

**COSMODROME AS A ‘GIFT OF MODERNITY’:
REPRESENTATION OF THE THEME OF SPACE IN KAZAKH
AND KYRGYZ LITERATURE**

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Abstract. The article is devoted to the analysis of the interpretation of space themes in Soviet and post-Soviet literature. The study was done about the works of art by Kazakh and Kyrgyz authors, where the problems of space exploration are raised and where the Baikonur Cosmodrome, located on the territory of Kazakhstan, is represented as a ‘gift of modernity’, a legacy of the Soviet era. Post-colonial literary optics allows to take a fresh look at the works of Chinghiz Aitmatov, Olzhas Suleimenov, Zhuban Moldagaliev and other Central Asian authors.

Keywords: post-colonial discourse, literature, space, representation, cultural landscape

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1. Introduction

April 10, 2021... The car rushes along the road, the yellow desert steppe spreads around, thickets of hard saxaul and tamarisk flicker outside the windows. The silhouettes of camels can be seen in the distance, and the bizarre outlines of structures resembling mazars and Muslim cemeteries suddenly attract attention. Aitmatov’s lines from “The day lasts more than a hundred years” come to mind about the great desert spaces – Sary-Ozek, the Middle Lands of the Yellow Steppes, where the family cemetery of Ana Beyit was located, which became the resting

place of the legendary Naiman-Ana, who fell by the hand of her son, turned by enemies into a *mankurt*, a being without memory, without roots and without a heart. After all, these tragic events could have happened in these places, on Baikonur land.

Being members of the research group of a scientific project dedicated to the theme of cosmos in the cultural landscape of Kazakhstan, we are going to the anniversary launch of a rocket at launch platform No. 11, which bears the name of Gagarin. As soon as the car crosses the barrier that separates the territory of the cosmodrome from the surrounding steppe, we seem to find ourselves in another world, getting from the world of virgin nature to the world of high technology.

The ‘space’ agenda in the Soviet era was actively developed in art and literature, while the problem of space exploration could be represented ambiguously, including in the post-colonial aspect. Laura Adams notes that despite the abundance of discussions as to whether it is possible to speak of post-Soviet countries as post-colonial, the fruitfulness of the application of post-colonial theory in this aspect is beyond doubt (Adams 2009: 34).

In contrast, M. Tlostanova, a well-known decolonial theorist, categorically disagrees that the post-Soviet can be viewed through the prism of post-colonial theories and proposes to approach the analysis of the post-Soviet and post-socialist through critical theories of globalization and transculturalism. An example of such transcultural identification is the book by Olzhas Suleimenov “*Az i Ya*”, where the idea of the mutual influence of the Turkic and Slavic cultures is clearly traced. The researcher writes about the need to develop a comprehensive and differentiated approach to interpret the realities of the former socialist world, taking into account colonial and imperial differences, ways of modernization, understanding of ethnicity, nation, religion, multiculturalism, etc.

“Then one can speak of the post-Soviet case rather as a transimperial, transcultural and transnational, and not just post-colonial due to the Russian/Soviet imperial-colonial configuration, marked by less rigid and clearly defined divisions into center and periphery, a more chaotic ethno-cultural mixture, where racial stratification was not dominant, as was the case in Western empires. Transcultural and transnational discourses are, as it were, built-in terms for describing the realities of the Russian-Soviet empire and what has come to replace it” (Tlostanova 2004: 383).

The concept of transculturality and translanguaging of Tlostanova in relation to the Central Asian writers of the Soviet period – Suleimenov, Aitmatov, S. Sanbayev and many others, who created their works exclusively in Russian, the language of the metropolis, is quite justified. “The imperial language of Soviet literature was Russian. And in the Russian literature of the Soviet period, imperial writers naturally arose – not those who expressed the very spirit of the empire, but, on the contrary, those who worked at the intersection of resistance and subordination: resistance to ideology, subordination to language” (Ivanova 2014: 34).

