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The Decolonization of the Environment in Kazakhstan: The Novel *Final Respects* by Abdi-Jamil Nurpeisov

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Abstract

This article examines the novel *Final Respects* by Abdi-Jamil Nurpeisov from a postcolonial ecocritical perspective. Nurpeisov was one of the first Kazakh writers to discuss the decolonization of the environment and the “process of self-apprehension” by writing about the tragedy of the Aral Sea, power relations between the center and periphery, and the interconnectivity of humans and the environment in the Soviet Union. Through the prism of a small fishing village, he shows the tragedy of a nation that has an impact on the entire world. The novel is thus a critique of anthropocentric policies imposed by Moscow on Kazakhstan and other Soviet republics. Throughout the text, Nurpeisov reiterates the connection between the local and the global on one hand, and human culture and the environment on the other.

Keywords: postcolonial ecocriticism; literary texts; Nurpeisov; the Aral Sea; Kazakhstan

Introduction

Postcolonial theory has recently appeared on the agenda of Central Asian¹ scholarship (Adams 2008; Kandiyoti 2002; Khalid 2007). A few scholars have discussed literary texts of Kazakh writers through postcolonial lenses (Kuaibergenova 2016, 2017; Caffee 2013), but little research has been done on literature using a postcolonial *ecocritical* perspective. Texts written during the Soviet and post-Soviet periods can provide us with important insights on how intellectuals perceived, interpreted, and transmitted the Soviet reality in different contexts. Kazakh Soviet literature touched on important political and socio-economic questions including nation formation, the role of elites, culture, and environmental problems. The Soviet regime did not allow open discussion of these questions, so Kazakh writers sought to find ways to express their concerns in their texts. Hence, literary texts can be a litmus test of changes that were happening in intellectual circles and society at large.

The application of a postcolonial paradigm has been rather limited in scholarship on Central Asia (see Caffee 2013; Adams 2008; Kandiyoti 2002; Heathershaw 2010). On the one hand, this lacuna is explained by the fact that the Soviet Union has never been recognized by scholars as a “classic” colonial power like Great Britain or France. The modernization project and the *korenizatsia* (nativization) policy made it distinct from the experience of colonial powers more commonly considered “traditional” (Heathershaw 2010). On the other hand, most local Central Asian scholars resist using postcolonial paradigms largely associated with third-world countries (Abashin 2014). However, postcolonial theory can provide important theoretical lenses through which one can understand various cultural, social, and economic processes taking place in post-Soviet Central Asia.

This article is an attempt to show that postcolonial discourse in Kazakhstan is *not* characterized only by “silent incorporation of its colonial origins” as argued by some Western scholars. In contrast, Kazakh Soviet (and post-Soviet) writers—Olzhas Suleimenov, Abdi-Jamil Nurpeisov, Bakhytzhhan Kanap’ianov, and Chingiz Aitmatov—touched on very sensitive topics during the Soviet era such as the loss of the Kazakh language, the absence of an independent state, ecological problems, and many other issues. The existing ideas of “insecurely pronounced” postcoloniality in Kazakhstan and the inability of the ruling elites to openly confront the colonizer can be challenged by the existence of literary works written by Kazakh writers who openly discussed the destructive policies of the Soviet regime toward the environment, ecological violence, and issues of nation-building.

In this article, I look at power relations between the center and periphery and the process of decolonization started in the Soviet era through the lens of Kazakh Soviet literature. I focus on the novel *Final Respects*, by Nurpeisov, who raises the problem of Aral Sea desiccation and discusses its implications for local and global communities. In the words of the author, the novel is much more than “merely” a description of local ecological conditions: “I could have said that that this novel is about ecology. I could have also said that it is about love and the battle between evil and good. But I would like to say that mainly this is my final response to the century, to the epoch” (Nurpeisov 2000).

Nurpeisov is a well-known Kazakh writer who was born into a fisherman family in 1924. In 1942, at the age of 18, he was mobilized by the Soviet Army. In 1944 he took part in the Battle of Kurland, later described in one of his novels. After the war, he entered the Literary Institute named after Maksim Gorky and graduated in 1956. Nurpeisov began his literary career during the Soviet period. His first autobiographic novel, *Kurliandia*, published in 1950, is about World War II based on the author’s personal war experience. For this book, the writer received his first State Prize of the Kazakh SSR. His next work was a historical novel-epopee, *Blood and Sweat*, which focuses on the period from 1914–1920 and describes World War I, the Russian Civil War, and the 1917 Revolution in the Aral Sea region. The book made Nurpeisov famous not only in the Soviet Union but also abroad. In 1974, the author was awarded the State Prize of the USSR for the best historical novel. The trilogy was translated into many foreign languages. His last major work, *Final Respects*, which is the focus of this article, is a continuation of his *Blood and Sweat* trilogy. The plot develops in the same place—the Aral Sea region—and the main characters of the ecological novel are heirs and relatives of the heroes from the *Blood and Sweat* novel.

In *Final Respects*, Nurpeisov discusses a number of important problems debated in postcolonial ecocritical literature: the human-nature dichotomy, center-periphery power relations, the nexus between place and humans, and people’s displacement from their native lands. In this sense, his novel is an important contribution to an overall recognition of the struggle for ecological and socioeconomic justice in the post-Soviet space and beyond. This postcolonial ecocritical text highlights important environmental, cultural, and political problems that existed in Soviet Kazakhstan.

