

Representation of Ancient Turks in Isajon Sulton's *Bilge Khagan*

Ainur Akhmetova¹

Institute of Literature and Art, Kazakhstan

Mavlon Bobokhonov²

Samarkand State University, Uzbekistan

Abstract

Given its status as a Turkic-speaking nation of Central Asia, Uzbekistan provides a pertinent case study for the examination of contemporary portrayals of historical narratives, particularly those pertaining to the ancient Gokturks or Kök-Türks (ancient Turkic people), within the context of post-independence Uzbek literature. The present study examines the depiction of Turkic identity and ideas in Isajon Sulton's novel *Bilge Khagan* from a postcolonial perspective, using pragmatic discourse analysis, new criticism, reader-response theory, and comparative literary methods. The findings demonstrate that Turkic elements, or Turkisms, integrated into the post-Soviet literary tradition of Turkic-speaking nations. These literary endeavours signify a deliberate attempt to decolonise cultural memory and revitalise Turkic heritage. The juxtaposition of Uzbek and Kazakh motifs is employed by authors to convey shared history, traditions, values, and the heroic legacy of the Gokturks, often with ideological objectives in mind. During the Soviet era, there was a considerable degree of distortion and suppression of Turkic literary and historical legacies. Orkhon-Yenisei inscriptions including *Bilge Khagan*, *Kul Tigin*, and *Tonyukuk* underpin modern Turkist literature. This article analyzes the reinterpretation of Bilge Khagan's period in the second Ancient Turkic Khaganate, highlighting the author's post-colonial interpretation of Turkism for contemporary readers.

Keywords

Ancient Turks, Bilge Khagan, Uzbek literature, Post-colonial narrative, Isajon Sulton

¹Ainur Akhmetova is Leading Fellow at the Institute of Literature and Art named after Mukhtar Auezov, Almaty, Republic of Kazakhstan. She completed a PhD in contemporary Kazakh novels and is the author of publications on Central Asian Postcolonial literature, including "The Relevance of the Study of Central Asian Literature in the Aspect of Postcolonialism" (2022) and "Central Asian Literature: Postcolonial Aesthetics and Literary Relations" (2024). Email: a.akhmetova@aezovinstitute.kz <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0990-1182>

²Mavlon Bobokhonov is Professor in the Department of Russian and Foreign Literature at Samarkand State University, named after Sharof Rashidov, Uzbekistan. Email: mavlon_boboxonov@samdu.uz <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5548-7640>.

Introduction

The dissolution of the USSR in 1991, followed by the emergence of sovereign nation-states, significantly influenced not only fictional narratives but also various cultural domains across these territories. Although initially marked by societal turmoil and economic challenges leading to a temporary decline in literary productivity, numerous authors actively engaged in reclaiming or reconstructing literatures that were previously misrepresented during the Soviet regime. A distinct trend emerged among the Turkic-speaking populations of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan in Central Asia, where writers—particularly those belonging to elder and middle-age cohorts—undertook rigorous explorations into issues related to national identity and Turkism. They authored expansive historical novels aimed at illuminating the ancestral roots and genealogical heritage of their respective ethnic groups and broader Turkic identities. Through their writings, they resurrected iconic figures from antiquity, including leaders such as Bilge Khagan (683–734 AC), strategist Tonyukuk (646–726 AC), and hero-warrior Kul Tigin (684–731 AC), who collectively aspired to found lasting empires during the epoch of the Gokturk Khaganate. It is both rational and comprehensible that individuals hailing from regions subjected to prolonged periods of foreign domination would envision perpetual political autonomy, thereby reinventing archetypal personas akin to Bilge Khagan and Kul Tigin hero within contemporary literary contexts. Notwithstanding the attainment of independence or the persistence of colonial rule, individuals frequently resorted to their historical genealogy and the testimonies of their ancestors. This phenomenon has also been observed in the historical experiences of other colonised countries (Harrison 55). The depiction of historical figures and rulers in the literature of Central Asia during its period of independence, a region that had been a Russian colony since the 19th century, is understandable in the context of the region's experience with colonialism. It is a common phenomenon among citizens of states that have either recently gained independence or previously been under imperial rule, to rely on certain utopias and myths to seek spiritual support. For example, Harrison highlights the textbook phrase “Our ancestors, the Gauls,” which is tied to myths—promoted after France's defeat in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870–71—and myths related to “Gaul's heroic resistance to the Roman Empire,” a narrative that has itself acquired a mythical quality (Harrison 55). A similar phenomenon is evident, in Central Asian literature, where the depiction of historical figures and rulers, such as the khans, who safeguarded their populations from Dzungarian-Kalmyk and Russian incursions, along with internal and external challenges, assumed prominence. The subjects depicted in these figures were actual historical figures who are recognised for their significant roles in defending and preserving the nation.

