through her actions Tomiris defies traditional limitations imposed on women to present an empowered version of femininity which matches both international perspectives and specific Kazakh cultural values.

*Рассвет Великой степи (2022)*

“Рассвет Великой степи” is a 2022 historical film by Kazakh director Akan Satayev. It is a cinematic epic about the path and personality of Kasym Khan, under whom the Kazakh Khanate reached its peak. After the khans Kerey and Zhanibek, power passed to their sons Buryndyk and Ksym. After Kerey Khan, power in the Kazakh Khanate was inherited by his son Burunduk Khan, and Kasym became the main military leader. Altynbike was Kasym's beloved, but Burunduk Khan, who did not know about this, decided to take her as his wife. In order not to sow discord, Kasym decided to sacrifice his feelings for Altynbike. Having learned about Altynbike's feelings for Kasym during her death, the enraged Burunduk Khan deprives him of his position and sends him to the border. The road to power for Kasym turned out to be difficult and bloody. The internecine struggle ruined the people and devastated the steppe, but Kasym still managed to defeat his cousin and drive the irreconcilable Khan Buryndyk beyond the steppe. He

was not only a brave warrior, a fair ruler and a defender of his subjects, he was destined to become a reformer, a reformer and the founder of the first set of laws by which the Kazakh people would live for centuries. The entire life of Khan Kasym was a struggle for the independence of the Kazakh state and the prosperity of the people, for whom the Great Steppe became their homeland.

According to feminist film theory and Erving Goffman's social image theory the present-day historical epic in Kazakh cinema features women as only romantic and symbolic characters while sacrificing themselves for male-focused national narratives. The character of Altynbike in "Рассвет Великой степи" represents traditional cinematic marginalization of women because she serves men's development needs as a passive support figure without agency or inner life. Altynbike exists solely to be desired by Kasym and Burunduk and the film gives her no independent purpose. The love she develops becomes the central point of tension between two powerful men yet she actively participates in no decisions since she functions as an exchange between dominant figures in their political negotiations. Her demise serves the purpose of creating emotional responses from males while advancing the political narrative between men instead of representing female subjectivity. This displays a traditional "women in refrigerators" pattern where male writers harm female characters to push forward their stories (Simone, 1999). Film demonstrates that female characters remain restricted to maternal, marital and victimized roles and mystical inspiration while lacking historical leadership roles. No women appear in government positions or diplomatic roles or public life throughout the film's extensive portrayal of Kazakh statehood and law thus confirming women's exclusion from national history. Throughout the film Altynbike appears only as a symbol of her beauty and devotion to her

husband while the filmmakers ignore showing her active role in politics or intellectual activities thus continuing a cinematic tradition of making Kazakh women disappear from state history.

Dawn of the Great Steppe demonstrates how women, especially Altynbike embody performable feminine ideals through cultural representations of purity alongside sacrifice and emotional devotion. Altynbike represents the perfect feminine virtues through her devotion and faithfulness and purity while matching the patriarchal narrative standards of Kazakh culture. Through her performance of silent suffering Altynbike shows both personal pain and reinforces national sacrifice while performing the “front stage” image-making recognized by Goffman. The narrative of this national epic depends on male heroism for its progression while feminine attributes serve to show emotional depth and establish authority for male leadership. The image of Altynbike supports Kazakh nationalism by displaying the traditional female values of modesty and nobility and humility that upholds cultural standards for female appearance in national representations. Research confirms that Kazakh women function in cinema as cultural symbol carriers while directors deny them active participation in shaping societal developments.