This article explores how the Baikonur cosmodrome, which became the embodiment of the gift of modernity received from the Soviet era by the Republic of Kazakhstan, and in general, space themes are represented in the works of Kazakh and Kyrgyz authors. In this sense, post-colonial discourse is a valuable resource,

since the current state of the country can hardly be called free, and the current situation with the cosmodrome, leased to Russia until 2050, testifies it. If previous post-colonial studies of the region focused on the problems of memory, culture in general, the very logic of Orientalism, which became the forerunner of post-colonial studies, assumed the analysis of literary material in order to identify the 'orientalist' view of the East and, more broadly, post-colonial countries.

Based on the study of the works of Kazakh and Kyrgyz authors who addressed the topic of space in the Soviet and post-Soviet period, the article shows how the conquest of outer space was perceived by the inhabitants of Uly Dala¹, how global and national contexts were combined in 'space' literature, national identity was conjugated and the desire to fit their people into the modern post-Soviet 'space' era, into the new global world, the world of advanced space technologies and even subsequent space colonization.

Postcolonial theory is rarely used in the analysis of Soviet and post-Soviet literature, moreover, it could not become a full-fledged component of understanding the past and present of the countries of the former USSR, which is by no means explained only by the different quality of colonial experience (Breininger 2012: 14). Referring to Salman Rushdie's 'writing back' concept, the researcher notes that 'writing back' allows two different approaches: either a direct protest against the cultural hegemony of the West, an open challenge to the culture of the colonialists, or the opposite silence of 'minor' writers, i.e., an inaudible, hidden protest" (Breininger 2012: 14).

D. Matsinier calls for decolonization of research methodologies: "In research the life worlds and world views of the inhabitants of the former colonies continue to be the object of study with the help of Western methodological tools. Scholars have not assimilated the world views (ontologies and epistemologies) of the former colonial peoples as a form, not simply as the content of analysis" (Matsinier 2008: 34).

On the contrary, the fruitfulness of the use of postcolonial theory due to the involvement of researchers of the post-Soviet world in new global networks of knowledge production and the transition to a more complex, critical understanding of both the colonial past and the postcolonial present, which became possible after gaining independence, is noted by A. Bisenova and K. Medeuova (Bisenova and Medeuova 2013: 36).

2. Baikonur – as a 'gift of modernity'

There is a certain problem of distinguishing between colonization and modernization, since colonization also implies inevitable modernization, which could be perceived as "a sophisticated form of coloniality aimed at suppressing one's own cultural identity", the 'colonized' in such a situation turns out to be not a passive recipient of the 'gift of modernity' – he seeks to appropriate and, having mastered it, make it your own. Postcolonialism, on the other hand, can turn into a radical

¹ Uly Dala – (Kaz. – Uly Dala) Great Steppe, the name of a large region in Central Asia, which includes the steppes of modern Kazakhstan.

denial of the significance of the European enlightenment project, a total rejection of ‘colonial modernity’ and its ‘progressive content’ (Remnev 2014: 194).

The modernization of the Union republics in the Soviet era was uneven, the researchers note that the main idea at that time was the idea of a ‘conservative revolution’: building centers of high modernity (in some ways even overtaking Western models, for example, in the military or space sphere) based on traditional, even forcibly revived archaic institutions in other, basic areas (for example, the revival of the institution of the community in the form of collective farms in agriculture) (Vishnevsky 2014: 34). Kazantsev calls the Russian-Soviet modernization project in Central Asia an ill-balanced forced modernization and writes about the possibility of compensation and assistance in the formation of independent states after the fall of the USSR (Kazantsev 2008: 300).

The Baikonur cosmodrome, erected in the Kazakh steppe, can be considered a grandiose project of Soviet modernization, this ‘gift of modernity’, which required the investment of huge human and financial resources and embodied the grandiose plans of the Soviet government for space exploration during the Cold War with America. However, after the collapse of the Soviet empire and the subsequent ‘parade of sovereignties’ of the national republics, the question of the status of the cosmodrome inevitably arose, which currently causes ambiguous interpretations among the Kazakhs themselves. At the same time, “the epistemological profile of most Soviet texts about the Baikonur cosmodrome presents the local landscape before the construction of the cosmodrome as a desert – a bare, barren steppe in which there was nothing and no one lived. This justifies massive technological investments in the region and the literal displacement of local history, as disproportionate to the space infrastructure that has appeared. The study of traditional toponyms of the region allows us to show that this is not only a natural, but also a cultural landscape, formed under the influence of an anthropogenic factor” (Medeuova and Naurzabayeva 2021: 34).