A number of studies have been published which analyse Uzbek folk writer Isajon Sulton's novel *Bilge Khagan* (2022). A large-scale master's thesis

defended in Turkiye is worthy of particular note among the extant studies. The second part of the dissertation presents the Turkish version of the novel, while the third part is fully devoted to its analysis. The dissertation states that:

The novel was written with the aim of reviving national sentiment, and can be considered an indicator of the National Awakening Movement in Uzbek literature. The novel is a clear testament to the revival of Jadidism (or Jadeism) in Uzbekistan today and highlights the importance of the Uzbek intelligentsia places on a shared Turkic history and identity. (Solgun 3)

Additionally, S. Khuzhaev's article, titled "The artistic-aesthetic function of the triad in the novel *Bilge Khagan* by Isajon Sulton," explores the role of the triad concept in the Turkic worldview and examines the author's conceptual approach to writing (Khuzhaev 613-618). The extant studies note that the author endeavors to showcase the unique qualities inherent to the Turkic people in the novel. In this article, we will not reiterate the objectives, and findings of the aforementioned research will not be reiterated.

The novel's compositional structure draws upon the literary sources known as *Bilge Khagan*, *Tonyukuk*, and *Kul Tigin*, which were discovered along the Orkhon River in Mongolia. The historical novel "Bilge Khagan" portrays the image of Bilge Khagan during his reign within the 2nd period of the Gokturk Empire. It can be seen that historical narratives and geographical spaces play distinct roles in the novel. Specifically, the era of the Turks in the 6th to 8th centuries, along with the mountains and plains where they lived and where Turkic heroes fought, i.e., the geographical region of the Turks serve as a backdrop to the narrative. The specific types of Turkic toponyms and historical periods have been selected to provide a contextual framework for the events of the story. The novel is divided into three sections of varying lengths, each covering different themes. The text details three significant events from Bilge Khagan's life, who historically led thirty-three campaigns against his enemies. The temporal framework and occurrences associated with the Gokturks facilitated the author's structuring of the novel's plot and thematic content, with a central focus on Turkic society, the leadership of Bilge Khagan. The novel features characters, including Bilge Khagan, who founded the Khaganate during the second period of the Gokturk Empire, as well as Kul Tigin, Ishbara Yamtar, Kur Shad, Bulut, Meili Chur, and others who served under his leadership. The author conducts a thorough examination of the impact of the victories and tragedies of the khagans and heroes on both Turkic society and the individual experiences of its members during that period. Moreover, historical narratives fulfil a pivotal role in fostering a sense of national identity among postcolonial societies. This is achieved by providing members with a means to connect with their ancestors' narratives, thereby facilitating a deeper understanding of their heritage and formation of a shared identity.

The initial segment presents the socio-economic circumstances of the Turkic populace facilitated by a concise dialogue that transpires during an open-air congregation between Ishbara Yamtar and a youthful hero named Bulut. This is accompanied by the incorporation of the Tabgach people and an endeavour to safeguard the tribe from starvation by pursuing a deer. These interactions reveal that the Turkic peoples had been dependent on Tabgach for fifty years and were suffering from severe hunger. By means of such concise compositional elements, the author succeeds in conveying the hardships faced by the Turkic people. This approach is indicative of the author's proficiency in contemporary writing techniques, which facilitates the presentation of intricate historical narratives within a concise format. The author provides a realistic depiction of the nomadic lifestyle of the Turks, who lived thirteen or fourteen centuries ago, and the pastoral existence of the steppe people. In the novel, the scene in which the women's community prepares the meat of the hunted deer in the yard tent and distributes it to the people illustrates an ancient collective tradition based on the principle of "one for all and all for one." Bilge Khagan is depicted as a savior who averted a crisis of starvation and facilitated the repatriation of the Turkic peoples. The Gokturks regained their independence with the establishment of the Khaganate by Bilge Khagan. The novel's central theme is aligned with a historical reality, thereby illustrating Bilge Khagan's pivotal role in the restoration of the Gokturk Khaganate.

The initial segment of the novel chronicles the rescue of the Turkic populace from starvation and the reunification of Togiz Oghuz and On Oq communities with the Gokturks, constituting a seminal occurrence in the genesis of the Bilge Khaganate within the II Gokturks epoch. Before its establishment by Bilge Khagan, Togiz Oghuz, On Oq, Kyrgyz, and Khitan tribes, in conjunction with Tabgach and Jangzhu planned to eradicate the Gokturks. Subordinate to Tabgach, the Gokturk tribes were in a state of starvation and lacked the necessary strength to engage in combat with their external and internal enemies, a situation compounded by a shortage of warriors. However, Bilge Khagan ascended to authority during this dire period. He vanquished Togiz Oghuz at Lake Inigach in the Kogmen Mountains, and subsequently at On Oq in the Iaris Desert. Through strategic persuasion, he successfully convinced them to align themselves with the army of the Gokturks in opposition to Tabgach. Under Tabgach's influence, the Gokturks united with On Oq, Togiz Oghuz, Kyrgyz, and Turkesh—former enemies—raising their combined fifty thousand troops. The initial segment of the novel culminates in a significant Turks event, which has been liberated from their hunger and is commemorating their national holiday. This victory is attributed to the heroism of Bilge Khagan, his younger brother Kul Tigin batyr (hero), the counsellor Tonyukuk, Ishbara Yamtar, El Bugu, and Kur Shad. The Turks were able to liberate themselves from the oppressive colonial rule of Tabgach and reclaim their independence by

demonstrating obedience to their Bilge Khagan, and placing their trust in both God and their leader