## **Discussion**

### *Cultural perspective of women*

It is impossible not to notice the role that Kazakh culture has played in shaping the image of women in films, often reinforcing traditional gender expectations. In all periods, ideal Kazakh women were often depicted as innocent, homemakers and housewives. Post-Soviet films like “Счастье” (1995), “Тот, кто нежнее” (1996), and “Кардиограмма” (1995) where Kazakh women were featured reinforce the stereotype of Kazakh women as devoted wives and mothers. Even more recent films like “Рассвет Великой степи” (2022) and even “Томирис” (2019), due to their historical genre, continue to portray women in the traditional role where wives stay at

home while their husbands go to battle. The same picture is currently observed in the country. As was said, despite the large number of opportunities for women in various fields, where the number of women entering higher education institutions is greater than that of men (Maulenova, 2023), women do not always give preference to obtaining and using their own knowledge, but mainly choose the traditional role of a housewife, since there is double pressure in the form of household responsibilities and career growth.

Russian women from urban areas are portrayed as financially independent, while Kazakh women are shown as financially dependent on men. Using the theory of intersectionality, one can consider the marginalization of women as a union of women and Kazakh women from the city and also a union of women and Kazakh women from rural areas. Where Kazakh women from rural areas committed to traditions are more susceptible to economic dependence on the man in the family. Even having a job there is a gender pay gap at 25% and inequality on career opportunities, which can be seen looking at the share of seats in parliament held by women is only 24.7%, making the difference between men and women 50.6% (Kabzhalalova, 2023; United Nations, 2024). One exception is “Кардиограмма” (1995), where a Kazakh woman achieves financial independence by working as a nurse. In “Игла” (1988), “Тайны мадам Вонг” (1986), and “Тот, кто нежнее” (1996), Russian women are portrayed as self-sufficient and economically stable, reflecting Soviet-era notions that linked modernity and independence with Russian identity. “Кардиограмма” (1995), being a post-Soviet film, is a rare instance in which a Kazakh woman is shown as financially independent and educated, marking a small but significant shift in representation.

Speaking about the cultural differences between Russian and Kazakh women, it is also necessary to note that Russian women were distinguished by deviant behavior. This is especially

noticeable in Soviet films such as “Игла” (1988), “Тайны мадам Вонг” (1986), “Чужая Белая и Рябой” (1986) they could smoke, drink alcohol and use drugs (Picture 1) while Kazakh women, portraying "cleanliness", could not afford it. From the point of view of Goffman’s social image theory, these images create a social image of a “liberated but dangerous” woman - a figure who exists outside of Kazakh cultural norms and is therefore considered different or labeled as a foreigner. These characters challenge the dominant script, but their “deviation” is allowed because they are not Kazakh. The social system does not expect them to conform in the same way as it does Kazakh women. Their freedom becomes performative – both a spectacle and a symbol of moral risk. The film shows their actions as amusing but at the same time crosses societal moral values in Kazakh society. Throughout cinematic portrayals Kazakh women maintain a fixed image of pure nature which combines domesticity with moral excellence. The representation of femininity in this context serves as a national performance which Goffman would label as the “advanced performance” of national femininity. The “pure” and obedient Kazakh woman becomes a social image constructed to represent the ideal Kazakh citizen – modest, devoted, and apolitical. This strict coding means that any deviation from this role – sexual freedom, financial independence, or moral ambiguity – violates the cultural script and is therefore rarely tolerated on screen. This shows that strong, independent women with different behavior must be “other” – foreign, dangerous, and morally corrupt. The freedom given to Russian heroines in their representation in films shows that they can be different, and also exist in society on an equal footing with everyone. And Kazakh women have only one prototype of behavior, as innocence and obedience. Changes occurred only in modern films, where already in the film “Желтая кошка” (2020) a Kazakh girl (Eva) was a worker in the intimate services sector. Instead of being seen as a complex human being with her own desires and agency,

spectators view her from limited perspectives of society, Kermek and the mafia view presented in the movie. The structural requirements assigned to Kazakh women obscure how Eva performs as an individual person. Despite her contemporary role in society she remains treated as an object instead of a subject thus confirming Goffman's observation about how social roles control personal self-expression.