It should be said that the area of Kyzylorda, where the Baikonur cosmodrome is located, Syr Eli or the region of Kazakhstan, connected with the Syrdarya river, is literally ‘saturated’ with the atmosphere of myth, since this area is associated with the name of Korkyt-Ata, the myth about who can be called the main myth of the pan-Turkic cultural ecumene. A. F. Losev argued that at the basis of each culture lies its fundamental myth, the realization of which this culture is (Kosarev 2014: 120). A similar myth for the Great Steppe, an ethnocultural archetype, where “the collective experience of the people is presented in a condensed form,” is the myth of Korkut. According to Zh. Karakuzova and M. Khasanov, the authors of the book “The Cosmos of Kazakh Culture”, the myth of Korkut, which thrust kobyz into the middle of the Syr Darya, reflected the act of first creation: water-chaos is harmonized by kobyz-music, and life is born (Karakuzova and Khasanov 1993: 78).

The cosmogonic semantics of the myth of Korkut was reflected in the sacralization of the coast of the Syr Darya, associated with the idea that the center of the earth, the ‘navel’ of the Earth (Zher kindigi) is located there. That is why the first shaman Korkyt returns to the Syr Darya River after escaping from death and traveling to

four cardinal points, where he creates the first musical instrument – kobyz, thanks to which he acquires immortality. The cultural landscape of the Syr Darya is also remarkable for other parallels: the ancient capital of the Oghuz state – Yangikent (Zhankent), Syganak – the center of the Kazakh Khanate Ak Orda, and in Soviet times Kyzyl-Orda, the first capital of the Kazakh SSR. The region has preserved many burial mounds and mausoleums of Muslim Sufi saints², *pir*-mentors³, highly revered by the locals. Liya Molokova gives an example of another Turkic legend “Ten centuries ago, Oguz tribes lived in these places⁴. They had a legend: a black shepherd made a huge sling. He put a bag of stones and pieces of camel fat into it and threw it into the sky. The bag came back with stones and fire. Then the grass didn't grow here. The Oguzes considered this place the navel of the earth. The attraction is weakened here. That is, it takes less energy to launch a rocket. It was in this place that the cosmodrome was supposed to be built” (Molokova 2019: 12).

“Indigenous types of knowledge should not be perceived as pre- or anti-modern, pre- or anti-scientific, should not be opposed to modernity and knowledge. Researchers should not discard them, but include them as a gift to human heartless modernity. Indigenous types of knowledge can be methodological guidelines for the study and representation of the plurality of life worlds. Like the history of mankind, native knowledge is literally strewn with virtualities. The interweaving of the virtual with the real, the otherworldly and this-worldly, the physical and the non-physical are widespread in nativeness” (Smith 2002: 17).

Matsinier notes that the methodologies of Western and Westernized institutions of science are characterized by desacralization and historicism. “Desacralization, disenchantment is an important function of the methodology for modernizing the life of society. Therefore, the methodologies of the era of modernity and modernization are not only blind to bewitched social realities, but also try to abandon them” (Matsinje 2008: 28).

The Baikonur Cosmodrome, which was the first to open the gates to space for humanity, was built in 1955. The decision to build a cosmodrome in the desert steppes of Kazakhstan to the east of the then-existing Aral Sea was made based on the presence of a number of advantages over others: relatively sparsely populated not only in the area of the cosmodrome, but also along the route of launched rockets, flat semi-desert terrain; the presence of the largest Central Asian river Syr Darya; passing near the railway line and highway; more than three hundred sunny days a year; and, most importantly, the proximity to the equator, which makes it possible to use the additional speed of the Earth's rotation for launches (Molokova 2019: 12).