At the center of the novel is the concern with a “slow violence” against the environment. Nurpeisov criticizes the abuse of nature inflicted by the anthropocentric policies of the Soviet authorities in the Soviet republics. Through the prism of a small fishing village, the writer shows the global ecological catastrophe that has transcended the spatial boundaries of a small community and the temporal boundaries of the present time. The desiccation of the Aral Sea, “the worst single instance of agricultural ecocide in the Soviet Union” (Feshbach and Friendly 1992, 73) and even the entire world, has negatively affected the lives of humans not only in the Aral Sea region but in many other distant locations far removed from the origin of anthropogenic crisis. The novel thus delves into specific locations and challenges of the “current postcolonial realities of environmental dispossession” (Sen 2009, 366). If some authors writing in the postcolonial ecocritical paradigm are largely interested in showing the impact of people on nature and the

consequences of conservationist policies on humans, Nurpeisov highlights a mutually constitutive relationship between the environment and people.

How does the author view the colonization of the environment and its implications for people in the novel? This article uses a postcolonial ecocritical perspective to explain the links between Soviet “environmental colonization” and its consequences for contemporary Kazakhstan’s society reconstructed in the novel *Final Respects* by Nurpeisov. To begin, I focus on postcolonial ecocriticism. The next section deals with the issues of colonization of nature, place and displacement, and center-periphery relations discussed by the writer in his novel before conclusions are outlined.

A Postcolonial Ecocritical Perspective: Nature Colonization, Place, and Displacement

Postcolonial ecocriticism is a rapidly developing sub-discipline that bridges two fields—postcolonial and environmental studies. Alfred Crosby (1986), one of the founders of postcolonial ecocriticism, was the first to coin the term *ecological imperialism* that describes the devastation of colonial ecologies and traditional subsistence patterns. Crosby and Richard Grove (1996), another environmental historian, argue that colonized lands were subject to damage and transformation in the same manner as indigenous populations. The neglect of environmental issues by the earlier generation of postcolonial writers such as Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, and Gayatri Spivak, who mostly focus on texts and intertextuality, necessitates “greening” postcolonial studies (Mukherjee 2010). According to Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin, the “green” turn in postcolonial studies is critical, since the analysis of modern imperialism and colonialism would not be possible without paying attention to the environmental damage that they bring about (Huggan 2004, 702; Huggan and Tiffin 2007). This is very relevant to the context of the former Soviet Union, which heavily relied on anthropocentric policies projected from Moscow to the Soviet republics.

At the heart of postcolonial ecocritical literature are power dynamics, social justice, and concern with the implications of anthropocentric and, recently, conservation policies. The anthropocentric perspective, in which man is a measure of all things, treats nature as a necessary resource and as “background” for the development of the economy of the colonial power and profit making (Crosby 1986). It justifies the colonization of nature “through the imposition of the colonizer’s land forms and visions of ideal landscapes” (Plumwood 2006, 53). Anthropocentrism excludes humans from nature and treats the latter as predominantly passive and lacking agency. The nonhuman sphere is interpreted as the Other, something that is distinct and separate from humans. The colonized Other is usually stereotyped as homogenous, or “all the same,” deprived of social, cultural, and religious differences (Memmi 1965). The same homogenization of nature takes place under the colonization of the environment. Homogenization of nature, in turn, leads to the underestimation of the diversity and complexity of nature and thus to its devaluation (Plumwood 2003).

This interpretation of the human-nature nexus has been critically evaluated by postcolonial ecocriticism. In the work *Slow Violence*, Rob Nixon (2011) shows the damaging effect of anthropocentric policies on the environment. One of the dangers of this slow violence is its gradual, out-of-sight environmental destruction that has no temporal and spatial limits. Because of its invisibility and slow effect, governments and environmental organizations face “representational, narrative and strategic challenges” to tackle the environmental and human casualties. In this regard, the role of writer-activists becomes crucial. As Nixon notes, “imaginative writing can help make the unapparent appear, making it accessible and tangible by humanizing drawn-out threats inaccessible to the immediate senses” (2011, 15). *Final Respects* help us to grasp the scale and level of the environmental disaster of the Aral Sea, its threats and damages to people through imagination of the author that cannot be easily comprehended by people due to “geographical remoteness, large scale or long time span” (Nixon 2011, 15).

Postcolonial ecocriticism suggests reclaiming the dependence of humans on nature and its diversity (Pumwood 2006). Scholars emphasized the importance of place, period, race, class, and other things to analyze the relationship between humans and the environment; place and displacement are, in turn, intertwined with environmental issues. Place is thus viewed as a complex interaction of many things—environment, history, language, and humans. The environmental damage induced by human-made disasters, infrastructure, or agricultural projects results in people's displacement such as the removal of indigenous people from their historical homeland (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 2002). However, displacement is not only about physical removal of people to less arable lands. Nixon (2011) suggests even a more radical definition of displacement that refers to the “loss of the land and resources” beneath places where people lived for generations. For him, displacement is about the “place stripped of the very characteristics that made it inhabitable” (19). Displacement is also cultural and psychological dislocation, disruption of people's self-identity and eventually the erosion of the sense of self. Under colonization, local people are placed into the hierarchy where their culture and values are replaced by those of the colonial power (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 2002). Paradoxically, some ecocritics have also pointed out the type of displacement produced by conservationist policies imposed by national governments and international organizations. Malcom Sen, analyzing the novel *The Hungry Tide* by Amitav Ghosh (2004), shows that national governments, pursuing the goal of environmental preservation, in fact, destroy people's local environmental practices that, in turn, lead to the destitution of local human populations.