Picture 1 - Screenshot from the film “Тайны мадам Вонг” (1986) where Frau Schulz (cruise director of the motor ship "Ivan Bunin") smokes in the company of ship workers.

### *Stereotypes*

Women in Kazakh cinema are often portrayed through ingrained stereotypes that show women as constantly in need of a man's help and action, as well as a gendered division of roles where the woman is the keeper of the hearth, which is a confirmation of feminist film theory. In many films, female characters rely on male figures for protection, guidance, and action, which reinforces the idea that women's success or survival depends on men. Films such as “Игла” (1988), “Чужая Белая и Рябой” (1986), and “Тот, кто нежнее” (1996) all depict female

characters who need male intervention to resolve conflicts. The same perspective has been observed in South Korean cinema, where the woman is shown as a passive object and the male hero becomes the “bearer of the gaze,” which gives him additional power in the sense that he serves as a point of identification for the viewer (Tangalycheva, 2023). Even in modern cinema, the film “Желтая кошка” (2020) continues this trend, in which the women character, working in a brothel in a village, waits for the protagonist and is further dependent on the direction, goals, and dreams of the male protagonist.

What is more, according to postcolonial theory, the ingrained stereotype from the USSR period depicts Kazakhstan as an underdeveloped country, influencing the representation of female characters as also not so well developed. Feminist studies of Kazakhstani movies are closely related to cultural studies in the field of cinema, mass media, and literature. This approach defines culture in terms of the struggle for cultural capital and access to it, for the production of identities within and through cultural representations (Tangalycheva, 2023). What was interesting was that in Soviet and post-Soviet films, the leading roles were mostly played by Russian women, while Kazakh women were rarely depicted as independent or central characters. This reflects the cultural policies and stereotypes of the Soviet era, which often prioritised Russian representation over local ethnic narratives. In many of the Soviet and post-Soviet films analysed, the leading female roles were played by Russian actresses, reinforcing the idea that independence and access to education are associated with Russian women, while Kazakh women were only given roles in film in the post-Soviet period and are depicted as rural women with more traditional views and tied to the home. The cultural politics of class, gender or race is a struggle to make the history and culture of a certain social group “visible”, it is a struggle for representation, a struggle with the dominant ideology that has usurped the right to “name”, to

naturalize the so-called common sense, to present “official versions” and reconstruct the historical past (Tangalycheva, 2023). In this study we can clearly see the cultural struggle of the Russian and Kazakh, where even when getting a role in films, Kazakh women are portrayed as uneducated from rural areas and dependent on men.

### *Shift of image*

There is a change in the female image over time from Soviet films to modern films. There is a gradual transformation of female characters from passive participants in what is happening to more active and independent. Looking at films of the Soviet and post-Soviet period, one can notice that the main characters were depicted as needing the help of men. Despite the main role in the film, they do not play any role in the development of the plot and act as secondary figures around which the plot simply revolves. For example, in the film “Игла” (1988), despite the fact that the heroine Dina (Marina Smirnova) is the main character who needs the help of a man and because of whom the whole story begins, throughout the film she is overshadowed by the main male character, whose actions and decisions determine the course of the plot and take up most of the screen time. In the film “Чужая Белая и Рябой” (1986), although the storyline of Ksenia Nikolaevna Startseva (Lyudmila Savelyeva) is additional, the directors show her helplessness in a dialogue between two men, where one says “You must return to Ksenia Nikolaevna. She will die without you.”, which reinforces the idea of proactive men who save women from difficult situations. In the post-Soviet films “Тот, кто нежнее” (1996), “Кардиограмма” (1995), women are still largely defined by their relationships with men, with little attention paid to personal ambition or professional success. This observation confirms the work of Kononenko (2011), who, analyzing cartoons, also claimed that in Soviet

times, independent women were no longer desirable and the ideal was passive, meek, selfless femininity.