However, the location of the cosmodrome in Kazakhstan did not portend any privileges for the republic within the framework of the all-Union technological space hierarchy, since “due to the extreme sensitivity of space technology in the context of the Cold War and its military significance, Baikonur remained a Soviet technological and infrastructural enclave, practically unrelated to its ‘master’, Kazakhstan”

² Sufi is a representative of Sufism, a mystical-ascetic trend in Islam.

³ *Pir* (kaz. – *pir*) – a concept denoting representatives of religious movements in Islam, in particular, in Sufism, acting as spiritual teachers.

⁴ Oghuz – a medieval Turkic people who lived in the territory of Central Asia and Mongolia.

(Bekus 2021: 34). The ‘alienation’ of Baikonur from the Kazakh SSR was most likely explained not only by these reasons, but also by the ‘organic imbalance’ of Soviet modernization in general. “In turn, cities, industry and transport infrastructure existed, according to the logic of Soviet modernization, as if separately from this rural world. This was manifested, first of all, in the national composition and culture of their population. Russian-speaking or ‘Russified’ representatives of indigenous peoples prevailed there” (Kazantsev 2008: 179). Built in the Soviet period, the town of Leninsk, later called Baikonur, was very different from the surrounding Kazakh cities and towns. The supply of the city was special, local residents recalled that for the first time they saw an abundance of fruits and vegetables in Baikonur.

In the post-Soviet era, Baikonur in Kazakhstan is viewed in the context of unfulfilled hopes for full-fledged participation in space projects along with Russia and for the joint modernization of the former Soviet cosmodrome. At the same time, some researchers consider the current processes associated with Baikonur as an expression of Kazakhstan’s confident space technopolitics, focusing on the fact that the unsolicited and unintended legacy of the Soviet space infrastructure, inherited by the country in 1991, can now turn into an important tool for shaping the image Kazakhstan as a technologically advanced country building its alliances in the international arena and mobilizing its scientific and technological resources to represent the country’s new global identity (Bekus 2021: 34). In this aspect, we are talking, in fact, about the possibility of re-appropriation of the ‘gift of modernity’ in the person of Baikonur in the post-socialist, post-colonial modern era.

3. Space theme in literature. ‘Soviet-patriotic’ discourse (socialist realism)

In Soviet literature, the theme of space was raised from two angles. One was connected with the patriotic intensity inspired by the confrontation between two powers of the USSR and the USA during the Cold War and the space race. The sixties poet Olzhas Suleimenov with his programmatic poem “Earth, Bow to Man!”, published in the memorable April of 1961, when an earthling first conquered outer space, is an example of this approach. It is noteworthy that the proud words of the Kazakh poet are carved on the memorial erected at the site of the subsequent death of the first cosmonaut. A sense of belonging to a great event – a manned flight into space, pride, joy, all these feelings vividly describe that Soviet discourse of belonging to a great country. “On April 12, 1961, when Yuri Gagarin made his space flight, there was such great joy on the streets of Alma-Ata. Everyone was in a good mood. Marvelous. Unfortunately, there were no more such holidays in my memory.” According to the poet, it was in the April days of 1961 that he became known to the whole world. “I wrote. A week, maybe. Non-stop. He wrote, wrote ... Screamed! Because such things are not silently written. But aloud. He paced the room, frightening his family. Well, as a result, already in April I managed to put into production this poem “Earth, bow to man!” (Sputnik 2014: 34).

It is noteworthy that in the poem of the Soviet poet, written in the 1960s, the heyday of the Soviet empire, completely anti-colonial motifs are heard: "There is no East, and there is no West. The sky has no end. There is no East, and there is no West. The father has two sons. There is no East and there is no West. There is sunrise and sunset. There is a big word – EARTH! Live, people. You have accomplished your first feat. Overcome the earthly burden, so that the descendants will remember it – Overcome the earthly litigation! With the name of Lenin. We will repeat this feat!" (Suleimenov 2010: 380). The perception of flight into space as an achievement on a planetary scale correlates with the glorification of socialist ideas.

In the same row is the poem of the Kazakh poet Zhuban Moldagaliev "Baikonyr baspaldaqtary" ("Steps of Baikonur"), which glorifies the achievements of the communist state who boldly touched the cosmic limits. In the poem "I am a Kazakh," the poet says, "The steppe used to be wide, now it is high. Since ships have risen from it into the sky, Gagarin, the son of Russia, has become my son" (Moldagaliev 2010: 380).