To prevent environmental and human casualties, it is imperative to connect the local to the global. This is exactly what the Nurpeisov's novel does. The writer investigates power relations, the issues of place and displacement of humans and environmental practices discussed in postcolonial ecocriticism. As a writer-activist, Nurpeisov advocates resistance to “slow violence” inflicted by humans on the Aral Sea. He criticizes the policies imposed by Moscow on Central Asia and the neglect of the local environmental situation, suggesting an alternative vision of the ecological disaster imposed upon the Aral Sea region.

Decolonization of Nature by Nurpeisov: Civilization vs. Environment

The novel *Final Respects* by Nurpeisov is one of the first works in Kazakh literature that deals with environmental problems and specifically with the Aral tragedy. The author raises a vast array of other important problems that accompany the ecological cataclysm, including the Soviet modernization project implemented in the republic, the degradation of human values, and the process of decolonization of peoples' attitudes toward nature. In the 1980s and afterwards, few Kazakh intellectuals discussed and criticized the destructive Soviet policies toward the environment in the Aral region. Nurpeisov was among the few who touched on the issue before the ecological movements emerged in Kazakhstan. On the one hand, it was difficult and dangerous to disagree with policies and directives from Moscow. On the other, there were other important issues on the agenda that had to be discussed, such as the role of the Kazakh language, national cadre policy, problems in the healthcare system, and others. During the Soviet period, ethnic Kazakhs were in the minority in the Kazakh SSR, the only case of such a “titular” minority across the entire Soviet Union, and environmental issues were not raised until the late 1980s.

During the perestroika period when Soviet republics acquired more autonomy, national intellectuals organized forums, conferences, and movements to protect the environment of the country and rights of local people. Across all the Soviet republics, the environmental movements were particularly salient in the Baltics. In Latvia, Estonia, and Lithuania, the environmental movements were important venues through which people could express their discontent with Soviet policies. Unlike the Baltic republics, Central Asian states did not have large-scale environmental rallies and demonstrations. Although Kazakhstan was one of the most ecologically affected republics in the former USSR, there were no environmental movements except the 1989

Nevada-Semipalatinsk antinuclear movement headed by a prominent Kazakh poet, Olzhas Suleimenov. The movement led to the closure of the nuclear test site in Kazakhstan in 1989. The desiccation of the Aral Sea did not inspire popular mobilization to the same degree as antinuclear sentiments did due to the poor financial resources and the dependence of the Central Asian economy, particularly that of Uzbekistan, on cotton production. The problem of the Aral Sea was raised by Mukhtar Shakhanov, a Kazakh writer and founder of the Aral-Asia-Kazakhstan Committee. However, Shakhanov did not criticize central authorities in Moscow; his anger was directed toward “unnamed individuals” (Schatz 1999). Similarly, the Nevada-Semipalatinsk anti-nuclear movement also had no “colonial references.” Rather, as Edward Schatz (1999) argues, ecological mobilization in Kazakhstan was based on eco-internationalism than on eco-nationalism as in other republics. As Schatz explains, it was a result of the demographic, economic, and propaganda legacies of the Soviet state. Overall, the discourse in the late 1980s offered little criticism of the environmental policies and ecological disasters. In this light, *Final Respects* represents one of the first and bold works in Kazakh literature that openly criticized the Soviet policies toward the Central Asia region and particularly, the Aral Sea.

One could accuse Nurpeisov of “Sovietness” and view him through the “*appartchik*-turned-nationalist” lens, since he wrote about the revolution and the establishment of Soviet power in the Aral region using a Socialist Realism approach. This kind of accusation, however, would be misleading. Although Nurpeisov wrote about Soviet power and the ideals of Communism in *Blood and Sweat*, he was concerned with ordinary Kazakh people and their fates narrated through the prism of dramatic events. In his works, the writer suggests not only a view of the historical events from the periphery but also a “view from below” which was in stark contrast to the existing literary tradition of interpreting historical events from a centralized perspective (Caffee 2013). In contrast to Russophone writers such as Olzhas Suleimenov, from the beginning of his literary career, the author wrote his novels in the Kazakh language. Those were later translated into Russian and other languages. Nurpeisov appealed first of all to Kazakhs, who were the main audience for his books. His privileged position among intellectuals allowed him to have “greater freedom of expression” and attract people’s attention to the issue of the Aral Sea (Caffee 2013).

It is also important to note that the first part of his novel was published in 1983, when Soviet censorship was still strong. Even though the second part of the novel came out in the post-independence period in 1999, the first part of the book originated long before the collapse of Communist ideology. Nurpeisov raised and discussed forbidden themes at a time when any criticism of the central authorities from the periphery was dangerous and could result in political prosecution. Like other writers such as Olzhas Suleimenov, Ilyas Esenberlin, and Chingiz Aitmatov, Nurpeisov used his position as a privileged Soviet writer to discuss issues important to the subaltern periphery such as loss of national identity, the problem of the Kazakh language, degradation and contamination of the environment, and desiccation of the Aral Sea. Nurpeisov was not purely an official writer seeking to glorify the Communist party and Soviet regime. While he did not have an open conflict with party officials and the Soviet regime in general, this does not diminish his remarkable contribution to both Kazakh Soviet literature and postcolonial writing. Nurpeisov was quite critical of environmental policies during the Soviet and post-Soviet periods.