In modern times, filming a large number of high-quality historical films, we notice a revival of the power of the clan among Kazakhs, which is closely connected with fundamental aspects of Kazakh culture, identity and social structure. For Kazakhs, clan is not just biological kinship, but the most important element of worldview, moral system and cultural continuity. It influences behavior, self-identification, choice of spouse, relationships in society and even the perception of history. One of the evidences to this is that in contemporary films, there is an empowerment of women and a small shift in the traditional roles of women as homemakers and men who decide everything. Women become protagonists with ample screen time, independent, ambitious, with feelings and goals, and occupying a central place in the narrative as it was in the times of freedom-loving nomads. A great example is the historical film “Томирис” (2019). By portraying Kazakh women as warriors and making one of them the main character, the film shifts ingrained ideas about women, describing the life of Tomiris. The narrator says, “Gradually, the Sarmatians accepted Tomiris. She grew stronger and got used to life among the warrior girls. Brave girls honed their fighting skills, hunted and plundered sedentary neighbors on an equal basis with strong men.” Unlike earlier depictions of women as passive or secondary, Tomiris portrays women as leaders, strategists, and warriors with their own right to choose and vote, challenging traditional depictions of women. It confronts the domestic and dependent female character pattern which Bezruchko & Stepanenko (2024) observed by presenting a powerful female protagonist. The portrayal of atypical gender roles within movies serves to reform how people view gender roles in society and national identity structures as Lu (2023) suggests. What is interesting here is that this independence is manifested only in one film of modern cinema and

the film in turn is historical. In addition, the film “Tomiris” is evidence that the role of women in Kazakh culture is most closely associated with the country's cultural heritage in the form of free nomads (Naizabayeva et al., 2022). Therefore, the formation of the concept of gender and the female image depends not only on stereotypes and culture but also on the historical context confirming the concept of transnational cinema that depict the plight of women around the globe but with respect to cultural and political differences like being a postcolonial country (Sara, 2023).

### **Conclusion**

This research examined women's representation in Kazakh filmmaking throughout time. The research demonstrates that Kazakh cinema represents women through the combined effects of gender along with ethnicity and class status and postcolonial heritage. During Soviet times and the subsequent post-Soviet period and contemporary era female characters in films showed gender discrimination as well as discrimination based on social position and ethnic background and geographic location. The model of intersectionality created by Kimberlé Crenshaw serves to properly identify these complicated elements. Kazakh cinema presents diverse images of “woman” through separate portrayals of urban Russian women who appear independent and modern and rural Kazakh women who remain traditional and submissive as well as contemporary women who function as symbols of national victimhood or non-conforming outsiders facing punishment. Kazakh women in rural areas face gender subordination because they are women but their experience is also shaped by belonging to a non-dominant ethnic group and living outside urban areas and being portrayed through stereotypical culturally conservative social roles. The multiple social categories in which women find themselves operate together to create a story where power belongs either to women who match colonial stereotypes (Russian

urban educated women) or who serve nationalist symbolism (warrior queen Tomiris). The film industry provides Kazakh women with little opportunity to express themselves as complete individuals who have independent wants and vocalize their thoughts.

Kazakh cinema historically cut women off from public activities while restricting their screen depiction to housework or moralistic figures. Women who take leading roles appear mostly in historical epics and tragic romance stories instead of portraying their abilities to drive daily transformations. To put it more simply, Eva the female lead in “Желтая кошка” faces marginalization throughout the film by silencing her voice and having no complex character development. Film narratives usually depict stories from male perspectives because patriarchy together with postcolonial values maintain control over fixed destinies. A minimal shift occurs across this narrow filmic domain. Through its cinematic portrayal of Tomiris the film confronts the Soviet-era ethnic hierarchies and gender norms by depicting an historical and mythical Kazakh female hero. The future of Kazakh cinema will bring women into full participation in cultural evolution alongside their role as cultural symbols. In brief, through intersectional analysis we discover both an analytical framework and also resistance power that identifies past representational boundaries which open the way to inclusive and dynamic contemporary film productions.

