

# Two Culture's Characters in Contemporary Kazakh Cinema

Baubek B. Nogerbek, Alma M. Aidarova

**Abstract**—In this article the authors are researching cultural differences between rural and urban characters in case of contemporary Kazakh cinema. Two motion pictures are analyzed: “Strizh” (2007) by AbaiKulbai and “Seker” (2009) by SabitKurmanbekov. According to the authors’ opinion teenage girl characters in these two films reflect two cultures (urban and rural) of Kazakh society, which displays complicated socio-cultural processes of modern Kazakhstan.

**Keywords**—Culture (urban and rural), film characters, Kazakh cinema, Kazakh society

## I. INTRODUCTION

CINEMA as art reflects cultural realities of society, the state. Kazakh cinema in a context of global film production is not an exception. Throughout the history of Kazakh cinema there were movies with heroes from the village and the city. But in the Kazakh Soviet-era cinema cultural gap between city and village residents was not criticized. All characters, whether they were from a village or a city, were represented as a model of the Soviet people and films were national in form and socialist in content. The socialist realism did not reflect public realities and aspired to represent an ideal of the Soviet society in which “there will be only one nation – Soviet, one language – Russian, one culture – communist”. [1, p.148].

The first part of “Two Cultures of Kazakhstan: urban and rural” describes the cultural differences of modern Kazakhstani society. Authors make a brief historical digression; lead the statistics on the population of Kazakhstan. The authors distinguish linguistic differences and emphasize the influence of colonial policies of the Russian empire, extended by the communist ideology of the Soviet state.

In the second part of the paper “Urban and rural characters in independent Kazakhstan’s cinema” authors analyse films clearly marked in the structure elements of the urban and traditional rural culture. Attention is given to two main characters of films “Strizh” (2007) and “Seker” (2009). On-screen lives of these characters accurately reflect the picture of the cultural reality of modern Kazakhstan. The conclusion presents findings, in which the authors emphasize that the imagination of directors-debutants is directly related to the cultural environment from which they come from.

Baubek B. Nogerbek is with the Zhurgenov Kazakh National Academy of Arts, Almaty, 050000 The Republic of Kazakhstan (phone: +7 707-333-7337; e-mail: baubek@nur.kz).

Alma M. Aidarova is with the Zhurgenov Kazakh National Academy of Arts, Almaty, 050000 The Republic of Kazakhstan (phone: +7 777-177-0072; e-mail: alma@nur.kz).

## II. TWO CULTURES OF KAZAKHSTAN: URBAN AND RURAL

Kazakhstan is a state of two dissimilar cultures: modern urbanized culture and traditional ethnic village culture. These two cultures are usually in peaceful coexistence but sometimes they clash. Cultural separation between cities and villages consists in language diversity. Generally villages are Kazakh speaking environment and cities are Russian speaking space. During the Russian empire period cities were a location for Russian settlers and military. In the Soviet period only in Atyrau and Kyzylorda Kazakh people constituted a majority. Up until 1980 the capital and the biggest city of Kazakh SSR Almaty had “not more than 10-15% of Kazakhs inhabitants” [2]. This was due to several political and social factors. First, many Kazakhs died during the 1930-1934 years of famine, a period in which it is estimated that 45% to 51% Kazakhs perished. Furthermore, a large number of Kazakhs fled Kazakhstan as a result of starvation. This tragedy was explored in the works of Kazakh historians. For example, Nurbolat Massanov gives the following estimates: “victims of hunger are 1798.4 thousands ethnic Kazakhs or 46.8% of the total Kazakh population” [3, p. 376]. Zh. Abylhozhin, M. Tatimov and M. Kozybaev in “Kazakhstan tragedy” wrote: “There were 1750 thousands Kazakh dead in 1930 year” [4, p.67]. A. Alexeenko notes: “1840 thousands Kazakhs or 47.3% of total Kazakh population died” [5]. A. Kuzembaiuly and E. Abil note: “In 1931-1933 were died about 2 million or 50% of Kazakhs” [6, p. 274]. Immediately after the famine years came Stalin’s repressions. In Kazakhstan, a very heavy damage was inflicted on Kazakh intellectuals living in cities. In 1936-1938 up to 70% of Kazakh intelligence falsely accused of nationalism and espionage were shot. The second major factor after the famine and repression was the Second World War, deportation of peoples and the development of the Virgin Lands Program. In 1937 around 40 thousand Koreans were deported from the Far East. Then began the Second World War, in which with other people of the Soviet Union were killed many Kazakhs – more than 410 thousand. In the last years of the Second World War about 1.5 million people were deported to Kazakhstan. Among them were whole nations of which Stalin declared “enemies of the soviet people” – 570 thousands of Chechens, Ingush, Karachai, Balkars, 361 thousands of Germans from the Volga region, 110 thousands of Meskhetian Turks and also Greeks, Kurds from the Caucasus region, Crimean Tatars, Poles, Jews, Kalmyk and many other nations”. [6, p. 293]. After the war, in 1954 began the Virgin lands campaign. In fact, it was pasture lands of Kazakhstan which was used for sowing of wheat. As a result the traditional semi-nomadic culture of the Kazakh people suffered irreparable damage. In the course of this state campaign in 1954-1956 about 640 000 settlers from Slavic and Baltic republics of USSR moved to Kazakhstan [6, p. 303].