Today it is a well-known fact that the Aral Sea disappeared due to anthropocentric policies. Human and environmental casualties due to the desiccation of the Aral Sea and nuclear and biological weapons testing were tremendous. However, as Nixon (2011) contends, this kind of “slow violence” was rather invisible when the actual policies were implemented. First, tests of biological weapons were conducted on Renaissance Island also called Anthrax Island in the Aral Sea. The island was a close guarded area from 1935 until the early 1990s. Nurpeisov (2014, 6) who is native to the Aral region, recalls:

During Soviet times, there was a test site for production and testing of biological weapon on Renaissance Island. It was the biggest test site where testing of biological weapons based on anthrax, plague and tularemia, Q-fever, and other types took place by air-spraying and explosion. Various animals—rats, guinea pigs, monkeys—and criminals awaiting the death penalty were subject to experiments. . . . There were thousands of military men and scientists on the island. . . . Only a few knew what the military were doing on that island. The rest could only guess. Guess and be silent. . . . An approximate work plan on the Island [officially named Aralsk 7] came from Moscow. . . . The test site was open until 1992; then the military were relocated, the biological laboratory was dismantled—some equipment was moved out of the island, some equipment was buried there. . . . All the flora and fauna of the island were destroyed.

Tests of biological weapons continued over 40 years on the island and heavily affected the environment and people's health. In addition to testing biological weapons, the Aral Sea itself was subject to "slow violence" due to the irrigation policies imposed by authorities from Moscow.

As a humanist and writer-activist, Nurpeisov could not be indifferent to the tragedy of the Aral Sea and people living in the region. It is also important to note that there were books that discussed the relationship between nature and humans written during the Soviet period. One of the most significant works was *Russian Wood*, by Leonid Leonov, published in 1953. The work became a point of departure in Russian prose dealing with the people's attitudes and perceptions of the environment. Writers such as Vasilii Belov, Viktor Astaf'ev, Sergei Zalygin, and Valentin Rasputin, using the "village prose" genre, touched upon environmental problems, confrontations between human civilization and nature, and degradation of moral values. Some of them, such as Rasputin, actively protested against the contamination of Lake Baikal and the diversion of the Siberian Rivers to the south.¹ Undoubtedly, the works of those writers exerted some influence on intellectuals in the Soviet Middle Asia. Chingiz Aitmatov, a prominent Kyrgyz Soviet writer, raised the issues of environmental protection and human existence. His novels, particularly *A Day Lasts More than a Hundred Years* (1980) and *The Place of the Skull* (1989), are deeply humanistic and express concern about nature, the decline of moral values, and the possible apocalypse of human civilization. Aitmatov and Nurpeisov knew each other well and developed friendly relations over time. Obviously, both writers exerted influence on each other's literary works. In 1966, Aitmatov wrote, "I have been reading Nurpeisov's books for a long time and I fell in love with his talented prose long ago. I learned a lot from him; I talked to him many times but each time when I meet with him I open something new for myself. As a human and interlocutor, he is very deep, wise, and composed. He is also like that in his writing."

Nurpeisov's *Final Respects* merits special attention for a number of reasons. The first part of *Final Respects* was published earlier (1983) than Aitmatov's novel *The Place of the Skull* (1986) and thus can be considered one of the first books in Central Asia that raised environmental problems. Second, the novel specifically deals with the world-scale tragedy of the Aral Sea, which was not discussed in Soviet literature before. No other literary text of such magnitude devoted to the problem of the Aral Sea has been written yet in Central Asia or beyond the region. The topic of the book and its philosophical narrative make it special not only in Kazakh but also in the world literature.

One of the important themes of the book is political relations between the imperial center and the subaltern periphery. Although the novel "develops that humanistic tradition of the Soviet literature that was established in *Russian Wood*, nevertheless, it also demonstrates the protest against the policies and oppression of the center" (Eleukenov 1987, 289). Nurpeisov openly criticizes anthropocentric policies imposed from Moscow on the republic and suggests reevaluating the "ends justify the means" ethical framework toward nature in the Soviet Union. Nurpeisov's writing, close to the Kantian philosophical approach, calls readers to treat nature as an end in itself rather than a means by which to achieve individual goals. In fact, in the Soviet

Union, no ethical considerations were applied toward nature; it was used rather as a background to serve the interests of humans. If so, then, as Val Plumwood (2003) argues, there are no restrictions or moral limits to people's actions. This instrumental view of the environment "distorts our sensitivity to nature," reducing it to raw materials for human goals and projects. One of the episodes in the novel—hunting saigas, a rare type of antelope, inhabiting the steppes of Kazakhstan—vividly depicts that kind of framework. The author writes:

At the sight of these fire-eyed mechanical monsters, the animals crawled out of the darkness with a roar and then froze in horror. The blind and deaf, the saigas began huddling together, pushing and crawling over one another, ending up in one mad, snorting mass. The thundering monsters flew at them from all sides, crushed them with bumpers and sides, flattening them with their wheels, and running over them with a crunch. The next day, barely awaiting the twilight, they once again rolled out to the steppe. The same on the third day. Hundreds and hundreds of saigas were crushed to death for the sake of their horns, the eyes of the male and female goats clouding up in horror. (Nurpeisov 2013, 208)