"The cult poet of the Soviet period Zhuban Moldagaliev (1920–1988) in the poem 'Baikonyr baspaldaqtary' ('Steps of Baikonur') sings of cosmic achievements, while one of the chapters is dedicated to Korkyt. The spirit of the legendary Korkyt tells about his struggle against the attraction of everyday life, regrets that his life was tied to the earth, but hopes that the music of the kobyz he created will reach the heavens. The poet also refers to other pages of the history and culture of the region. Thus, already in the poem written in the mid-1970s, praising Soviet space achievements, the cosmodrome is included in the ethno-cultural landscape of the Syr Darya" (Medeuova and Naurzbayeva 2021: 34).

At the same time, in the best traditions of socialist realism, with its contempt for 'feudal-bai remnants', the poet ridicules the image of the sage Korkyt, the hero of Turkic folk legends, who seems to him only a singer of sadness, as a sad symbol of the past, as an example of impotence, 'absurdly living his life'. The search for Zheruyik (Promised Land), by the way, associated in Turkic culture not with the name of Korkyt, but of another legendary sage Asan Kaigy (Sad), seems to the Soviet poet only a fruitless dream, an empty sound ... All the same, a feeling of high involvement in the great cause of conquering space, realized thanks to the USSR, the desire to emphasize national identity by introducing elements of the cultural landscape, cultural codes, comparisons and metaphors of one's culture into the poem: stars – boursaks⁵, kazy⁶, – the heat of the sun, the earth – dzhailau⁷, tusau kesu⁸ – cutting the fetters, "Turksib, Mointy, Chu, who gave heights to the steps of Baikonur." And a well-known quote from Abay: "You are just a brick in a complex universe – be able to find the right place in it." The poet also expresses his innermost dream, which came true only after Kazakhstan gained independence, when ethnic Kazakhs also conquered space – T. Aubakirov, T. Mussabayev, A. Aimbetov –

⁵ Boursaks – a national dish of the Turkic peoples, pieces of dough fried in oil.

⁶ Kazy (kaz. – *kazy*) – a traditional delicacy dish of the Turkic peoples, horse meat sausage.

⁷ Dzhaylyau (kaz. – *zhaylau*) – summer pastures of nomadic Turkic peoples.

⁸ Tusau kesu (kaz. – *tusau kesu*) – one of the most important rituals among the Kazakhs is the symbolic cutting of the fetters on the feet of a child, so that his future path in life would be easy and bright.

“Our cosmodrome is the wings of the entire planet, They will still fly over the world and Kazakhs ...” (Moldagaliev 2010: 503).

4. Postcolonial discourse

Another discourse is connected with the post-colonial rethinking of the ‘gift of modernity’ by Chinghiz Aitmatov, a Kyrgyz writer, who, in the novel “The day lasts more than a hundred years” (1980), along with the theme of mankurtism, the loss of cultural memory, also touches upon the theme of building a cosmodrome on Kazakh soil. The fundamental ‘focal point’ of Soviet modernization, the combination of high modernity and dense archaism, which Vishnevsky wrote about, is also reflected in the thickness of the novel, when the local residents are track workers living their measured, half-asleep, almost archaic life at the Buranny station (the prototype of the station Toretam), having encountered the cosmodrome for the first time, they perceive it as something completely alien and incomprehensible, as a kind of imperial project that has no points of contact with their daily life. In the novel, one can clearly feel the opposition between the traditional way of life of track workers, close in spirit to the archaic shepherd nomads, and the modern cosmodrome. The heroes of the novel, living on a small, godforsaken Buranny railway siding, located in the boundless Saryozek steppes, are portrayed by the author as powerful, integral personalities.