Thus, in 1950 the Kazakhs in Kazakhstan amounted to less than one third of the total population, or precisely 29%-30% [2]. In addition to have a permanent residence in cities people were required to register and needed special permission. The Soviet government silently limited the local Kazakh people the rights to settle in cities and gave preference to Russians, or at least to Ukrainians, Baltic people and other Soviet ethnicities. In fact, it was a continuation of the Tsarist policy of Russification of the population but with a new form – sovietization and internationalization. Now in many cities of Kazakhstan non-indigenous inhabitants make up a significant portion of the residents – about 35% of total population. Russian language is widely used at all levels; up to 90% of citizens can speak Russian. Today, according to the Kazakhstan census data of 2009 45.9% [7] of the population lives in rural areas in small towns and villages. However, the process of urbanization is growing every year and therefore the rural population is slowly decreasing. In fact, Kazakhstan is divided into two groups, two types of people - urban and rural. City and village life is practically two different information fields - it is like two subcultures. Kazakh speaking population is basically the Kazakh residents of villages mostly watching Kazakh media, reading Kazakh writers, listening to Kazakh music, etc. And Russian-speaking inhabitants they are citizens of different nationalities, prefer local and foreign Russian language media, Russian-language literature, Russian and foreign music, etc.

Display of these two cultural realities took place in history of the Kazakh cinema. However, as it has been specified above cultural difference between characters of city and village was not strongly pronounced in Kazakh cinema during the Soviet-Era. It depended on purposeful cultural policy of communist's government in the name of creation of brand new uniform Soviet nation. According to soviet ideology, division into classes in communist society was not comprehensible. But with the beginning of perestroika, democratization of society began. The communist ideology failed and subsequently the Soviet Union collapsed. All of this dramatically affected the aesthetics of cinema. During this period the Kazakh New Wave as an artistic phenomenon was born. "While the Soviet Union underwent severe stress the New Wave cinematographers took advantage of the opportunity to explore the art and freedom of their own newly defined cinematic language" [8, p. 791].

### III. URBAN AND RURAL CHARACTERS IN INDEPENDENT KAZAKHSTAN'S CINEMA

Over the last two decades Kazakh motion cinema began to show an increasing gap between screen characters of the village and the city, as bearers of two different cultures. Most obviously this gap has been shown in the films of the "New wave" of Kazakh cinema. Films with a city theme – "The needle" ("Igla", 1988, directed by R. Nugmanov), "Lady of the day" ("Zhenshinadnya" 1989, directed by A. Baranov and B. Kilibaev), "Homewrecker" ("Razluchnitsa" 1991, directed by A. Karakulov) – were shot by directors from the city, i.e. directors who know urban culture from the inside.