Criticism of the appropriation, extermination, and commodification of nature is reiterated throughout the novel. Hundreds of rare animals are killed for the sake of profit making. The commodification of nature has negative implications for people and their habitats. The goal of Soviet anthropocentric policies was to adapt the land and its resources to the needs of humans. The five-year plans required the increase of production in industry and agriculture which was implemented through extensive rather than intensive modes of production. As in European colonies, where resources and crops were produced and then exported to Europe and many other world countries, Central Asian states also served as a resource for more developed industrial republics. The example of Uzbekistan, which was turned into a monoculture economy during the Soviet period, demonstrates these kinds of policies. While Central Asian republics were much less developed and exported largely agricultural products—cotton, grain, dairy products, and vegetables—to Soviet republics and other countries, the Russian Federation, Ukraine, Belarus, and the Baltic states were the main producers of manufactured goods.

In contrast to the anthropocentric approach popular in the Soviet period, in the novel Nurpeisov suggests moving to a different paradigm, the one of communication and dialogue between nature and humans. For him, it is important to give more agency and voice to the subaltern—nature and the native people of the periphery. *Final Respects* thus resists anthropocentric policies in the Aral region. Nurpeisov uses multiple narrative techniques to depict the tragedy of nature and native people. Nature gets a voice through the traditional Kazakh legends and dreams. Legends and dreams are important for conveying the wisdom of ancestors and moral values of the Kazakh people. They help support the identity of Kazakhs and continuity of generations. In the dreams of the main character, Jadiger, animals acquire the voices of humans, while humans can feel the pain of animals. Nurpeisov defends the idea that humans and nature are an integral whole that cannot be separated from each other:

It was impossible now to sense in which guise you were present there, in the depths of the yellow fog. In the guise of a person or a fish? If a person, then you could not understand: why were you sailing with the whole school somewhere expending your last strength? You could recall clearly that you had been sailing along, carried by the current, for several days in a row now. The school was so enormous and swam together so densely that it agitated half of the sea, churning up a dark murk from the bottom. It was hard to breathe and the gills were clogged with mud. The ones who were weaker, exhausted, especially the old ones, gasped for breath and fell behind the school, helpless and carried along by the current, and were lost somewhere behind. But ahead of the school Gray Ardent and Mother Inconnu² swam side by side. . . . You understood everything, as if he were speaking a human language! . . . So were the cries of Gray Ardent so understandable to you? Why did you hear

so clearly his persistent cheering voice, the voice of a leader who was exhausted but not broken by the long and difficult trip? (Nurpeisov 2013, 221)

One of the important themes raised by the author in the novel is that of place and peoples' displacement from their own lands. The issue of place is central in postcolonial ecocritical studies. The writer reconstructs the place by showing the links among human psychology, experience, time, history, and memories. Wallace Stegner (1986, 201–202) argues in his work *The Sense of Place* that “a place is not a place until people have been born in it, have grown up in it, lived in it, known it, died in it—have both experienced and shaped it as individuals, families, . . . communities . . . until things that have happened in it are remembered in history, ballads, yarns, legends, or monuments.” People locate and reshape themselves in correlation to place as much as place contains a nation's social history. Hence, the vernacular landscape which is “integral to the socioenvironmental dynamics of community” is central to the novel. Nurpeisov refers to Kazakh names and toponyms to describe the landscape—Bel-Aran, Shomish-Kol, Kok-Aral, Ak-Basty, and Sary Basta. Living in the Aral Sea area since old times, Kazakhs created this place in their folklore, and infused the place with myths and legends to ascribe certain meanings to it. For Kazakh writers, legends and myths are very important. They express the spirit of the nation, its history and traditions. The use of legends, dreams, and myths is an important tool for Nurpeisov to convey feelings, perceptions, and expectations. Nurpeisov (2000, 25) writes:

Side by side these fishing villages co-existed and you could hear the barking of dogs in the evening from the neighbors. In the spring, when the numerous holidays began, celebrated from ancient times, celebrations began, the young people, from neighboring *auls*, dressed in their finest clothing, would visit each other. People went from aul to aul by sea on boats, and by the coastal steppe on carts. They broke into bands and the fun resounded day and night. They swung on the swings, sang songs, and played games. That was how it was, and it was all alive in many people's memories. But thinning of it was left now. It had disappeared like a sweet dream at dawn. Now, all along the coast, there were not more people with their songs, and no wild grasses. And it was clear, there is nothing in the world sadder than a human settlement that has been abandoned. (Nurpeisov 2000, 33–34)

The place serves an important source of identity for people; it represents continuity with the previous generations that narrated that place.

The sea had grown shallow and receded from its original shores. It unattractively bared the bottom of the coves and bays, where only recently, ships and barges would stand at sea moored by their anchors, and motor boats would dart in and out nimbly. Beyond the turn, behind a gently sloping sand dune, the small islands along this side—Jalanash, Buyugundy and the famous Kok-Aral—had now come together like old men at a funeral and merged with the mainland, mournfully glowing white with salt patches. Some of your ancestors lived on these islands, fishing in season, maintaining wealthy homes here. Now, only with an effort of memory, with difficulty, you found them and the pictures of the past, one more alive than the other rose before you and tormented your soul with the fact they could never return. (Nurpeisov 2013, 32)

Nurpeisov investigates how the vernacular landscape is destroyed by policies based on the official, colonial landscape that “writes the land in a bureaucratic, externalizing, and extraction-driven manner” (Nixon 2011, 17). The theme of the vernacular landscape and native soil appears throughout the entire novel. The author reflects on injustices that were done by the Soviet authorities to the native land where people lived for centuries. If the place disappears, then the people also lose their identity, which is what happened to Kazakhs due to the Soviet experiments of sedentarization and industrialization. In the novel, the continuity of generations is observed through the reproduction of legends that are connected to this particular place. Nurpeisov

provides examples of legends and folklore about the heroic past of the people who lived on this territory and who transmitted those legends from one generation to another. The usage of folklore in the novel written in accordance with the Soviet canons of the “true” novel represents a new hybrid genre that combines “the culturally-specific Central Asian world and the multi-national Soviet one” (Caffee 2013, 112).