Examining gender biases in Kazakh cinematic storytelling requires immediate intervention along with actions that boost various female character representations. Some meaningful representation shifts must emerge from both industry professionals and external stakeholders through supporting female directorship and audience attraction to diverse stories and neutral cultural legislation. The complete representation of existence through gender alongside ethnicity and class and historical context allows Kazakh cinema to mirror the societal

diversity it wishes to depict. Film creators must develop independent female characters that defy gender norms to advance industry transformation and societal gender perceptions in Kazakh society. Public and private funding agencies should support film production that shows women not only as traditional, beautiful objects, but also as activism, inner struggle, desires, combined with financial independence and leadership abilities. Film education and criticism with sensitivity towards gender will revolutionize how society views women's positions in society thus creating a platform for social improvements instead of maintaining conventional norms.

The research has a key weakness because it examines motion pictures from a Kazakhfilm studio which functions under state control yet fails to capture independent or alternative Kazakhstani cinema. A future plan is to examine these nine films in terms of visual effects, clothing, acting, colours and camera directions on female characters in terms of gender representation and gender construction. Future investigations also should analyze female-directed films together with independent and international co-productions to expand understanding of gender representation changes in Kazakh cinema. Future research moreover should examine audience responses to these images and also consider changes in Kazakhstan's gender policy, covering projects, changes in law and the political situation, to establish the connection between cinematic representation and gender realities in the country.

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## Appendixes

## Soviet (1984 to 1990)

Movie name	Number of female characters	Women Character		Occupation	Narrative significance
Игла (1988)  The story of Moro, who tries to save his beloved Dina from drug addiction but ends up dying himself.	2	Dina (Marina Smirnova)	Main character	Nurse living in Almaty	InSignificant
		Nurse (Ayhan Chataeva)	Minor character	Nurse living in Almaty	InSignificant
Тайны мадам Вонг (1986)  The Soviet cruise ship sails through the Pacific Ocean. Among the passengers is Madame Wong, along with her henchmen. Meanwhile, police commissioner Thompson is on their trail—his grandson has been kidnapped by Wong's people, and he must recover the pirates' treasure to exchange it for the boy's freedom. In the end, Thompson successfully rescues his grandson.	6	Madame Julia Wong (Irina Miroshnichenko)	Main character	The leader of a group of pirates	Significant
		Tioti (Dilorom Kambarova)	Minor character	Maid of Madame Julia Wong	Significant
		Svetlana, flight attendant of the motor ship "Ivan Bunin" (Olga Spirkina)	Minor character	-	InSignificant
		Flight attendant of the ship "Ivan Bunin" (Natalia Gvozdikova)	Minor character	-	InSignificant
		Frau Schulz (Larisa Luzhina)	Minor character	cruise director of the motor ship "Ivan Bunin"	InSignificant
		Blackmailer (Marina)	Minor character	-	InSignificant

		Levtova)			
<p>Чужая Белая и Рябой (1986)</p> <p>The film takes place in the fall of 1946 in a small provincial town in western Kazakhstan. Ivan Naydyonov, nicknamed "Sedoy," is passionate about pigeons. He captures a rare white dove. A thief named Chudik steals the dove. Sedoy reclaims the bird but ultimately sets it free, realizing it is doomed in captivity.</p> <p>The second storyline: Sedoy's father, who falls in love with Ksenia Starteva, a former actress struggling with poverty after her divorce. Facing eviction, she is forced to sell her belongings. Near the end, she suddenly dies of a heart attack.</p>	2	<p>Ksenia Nikolaevna Startseva (Lyudmila Savelyeva)</p>	Main character	Unemployed actress	InSignificant
		<p>Spectator in an open-air cinema (Tatiana Ignatova)</p>	Minor character	-	InSignificant