At the same time, a Kazakh New Wave SerikApyrmov directed a scandalous film about his native village "The Last Stop" (1989) and then film "Aksuat" (1997), (Aksuat – village in the East Kazakhstan region, where S. Apyrmov was born and grown up) which continued the theme of modern Kazakh village and its social-cultural and moral problems. Another well-known representative of the Kazakh New Wave is DarezhanOmiraev and his films "Cardiogram" (1995) and "Zhol" (*The Road*, 2001), who explicitly showed the conflict between the city and the village as two separate sometimes conflicting cultures. The character in "Cardiogram" a teenager boy Zhasulan comes to treat his heart in an urban health resort. Misunderstandings arise not only because of his lack of knowledge of the Russian language but also because of the differences between cultural identities – Zhasulan is a boy from the village and the rest are urban people. The public in the health resort did not accept Zhasulan. He was harassed, humiliated, and insulted by them. And, finally, unable to bear it all, Zhasulan escapes from the health resort to his paternal house – the village. This theme – a difficult, sometimes a tragic fate of the provincial young man in the city – has found its continuation in other films of DarezhanOmiraev "Kairat" (1991) and "Killer" (1998). However, the final incarnation of this problem is reflected in the film "Zhol". In this film the leading character is filmmaker Amir. He lives in the city in a first-class district. But he himself comes from the village which he hasn't visited for a very long time. One day Amir goes to his native village for his mother's funeral. Professor BauyrzhanNogerbek has pin-pointed the main idea of the movie: "Zhol" is a film about character's attempt and inability to find himself, his past, his incapability to return to spiritual roots" [9, p. 306]. In fact, the movie is about how modern man is losing not only his mother from his origins but also his relationships with the village. It is remarkable that DarezhanOmiraev is himself from a village; that is why he is so keenly aware of the social clashes between rural and urban cultures. Problems of displaying the traditional (rural) and the modernistic (urban) cultures in the Kazakh motion cinema has been researched by Kazakh film critics – Prof. Dr. BauyrzhanNogerbek [9], Dr. Gulnara Abikeeva [10], Dr. Inna Smailova [11] etc. and also by American and European film critics: Dr. Jane Knox-Voina [12], Stephen M. Norris [13], Dr. Birgit Beumers [14], etc. However, in these works the authors did not research teenage girl characters as a representation of Kazakh city and village cultures. We would like to focus our attention on the images of teenage girls because they totally reflect the processes of the transformation of urban and rural Kazakh cultures. Among Kazakh films of 2007-2009 we would like to highlight the most notable characters of the village and the city. This is a screen image of adolescent girls from the feature film debuts "Strizh" (city) and "Seker" (village). The choice of teenage girls as leading characters is quite rare in the Kazakh cinema. That is why this interests us. Currently, there are only two films, where the characters are young girls. We perform a comparative analysis of these two films in terms of image of the characters as representatives of two cultures – the urban and the rural.

Both characters are approximately same age – 13-14 years, i.e. a difficult transition period. They live at the same time period: modern Kazakhstan.

Film “Strizh”, directed by AbaiKulbai is an urban story of a teenage girl. The character is a 14-year-old girl named Ainur. She lives in not so rich, in not so central district of the city. What is remarkable about her is that she is Métis and lives with her mother and stepfather. Sometimes she meets with her father, who is divorced. Intermarriage is quite common in urban areas and relatively rare in the villages. Ainur is a girl from a socially disadvantaged family: her stepfather regularly drinks, parents are frequently fighting at home. As a result, she drops out of school has a conflict with her classmates, and runs away from home. Ainur is like a tomboy. She is the character of a modern city, cosmopolitan culture where dominates interpersonal relationships. The film’s main conflict concluded in that Ainur feels herself useless. “Seker” (2009) directed by SabitKurmanbekov tells the story of a village girl who behaves like a boy, similarly as in “Strizh” (2007) by AbaiKulbai. The father brings her up in such a way because he has no son: only three daughters of whom Seker is the eldest. She does not wear skirts, is friends only with boys and even fights with some of them one by one. In contrast to Ainur from the movie “Strizh” (2009), Seker lives in a prosperous village family. Ainur behaves like a boy on her own. She does so in protest of the society surrounding her: family, school, where nobody understands her. She is an individualist. This quality is inherent in urbanized people because they are torn off from national traditions and culture. Village girl Seker is compelled to behave like a boy because, as she said in the movie, her “father so wanted that way”. Here we can see at the same time love and respect the humility shown by a daughter to a father. Here again is a basic difference between children from a village and a city. According to the Kazakh folk traditions, as well as Asian and Oriental absolutely cannot argue with parents. The words of parents are like an order in the army: they should be executed unconditionally and not be questioned. The father said so and that’s all! This is not true of urban parents and their children. Urban parents do not play such an important role in the upbringing of their children. This is primarily due to a catastrophic shortage of time in modern cities. In a modern city a child is brought up by several social institutions: family, a kindergarten, school, friends, TV, Internet. Children in the village are almost entirely brought up by the family. Rural family consists of the child’s parents and his father’s parents, i.e. parents and grandparents. In the village there is the traditional way of life which is expressed in the upbringing of children involving multiple generations of adults, ranging from parents to grandfathers, grandmothers, sometimes even great-grandfathers and great grandmothers. It is said that a village child grows up a conservative environment because he or she nourishes the spiritual values of past senior generations. The city is constantly experiencing a race for modernization and the urban is a target for innovative experiments in the field of education and promotion of new technologies of mass culture. The teenager in the village is less prone to psychological stress than their peers in the city.