Only people strong in spirit, equal in strength, equal in spirit to this great desert could live in it. “To live on the Saryozek sidings, you must have the spirit, otherwise you will perish. The steppe is huge, and the man is small. The steppe is indifferent, it doesn’t care if it’s bad or good for you, accept it as it is, but a person doesn’t care what and how in the world, and he is tormented, languishing, it seems that somewhere else, among other people, he would be lucky, but here he is by a mistake of fate ... And that is why he loses himself in the face of the great inexorable steppe, discharges his spirit ... So is a person on the Saryozek sidings: he will not stick to business, will not take root in the steppe, will not take root – it will be difficult to resist. Others, looking out of the cars in passing, grab their heads – Lord, how can people live here?! Around only the steppe and camels!” (Aitmatov 1987: 295).

The existential loneliness of a person against the backdrop of a boundless, immense steppe can be overcome not only by fortitude, but also by the ability to take root in these expanses, to feel like a piece of nature, to merge with it, which was characteristic of nomads, of the nomadic tradition as a whole (Sarkulova 2004: 122). “The Kazakh gerontological concept is based on the awareness of rootedness in the Universe, therefore it is expressed in the reverent acceptance of a person, enshrined both in the traditional institution of the sages and in the cult of hospitality. The deep core of traditional Kazakh gerontology is the need, the human need for a person, for the endless formation and development of his humanity” (Nurlanova 1994: 42-43).

Problems of an existential nature are also raised in the ‘fantastic’ chapters of the novel about the discovery of life on the fictional planet Forest Breast, when the parity-cosmonauts, who learned about it, cannot hide their delight. “Are we

really not alone in the world, not the only ones of our kind in the unimaginably desolate infinity of the world, is it really not the experience of man on Earth the only acquisition of the spirit in the Universe?" (Aitmatov 1987: 329-330). Here the problem of abandonment and loneliness of man arises, not only on Earth, but in the whole Universe (philosophy of cosmism).

The construction of the cosmodrome in Aitmatov's novel is considered not from the position of Russian engineers and builders, as in numerous works of authors writing memories of the construction of Baikonur as evidence of the Soviet genius, thanks to which it became possible to build a cosmodrome in a deserted, almost uninhabited land, but from the position of 'foreigners', local residents, as a manifestation of imperial policy without the slightest respect for the feelings of local 'Others', on the land where the graves of ancestors, places of memory, sacred objects are located. In the philosophical novel-parable, the theme of the cosmos is rethought through the prism of the collision of a small man with the colossus of the Soviet state machine. When Edigei, the protagonist of the novel, finds himself in a situation in which it becomes impossible to bury his deceased friend, the local patriarch Kazangap, at the Ana-Beyit family cemetery, located not far from the newly built cosmodrome and, as a result, doomed to inevitable liquidation. It is in this, perhaps, the most powerful work of the Kyrgyz prose writer, favored by the Soviet authorities, laureate of the Lenin and state prizes, for the first time that anti-colonial and decolonial motives are so clearly manifested – the theme of *mankurtism*, forgetting one's origins, loss of national identity, cultural memory, further development of this topic is given. In the images of new *mankurts* – Sabitzhan, whom his father, the wise Kazangap, was once forced to send to a Soviet boarding school, since there were no schools at a small junction and where the complete rebirth of the boy naturally took place according to the law of mimicry outlined by Homi Bhabha.

"The Bolsheviks turned out to be radical in this matter. Certain forms of opposition by colonial Soviet women, such as their refusal to send their children to Soviet kindergartens and nurseries, gave rise to real campaigns to nationalize colonial children. While similar efforts in the metropolis remained slogans, except in the case of orphans and later, children of the so called 'enemies' of the people. As a result, in some colonial spaces, generations of artificial colonial orphans arose, who, with living parents, were removed from families and raised in Soviet boarding schools, representing ideological, social and gender engineering in action" (Tekueva 2006: 222-226).