Focusing on the Aral region, Nurpeisov seeks to remove the marginalization of nature existing in public discourse. For Kazakhs who led a nomadic life in the past, the land always was at the heart of their lives. If the links between nature and people are disrupted, then nations’ spirituality and moral values are also lost. In the novel, an old woman, Jadiger’s mother says, “You are guilty yourselves. The God was neglected. Sacred spirits of ancestors were forgotten. The traditions of ancestors were broken” (Nurpeisov 2000, 75). For Nurpeisov as a humanist, the death of the sea is associated with the destruction of moral values in society. Being a Kazakh means feeling a strong affiliation with the land one lives on. The main character of the novel, Jadiger, a fisherman, says, “since the sea grew shallow depriving fishermen villages of its generosity, people’s souls also became shallow” (105). Throughout the novel, Nurpeisov reiterates the idea of interdependence between nature and people. The place and self are mutually constitutive where “each is essential to the being of the other.” Thus environmental changes occurring in the Aral Sea region mirrored in the slow death of the fishing village. The writer shows that the place changed: “since then twenty years had passed. ... For those twenty years, the Aral changed, the land itself changed, the air became different in this place. Water is not water but poison. The sea itself is hardly alive” (122).

The writer poses the question: why was the loss of the Aral Sea possible? The answer is that people and place not only became silenced by the colonizing framework, but anthropocentric policies created a certain kind of (constructed) deafness. This is shown very well by Nurpeisov in the episode of the scientific conference on the Aral Sea, where true scientists try to convince the audience that the hypothesis about the existence of an underground sea in Central Asia that could replace the waters of the Aral Sea is nonsense. However, the majority of the participants do not want to hear common sense.

But what about people who live in the Aral Sea region? Many of them had to leave their villages and towns because of the lack of fish, jobs, and harsh climate conditions. Jadiger, the head of the fishermen artel, notes:

Today, as yesterday, and all the other previous days, it was mainly the low-quality predator fish that were landing in the net. It was the most enduring and noble. The perch, pike, and catfish adapted more easily than others to the harsh conditions of the depleted sea. But with every passing day, even they found it more and more difficult. Yes, there were few good fish left in the dying sea, and those that survived had long ago disappeared into the depths in search of food and restorative fresh water. Try to find it now, chase it and catch it. Even for these predators now the wolf’s life had come. (Nurpeisov 2013, 232)

Final Respects discusses the exhaustion of the flora and fauna of the Aral Sea. In the best times, the Aral Sea fish catches reached 48,000 tons, while in 1983, the last year when fish harvest was done, this number reached only 53 tons (Micklin 1988; White 2016). During the Soviet era, even the fish factory, established in 1925, processed 20,000 tons of fish annually and employed about 3,000 people (Danish Society for a Living Sea 2004; White 2016). The desiccation of the sea and contraction of fishing led to the closure of the fish factory in 1999, resulting in employment losses for factory workers and fishermen. *Final Respects* mirrors the tragedy of people’s displacement due to human-induced ecological catastrophe.

One of the scenes described by the writer is the migration of people from the fishing village: “On that day, when 25 families all left at once, there was a funeral sorrow reigning in the aul” (Nurpeisov 2013, 82). The writer poses the question: who is responsible for that tragedy?

Although Nurpeisov does not take away responsibility from the elites and people of Kazakhstan, he claims that the ecological disaster happened due to the unequal relations between Moscow and Soviet republics, when the Soviet authorities in Moscow imposed their will on the republics, ignored the environment in Central Asia, and neglected the interests of local people. The most grandiose projects to transform nature in the Aral Sea region started during Stalin's period. Huge dams and irrigation canal systems were constructed, such as the Kara-Kum canal. The usage of land and resources in the Soviet republics was largely based on the "official" or colonial vision of the landscape with center's image and perception of the territory of Kazakhstan and other republics as "inferior, silent and empty." If the territory is viewed through the "colonial map" as uninhabited steppes, it allows for conducting experiments such as nuclear bomb tests, launching rockets with toxic fuel, or desiccating seas and diverting rivers. Moscow was confident in the loyalty of the republican elites. Indeed, until perestroika, the national elites were not able to protest and stop destructive policies from the center. Even during the Gorbachev period, Moscow showed its strong grip on Kazakhstan when it brutally suppressed the Almaty 1986 riots against Moscow's control and dominance. Nurpeisov's character Azim thinks: "Well, go on, tell me who among you would dare to raise their voice, who said even a word against the main perpetrator of this national evil? Who among you? And what can be said about you . . . if it seems that the number-one Kazakh himself, the Big Man, had not said a peep!" (Nurpesov 2013, 336).