In the village there is harmony between generations of grandfathers, fathers and children. Therefore, in the film “Seker” the conflict between the girl and her parents is not aggravated as in the movie “Strizh” which destroyed the traditional family, Ainur’s mother divorced her father and lives with another man and she is pregnant.

In fact, she has a separate private life in which there is no place for Ainur. Ainur’s father doesn’t have enough economic means to support his daughter; he works as a night watchman. While Seker loves her parents and is internally ready to heed to the opinions of adults and is willing to wear a dress at the beginning of the school year. However, her father resists this: he does not want this and he is subconsciously afraid to believe that he had no son, a successor. As noted above, both screen heroines are approximately of one age: 13-14, a transition period. They are no longer children, but they are also not adults. In future they should have to assimilate or reject the life experiences of their parents.

Ainur from “Strizh” (2007) is exposed to the temptations of the big city: she is, using youth slang, “advanced”: smoking, drinking, and even kisses with a classmate on the lips while not sober. Ainur is actively absorbing mass culture, which promotes freedom of manners, consumer lifestyle and fashion on homosexuality. Seker is a typical girl from the village. For her it is more interesting to ride on horseback, to help her father on the farm, herd sheep and play with her peers in the field.

Notably, Ainur is one of the most popular female names among Kazakhs today. This is a composite name derived from the word “Ai” (Kazakh – the moon) and “Nur” (Arabic – light), i.e. “Moon light”. However, this is not a traditional Kazakh name: it appeared relatively recently. In fact the “Nur” (i.e. “Light”) radiates sun and the moon does not emit light but only reflects the sunlight (full moon reflects 7% of sunlight). Nomadic people, including Kazakhs, knew about this from ancient times. Therefore, allowing to the moon, Kazakh people use word “saule” (Kazakh “ray”). Name Aisaule (i.e. “Moon ray”, semantically correct) is less common. The fact that this spread in recent years shows that Kazakhs are losing the cultural and traditional ties. It’s becoming more urbanized consequently, the cosmopolitan.

The names of these two films also have a hidden meaning. “Strizh” in Russian means Swift (Latin – Apodidae) – suborder of the order of birds Apodiformes (Latin – Apodiformes). They often live in urban areas and they are reclusive as well. Bird Swift characterizes Ainur. She is also a hermit outside of the family, out of school and friends. The director plays with the image of the Swift plastic – Ainur likes to sit outside alone on her haunches, hunched over like a bird.

And the word “seker” dialectic (literary – “sheker” is rarely used, a synonym – “qant” is used often) means “sugar” in the figurative sense of “sweet”.

The ending scenes can be called happy. Ainur runs to her mother in the maternity hospital. The director shows Ainur running with a happy face as her mother’s, stepfather’s and even her father’s faces when the child is born. However, Ainur gets into a car accident, does not reach the hospital.

“All right, all right, I’m alive”– she said to the people who had gathered around her to help. It is possible that these first and only positive words from Ainur will inspire the viewer to hope that the birth of a child in the family will improve and harmonize her relationship within the family. Seker is a full-fledged girl who wears a dress and a bow. By the end of the film, the father abandons his illusions and prejudices about girls.