## Post-Soviet (1992 to 1998):

Movie name	Number of female characters	Women Character		Occupation	Narrative significance
Счастье (1995) Short story about the life of a nomad family in the vast Kazakh steppe.	1	Mother (family member of M. Shokhabaev)	Main character	A woman living in a village with children	InSignificant
Тот, кто нежнее (1996) Danesh was taken to hospital. An old man, his roommate, told Danesh about the treasure. After the old man's death, his sisters give Danesh the ruby and the Canyon map, and he sets out to find the treasure. His rival is the bandit Ramazan, who kidnapped the translator Alena, who can read Arabic inscriptions. In the end, they get the treasure.	16	Alena (Ksenia Kachalina)	Main character	Russian girl who lives in Almaty knows Arabic and works as a translator	Significant
		Witch	Minor character	-	InSignificant
		Danesh's mother (Raikhan Aitkozhanova)	Minor character	-	InSignificant
		Danesh's grandmother	Minor character	-	InSignificant
		Six Sisters of Sultan Hangerei	Minor characters	-	InSignificant
		Six Sisters of Danesh	Minor characters	-	InSignificant
Кардиограмма (1995) Zhasulan has a bad heart. His mother takes him to a sanatorium in	2	Saule (Saule Toktybaeva)	Minor character	A woman living in a village with family	InSignificant

the mountains near the capital of Kazakhstan and leaves him there for a month.		Nurse Gulya (Gulnara Dusmatova)	Main character	Nurse living in sanatorium	Significant
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## Contemporary (2018 to 2024)

Movie name	Number of female characters	Women Character		Occupation	Narrative significance
Желтая кошка (2020)  Young Kermek returns to his small hometown after serving several years in prison. Walking around in a Hawaiian shirt and an Alain-Delon hat, he is obsessed with the dream of opening a movie theater in the middle of the steppe, which cements his reputation as a fool, since the city is ruled by the mafia and corrupt police. Having joined forces with a local prostitute Eva, the main character tries to resist the bandits. In the end, both die.	2	Kamila Nugmanova (Eva)	Main character	prostitute	Significant
		Cashier (Adema Erzhanova)	Minor character	-	InSignificant
Томирис (2019)  Tomyris is from the nomadic Massagetae people. As a child, she loses her father and is forced to hide for many years. However, Tomyris then punishes her enemies, becomes queen and defeats the Persian king Cyrus II, who invaded her lands.	5	Tomiris (Almira Tursyn)	Main character	Queen	Significant
		Sardana (Aizhan Laiji)	Main character	Queen	Significant
		Shapi (Kamshat Zholdybaeva)	Minor character	-	InSignificant
		Tana (Zarina Eva)	Minor character	-	InSignificant
		Bopai (Assel Kalieva)	Minor character	-	InSignificant

<p>Рассвет Великой степи (2022)</p> <p>In the middle of the 15th century, when Kasym Khan became the ruler, the Kazakh Khanate began a period of slow but confident development. However, in the successful activity of Kasym Khan, a series of troubles suddenly occurred, caused by a bloody confrontation with the Sheibanids for the cities on the banks of the Syr Darya River.</p>	8	Zhakhn Begim (Alтынay Nogerbek)	Main character	-	InSignificant
		Alтынbike (Dilnaz Ertaeva)	Main character	Beloved of Kasim Khan	Significant
		Aisha (Aliya Anuarbek)	Minor character	-	InSignificant
		Kelbet Khanum (Saule Turdahunova)	Minor character	-	InSignificant
		Akkyz (Azharlym Magzum)	Minor character	-	InSignificant
		Akkozy Begum (Gulnaz Auesbayeva)	Minor character	-	InSignificant
		Kanyk Sultan Khanum (Layla Tileuova)	Minor character	-	InSignificant
		Mamash's wife (Asem Zhetpisova)	Minor character	-	InSignificant