Final Respects repeats over and over again the subalternity of the Kazakhs and the environment during the Soviet era. The anthropocentric approach promoted by the Soviet regime reduced the colonial land to a passive silent area subject to human projects. Nurpeisov (2000) writes, "What to do. . . . When did rulers worry about the will of people? The rulers of the great empire forced the indomitable river Amu-Darya to run back to the sands of Kara-Kum" (122). The goal of the center was to increase the production of cotton in Uzbekistan by diverting the two main rivers that nourished the Aral Sea—Amu-Darya and Syr-Darya—to irrigate the cotton fields of Uzbekistan. The Soviet authorities, criticizing the Tsarist policy to make Central Asia a "cotton colony," in fact continued the same policy. Under the first five-year plan, the goal was to free "the Soviet Union from dependence on foreign cotton or foreign cloth" (Sheehy 1988). The production of cotton in Uzbekistan increased year after year and accounted for two-thirds of the total Soviet cotton crop.³ Eventually, the USSR became one of the top world producers and exporters of cotton. As a result of using all the waters of the rivers, the Aral Sea rapidly dried up, leading to catastrophic consequences.

Probably, there was no poison in this world that the Kazakhs did not taste since the time when the sea began to die. Here the Semipalatinsk nuclear test site spreads death; there the Baikonur launching rocket site spreads death. As though it was not enough for one nation: nuclear bombs and rockets were tested on the plains of the Mangystau peninsular and the old mountains of Aktobe among the barchans of the Oral and Ordyn sands. The entire country turned into a test site. (Nurpeisov 2000, 48–49)

The passage highlights how colonizing policies made land "into mere passive instruments or neutral surfaces for the inscription of humans projects." The Soviet regime's desire to be first in the arms race and achieve military superiority in the world made people of the Soviet republics bear all the negative consequences. The Semipalatinsk nuclear test sites, where 649 explosions took place over 40 years, the Baikonur site, where rocket launching continues until today, and many other military test sites in the territory of Kazakhstan brought tremendous damage to the environment and people's health.

In the novel, Nurpeisov discusses the consequences of natural disasters for nature and people in Kazakhstan. The desiccation of the Aral Sea Basin radically changed the ecosystem of the region, causing salinization of soil and the emergence of dry winds. This in turn negatively affected people's health (Ormantayev 1989). While ecocritics emphasize that the victims of

ecological disasters are often women, Nurpeisov's depiction suggests a negative impact of the damaged environment on future generations. Jadiger has two children born with physical defects: "More and more children were being born with defects in the *aul*. These wretches, although they did not understand anything, were always underfoot. Little children born without arms or legs, jumped and leapt around like frogs, banging their crutches. Your heart always writhed when you saw them" (Nurpeisov 2013, 83). If the environment hits the most vulnerable and valuable—children—it is clear that people are facing the full brunt of environmental repercussions. Despite their superiority and technical progress, people cannot protect their children from the negative impact. Nurpeisov, like an ecological thinker, seeks to raise the consciousness of people by showing how much we depend on the environment. In the novel, one of the scientists at the conference says: "When the Aral Sea dies, then 4, 5 million tons of salt will appear on the shelf of the sea. And then this borderless steppe will turn into new Sahara. Only God will know what will remain and survive in today's Central Asia and Kazakhstan. The very existence of humanity depends on the environment" (Nurpeisov 2000, 309).

Throughout the novel, Nurpeisov reiterates the subalternity of Kazakhs not only among the ordinary people of the fishing village but also those who work in academia and research institutes as well as the political elites of Kazakhstan. Nurpeisov challenges this history of subalternity that has endured since the beginning of colonization. The writer believes that responsibility for the disastrous consequences of the Aral Sea rests primarily with Moscow. He shows how policies of the imperial center affected people of the small remote village on the shore of the sea. The goal of the central power was to export cotton abroad and receive convertible currency. When the pressure to diversify agriculture and reduce the area devoted to cotton from the public and intellectuals increased, the authorities in Moscow could not provide sufficient funds for this purpose. One of the solutions suggested was the diversion of the Siberian Rivers to save the Aral Sea; however, that plan was abandoned due to the resistance of ecologists and Russian nationalists (Ziegler 1992). However, Nurpeisov does not solely blame the authorities in Moscow for the destruction of the environment in the Aral region; he also shows that there were local party members and pseudoscientists who implemented the directives from above with zeal. One of his main characters in the novel, Azim, is a pseudoscientist who supports the idea of Aral Sea desiccation. The resistance to the policies from the center was quite low in the republic among the bureaucrats and the population in general, which also contributed to the environmental catastrophe.

The unequal hierarchical relations between the center and periphery are adequately reflected in the dialogue between Azim and members of the politburo.

"You, com-rade ac-adem-ician, claim that it was more profitable for us to dry the Aral Sea than save it."

"Yes, I don't deny that"

"But was there a fundamental scientific basis under this?"

"Whether there is or not ... you have to agree ... the sea is doomed anyway. There, at the top ... at the very top ..."

"Wait! What do you mean? Moscow?"

"Well, yes. There, they've already issued the Aral Sea a death sentence ..."

"Go on!"

"If we're to speak candidly . . . they don't care about the Aral Sea there. ... Even if all of Central Asia were to burn up. They just need cotton."

"All right. Moscow believes that. But do you believe it?"

"We ... we ... What do we ..."