Her father accepts the fact that he has no heir, that Seker is a girl, not a boy. Seker lives her tomboy lifestyle and is reborn as a girl and a future mother.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Thus, in the modern Kazakh cinema reflected the images of today’s teenage girls, representatives of urban (“Strizh”) and rural culture (“Seker”). As it turned out in case of analysing of these two films there are significant differences in the mental aspect between the traditional rural and modern urban cultures. Seker in village lives in a world of psychological comfort: she loves her parents and she has respect and consideration for elders, care for younger children. If conflicts occur they are not totally aggressive they can be solved peacefully. This culture allows a teenager to live in a world of romantic and fabulous views of the world. A modern urban culture is completely diverse. It is pragmatic in nature, designed to meet the needs of the individual’s selfish. A teenage girl Ainur from the city is experiencing tremendous stress due to lack of proper attention to their parents because they are divorced. There are persistent conflicts in the family because of drinking stepfather, cruelty by peers at school, hostile attitude of the adults, i.e. her friend’s parents and so on. Ainur is on the verge of a nervous breakdown like a small wolf, hunted by violent people, that she has brutal fights even with her peers. She is the product of a culture of a modernistic city. Here every man for himself: adults have own problems, children their own. Everyone stands by himself. Newcomer directors, trying to comprehend the contemporary artistic reality on the screen, try to embody two different on-screen images of adolescent girls as representatives of two cultures – urban (“Strizh”), and rural (“Seker”). Characters in films “Strizh” and “Seker” which were created from artists’ imagination adequately reflect the realities of modern society in Kazakhstan. Perhaps this is the fact that the directors themselves were born and brought up the city and village culture. Abai Kulbaibek from the city, Sabit Kurmanbekov from the village and each of them took off on what he knows and feels. Obviously, this concluded kindly audience response and success among film critics. Both films have participated in many International Film Festivals all over the world. “Strizh” (2007) has won Grand Prix Award of the Central Asian contest of IV “Eurasia” International Film Festival in Almaty, Award for Best Actress in a Leading Role (Inessa Kislova) at the International Film Festival in Singapore and Award for Best Actor in a Supporting Role at the International Film Festival in Bursa, Turkey. “Seker” (2009) has won Award for Best music on New York Eurasian Film Festival and the “Kulager” Kazakh National Film Award for Best Artistic Solution of Film.

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**Baubek Nogerbek** is a PhD student at the Kazakh National Academy of Arts named after T. Zhurgenov, Almaty City, Kazakhstan. His research interests include the evolution and transformation of character’s image in Kazakh cinema. He wrote several academic articles that were published in Kazakhstan, Turkey and Russia including “Nurmukhan Zhanturin and the Birth of Intellectual Hero in Kazakh Cinema” (in Kazakh), “Independent Kazakhstan’s Cinema: the Past, the Present and the Future” (in Turkish), “Transformation of Young Character’s image in Kazakh cinema (1998-2004)” (in Russian). In 2010 and 2011 he had internships at Istanbul University (Istanbul City, Turkey) and Columbia University (New York City, USA). He made presentations about contemporary Kazakh cinema in these universities. Currently, he is working on his PhD dissertation “The Evolution and Transformation of Character’s Image in Kazakh Cinema (1930-2000)”.

**Alma Aidarova** is a PhD student at the Kazakh National Academy of Arts named after T. Zhurgenov, Almaty City, Kazakhstan. Between 2008 and 2011 she worked as a research fellow at the Zhurgenov Academy of Arts. Since 2011 she has been teaching film studies at faculty “Film, TV and Art Studies” at the same Academy. Her research interests include history of Kazakh cinema with focus on Darezhan Omirbaev’s creative works in the context of Art cinema. She has written several academic articles, including “New Trends in Darezhan Omirbaev’s Films” (in Kazakh) and “Screen Versions of Classics of World Literature in Darezhan Omirbaev’s Films” (in Kazakh). In 2011 she had an internship at Columbia University (New York City, USA), where she made presentations about contemporary Kazakh cinema.