The same idea later finds continuation in the motif of *xrods*, deprived of roots, in the "Brand of Cassandra", in the images of the 'cross-eyed' investigator Tansykbaev and his son, guarding the cosmodrome, who, with emphatic contempt, refuses to speak with Edigei in the Kazakh language, as if at the level of 'Ana tili', the mother language, as the Kazakhs say about their native language, is fenced off from relatives and it is precisely such *tansykbaevs* who doom *Abutalib* to death, whose entire fault was that he wanted to save from oblivion, to preserve for his children and not only the narratives of the Steppe, mythological stories about *Naiman-Ana* and other legends and tales that convey the aroma of the life worlds of nomads. Aitmatov's

novel ends with a story about a huge explosion that thundered at the cosmodrome, from which the old Edigei, the camel Karanar, and the dog Zholbars flee in horror and which clearly recalls the innumerable nuclear tests carried out on Kazakh soil in the Soviet era. Here we can draw an analogy with the public movement Anti-Heptyl which originated in Kazakhstan already in the new post-Soviet era, whose members, speaking out against the release into the atmosphere of a highly toxic combustible material – heptyl, used as fuel by cargo “Protons” and inevitably leading to soil pollution as a result of rocket crashes, consider the Russian space program as a manifestation of neo-colonialism. D. Sivkov, a space anthropologist, mentions Sh. T. Mitchell, who writes about the collision of national and local space in the Brazilian space program, when the ethnic and political Quilombo movement considers space as local, “for them it is not the profit of commercial launches of a civil space agency and not the greatness of Brazil as a member of the club of Brazilian military space powers; for the Quilombo, the space program is their specific land with a ‘traditional’ economy and water resources that are being harmed” (Mitchell 2006: 222-226).

The plot of the novel by Aitmatov essentially represents the chronotope of the path – the mournful path of Edigei to the family cemetery. Patriarch Kazangap closes the chain of times with his death, completes the myth. Edigei’s decision to bury the wise old man in the legendary Ana-Beyit cemetery, the myth about which was once told to him by the deceased, is very symbolic. “The funeral of a worthy person is not a burden, not a hindrance, but a great, albeit sad event, and there should be proper honors for that. ... he, Buranny Edigei, tomorrow morning will lead the way to Ana-Beyit, riding on Karanar, covered with blankets with tassels, escorting Kazangap to his last and eternal place of residence ... And all the way Edigei will think about him, crossing the great and deserted sarozeks. And with thoughts of him, he will betray him to the ground in the family cemetery, as they had an agreement about that ... Whether it is far, whether it is close to keep the path, but no one will dissuade him that it is necessary to fulfill the will of Kazangap, even the son of the deceased ...” (Aitmatov 1987: 311). Edigei emphasizes the importance of the funeral for the steppe dwellers. Death is great and holy in its incomprehensibility and obscurity. It is not for nothing that the hero of the novel is amazed at the frivolous attitude towards death on the part of the young, especially the son of the deceased, Sabitzhan, who is ready to ‘dig in somehow and leave as soon as possible’ for his own father, considering the funeral of a loved one as a burden that needs to be rid of as soon as possible. “If death is nothing to them, then it turns out that life has no price. What is the point, why and how do they live there?” (Aitmatov 1987: 299).

Thoughts about the total loneliness of a person in the face of death lead Edigei to fantastic assumptions. The strange behavior of a fox, who he accidentally met, staring at him intently and mournfully, leads him to think about the possible transmigration of souls. The image of the fox is intended to express the author’s idea about the deep interconnection of all living things, thanks to which it is possible to overcome the feeling of ontological loneliness of a person in the world.

“Traditionally, social relations in this part of the continent are explained by ontology, according to which the relationship between human beings and nature permeates the universe. The physical world we are in is seen as coexisting with the spiritual world where our ancestors live. Ancestors are not dead, not gone; they are the living dead interacting with those on this side of the graves. Therefore, people cannot live as if they were the only ones on earth. Irresponsible waste of resources, devastation of nature, murders, etc. – violate the natural balance. The interaction of the spiritual and physical worlds lives in the practices of people, blurring the boundaries between the secular and the sacred, the physical and the spiritual” (Matsinje 2008: 30). A similar attitude to the world is also present in the national image of the world of nomads, which is reflected “in pantheons, cosmogonies, shines through in the set of basic archetypes-symbols in art” (Gachev 2014: 34). There are clear parallels between the cosmology of African peoples and the cosmology of nomads.