"Not we, but you. Did you raise your voice against such an open encroachment on the Aral?"

"You yourself know ... to speak against Moscow before *perestroika* ..."

(Nurpeisov 2013, 333–334)

The writer reflects, “what can be done ... when authorities are sensitive to the will of people? The governors of great empire forced the waters of the indomitable river turn back to the hot sands of the Kara-Kum desert” (Nurpeisov 2000, 122). Nurpeisov believes that intellectuals should speak on behalf of the subaltern—nature and the ordinary people of the Aral region—to defend their interests. As a writer-activist, he calls for action: “We, the intelligentsia, should relentlessly and systematically struggle for our people. And we will do it. We will hit the same spot as water hits stones thinning them down to call attention of bureaucrats to the problem” (2014, 6) of the Aral Sea.

His words were put into action by the government of Kazakhstan and the World Bank after the collapse of the USSR. In contrast to criticism of the conservationist policies that inflicted harm on humans, the World Bank project to save the Aral Sea has had a modicum of success. It was launched in 2001 and included the construction of the dam and hydrologic infrastructure that were completed in 2005 (White 2013). The result of the project was partial ecological restoration of the Northern Aral Sea that emerged after the split of the larger Aral Sea in 1989. The dam and dike complex retain inflow of water from the Syr Darya. The positive impact of the project was the increase in surface area of the Northern Aral Sea by 18%; the level of salinity also dropped, which in turn led to the increase of fish species coming from the Syr Darya river (Micklin and Aladin 2008; White 2014). The return of the fish also influenced the economic activities in the area. Today, there are approximately 1,000 fishermen in the North Aral Sea, 600 of whom are part-timers who work in other areas (White 2016). According to Akzhabak Batimova, the deputy director of the Aral Fresh Fish Processing Plant, “people have begun to build new houses, and to paint and repair existing houses. In general, the fishermen are now the wealthiest people in the villages. They are building houses, buying boats and cars. ... This is a very big development” (cited in White 2016). However, it would be incorrect to overestimate the impact of the dam and dike complex on the restoration of the Aral. The sea does not exist as it did in 1960, and continues desiccating while the socio-economic crisis is still going on in the region (White 2016).

The tragedy of the Aral Sea is written “from below” through the prism of a small remote fishing village in the Aral region. But the stories of the ordinary subaltern people vividly depict the impact of large-scale anthropocentric projects implemented in the Soviet Union. It openly criticizes the anthropocentric colonial discourse that existed in the public space. Nurpeisov challenged Otherness in center-periphery relations, on the one hand, and in humans-nature relations on the other. As Nixon highlights, the goal for people and governments is to notice and prevent the gradual degradation of the environment that has no space and time. The Aral Sea tragedy will continue to affect people in the future, reminding them about the environmental concern imperative for humanity.

Conclusion

The novel *Final Respects* is a critique of the anthropocentric policies of the Soviet Union in Kazakhstan. It is a postcolonial, anti-imperial project that challenged the authority of Moscow and initiated the “process of self-apprehension” by focusing on environmental problems during the Soviet period and in the aftermath. *Final Respects* is a “reality check” for people’s attitudes toward nature that gives them a deeper understanding of the scale of human-induced environmental destruction. The “slow violence” against the Aral Sea continued over a long period and the authorities were not willing to take measures to prevent environmental and human casualties. In his literary texts, Nurpeisov does not fall into the trap of xenophobic nationalism. In contrast, through the prism of a small fishing village, the writer transcends the boundaries of the local and raises the problem of the Aral Sea to the global level. As one of the literary critics, Sheriazdan Eleukenov (1987, 286) notes, “Thanks to *Final Respects*, the Kazakh national Soviet novel is

raised to a higher humanistic level, turning a national problem to the international one. The Aral Sea is a pain of the planet Earth.”

In the Soviet modernization project implemented in Kazakhstan, the environmental problems were a residual category. As a result, the Aral Sea was subject to gradual destruction without consideration of the possible implications for the environment and people. Nurpeisov places the environment at the center of his novel, showing the fragility of the ecosystem of the Aral region. The novel is thus one of a few literary works that deals with the decolonization of the environment and, particularly, that of consciousness.

The legacy of the Soviet Union is quite strong on the territory of Kazakhstan, where old Soviet models of nation- and state-building as well as attitudes toward the environment still prevail. In this regard, literary texts and historical studies can be on the vanguard of consciousness liberation. According to Nurpeisov, the tragedy of humanity is not only in climate change or landscape alternation but also the disruption of people’s connections with their land, ancestors, history, and traditions. In an interview, the writer (2014) said, “The life of people is closely related to that of their land. When in front of your eyes, your homeland is dying, the sea is drying out, soil is degrading, and your people leave somewhere, you also die.” This is Nurpeisov’s understanding of the deep interconnectivity between humans and nature that he reiterates throughout his literary works.

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Notes

- 1 In this article, I define Central Asia as a region consisting of five states: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan.
- 2 The author gives the fish names as if they are characters in a fairy tale.
- 3 For instance, production in the country increased more than ten-fold between 1913 and 1980, from 517,000 tons to 5,579,000 tons. Irrigation for cotton production depleted the flow of water into the Aral Sea. Each year storms with million of tons of salt were raised from the dry bed of the Aral Sea and spread around Kazakhstan and Central Asia and even further to the Arctic Ocean in the north and the Ganges basin in the south.

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