In his work, Aitmatov raises the problems of space colonization using the example of Planet X (elements of science fiction), and the ethical problems of the exploration and reformatting of outer space, and the problems of colonization of the ‘Saryozek steppes’ by the Soviet imperial machine (post-colonialism), and the geopolitical problems of the conflict of interests of two superpowers of that time – Soviet and American in the field of space exploration, and their unification in the face of the danger from extraterrestrial civilization (the decision to establish trans-cosmic barrage cordons around the globe, Operation “Hoop”).

The globalization of the space theme, the departure from post-colonial discourse is observed in one of Aitmatov’s latest creations, “The Brand of Cassandra”, written after the fall of the Soviet empire, when the cosmic monk Philopheus, the bearer of planetary consciousness, speaks on behalf of the entire earthly world, urging people to wake up, to renounce violence and enmity. Analyzing in places the uneven, fragmentary novel of Aitmatov, Ivanova notices the crisis of identity in Aitmatov and other Soviet writers after the collapse of the USSR. “Where Aitmatov used to have a living soil of cultural, socio-historical identity – Soviet-Asian, Kyrgyz, steppe, ‘animal’, Soviet (remember “Stormy Station”), now there is cosmic abyss. Aitmatov ... changes the chronotope of his prose, thereby realizing, consciously or again unconsciously, his break with the ‘Soviet’ space, which, relatively speaking, included the Kyrgyz (Kazakh, Nivkh, etc.) (Ivanova 2014: 34). The path of the ‘self-proclaimed’, ‘conditional cosmic monk’ Philopheus corresponds, in the author’s opinion, with the ‘cosmopolitan’ path of Aitmatov himself. “I chose for myself a hermit life in a space skete... When our... crew... having completed their program, had to return to Earth, I refused to leave the orbital station, to go to the space shuttle that arrived after us. I made a statement to this effect and insisted on freedom of personal choice. ... The collapse of the Soviet empire, from which the whole world shuddered painfully, turned out to be in my favour. ... No one is waiting for me on Earth. I don’t have anyone in the world. I am a foundling myself, I was brought up in an orphanage” (Aitmatov 1995: 34).

5. Conclusion

Kazakh and Kyrgyz writers who turned to space in the Soviet period were largely inspired by the Baikonur cosmodrome, built in the Kazakh steppe as evidence of the geopolitical greatness of the USSR and preserved today as the ‘institutional legacy’ of the Soviet empire. Two discourses: Soviet-patriotic (socialist realism) and post-colonial, reflected in the literature of the Soviet period, correlate with each other. Both Suleimenov and Moldagaliev introduce elements of ethnic identity into the poems dedicated to Gagarin’s flight into space, which eloquently testifies to the poets’ timid attempt to fit the Kazakhs into the modern world – the world of conquered space. The ambivalence of the approach is clearly manifested in the victorious-patriotic poems of the Kazakh Soviet poets, because even in the imperial in spirit (in relation to the Soviet Empire) moods of Suleimenov and Moldagaliev, who sang of the socialist homeland, anti-colonial motifs still implicitly break through – the dream of the Kazakhs flying into space, which was essentially unthinkable in Soviet times.

The actualization of post-colonial discourse by Aitmatov through the prism of perception of the construction of the cosmodrome on Kazakh soil, the difficulty of reception of such a decision by local residents, echoes the moods of modern Kazakhs living near the cosmodrome, who perceive Baikonur as something incomprehensible and distant, interfering with their daily existence, since regular rocket launches, in their opinion, are associated only with environmental problems, adverse weather changes, sandstorms, which are not uncommon in the saline lands of the Kyzylorda region (Bazarbek and Rakhmatulla 2021). Ordinary Kazakhs feel like subalterns, oppressed, like the heroes of Aitmatov in their time, people on whom nothing depends. The need for the existence of the largest launch complex of the space program of the Soviet era and for conducting space research is not obvious to them at the present time, since in their understanding the negative consequences of launches are much more than positive ones.

Time will tell whether the gift of Soviet modernity will open up potential wide opportunities for modern Kazakhstan in the future as a space power, or whether the cosmodrome will remain only formally owned by the republic.

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The authors do not have any conflicts of interest to report.

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