The second segment of the novel commences with the story of Ishan Likai, the Tabgach Khagan, who becomes aware of the Turks' intentions to unite with other related tribes and rise against him. In response, he dispatches an ambassador to the Jangzhu Khagan, entrusting him with the request for military assistance amounting to fifty thousand troops. This chapter delineates the Gokturks' alliance with Kyrgyz, On Oq, and Togiz Oghuz, culminating in the decisive victory over Tabgach on Kogmen Mountain. The decisive victory was the catalyst for the Gokturks to officially gain their independence, under the leadership of Bilge Khagan. In this section, the novel delves into the history of khagans who ruled Turks before Bilge Khagan, providing insights into the unique legal system of Turks.

In the third segment of the novel, the deaths of several valiant Turkic heroes including Kul Tigin hero are briefly mentioned. A significant portion of this section is dedicated to the process of carving the *Kul Tigin* and *Bilge Khagan* monuments, detailing the exploits of the aforementioned images and various other Turkic heroes etched in stone. The reader can find fascinating information about how the heroic stories of each Turkic hero were inscribed on stone. In other words, the act of recording historical moments during the era of the Blue Turks is incorporated into the novel as a metatext, shaped by the author's vivid imagination. The novel reaches its denouement with the demise of Bilge Khagan, who was murdered by Meili Chor, one of the treacherous 'heroes' amongst the Turkic people. This assertion is further substantiated by Turkology studies (Tashagyl 3: 45). The author's engagement with historical data furnished the opportunity to reimagine the lives of historical figures and to introduce such characters into the novel. This approach facilitates the depiction of the multifaceted perspectives and reciprocal struggles of individuals impacted by each other's actions, including the poisoning of Bilge Khagan by Meili Chur and the subsequent demise of Bilge. It is noteworthy that the Gokturk state was overthrown by Uighurs in 744 (Tashagyl 1: 1; Tashagyl 3: 6). Following the demise of Bilge Khagan, his son Yollygh Tegin ascended to the leadership, marking a period of decline in the governance of the Gokturks. This ultimately culminated in the dissolution of the Khaganate. Drawing upon a rich historical corpus, the author masterfully recounts the story of the Turkic Khagan Bilge Khagan and the hero directly responsible for his death, exploring their shared perspectives and challenges, and the collapse of the Turkic Empire. The treacherous actions within Turkic society and the fall of the empire inspire the author's imagination, driving him to complete the novel. The author hypothesises that the silence that ensued during Bilge Khagan's post-death Turkic period was profound. This imaginative process played a pivotal role in shaping the novel's structure. In summary, historical events related to Turks had a profound impact

on the author's imagination and national consciousness, motivating him to write a novel that extends beyond a mere short story.

Bilge Khagan's Image and the concept "Turks shall not be a slave, Turks shall not bow!"

The central character of the novel, Bilge Khagan is portrayed as a leader and hero of the 2nd Gokturk Khaganate, who brought independence to the Turkic people after fifty years of subjugation under Tabgach. The author's ability to retell and examine the biography and Khaganate experience of the famous ruler of the Turkic peoples within a historical context is enabled by the historical periods and events. The novel's primary theme is predicated on Bilge Khagan's notion that "All human sons are born to die in time." (Sulton 4)

The novel's primary theme is predicated on Bilge Khagan's notion that "All human sons are born to die in time. However, it is not typical for a person to die prematurely, like a jackal." (Sulton 4). Bilge Khagan, who was originally named Mogilyan, was the son of Elteris Kutlyk Khagan and El Bilga Khatun, and the brother to Kul Tigin hero. He was also the son-in-law of Tonyukuk the counsellor. At the age of thirteen, Bilge Khagan's father, Elteris Khagan, passed away, and he was subsequently raised by his uncle, Kapagan Khagan. Throughout the years, Bilge had become profoundly reflective, contemplating the notion that the Tabgach people, who had subjugated their territory and accumulated substantial wealth in the form of gold, silver, and silk textiles, were, in essence, culturally dissimilar to the Gokturks. According to the author, Bilge Khagan seeks an effective way out of a critical period by posing complex, elegiac questions about Tabgach, who colonized his ulus-tribe, Turkic people: "How could strangers come from outside and give orders to my ulus? What happened to my ulus — where are they now? If they are still alive, how could they allow this happen to themselves? And if they are dead, where is their body?" (Sulton 29). Bilge Khagan comes to the realisation that to safeguard his people and achieve the liberation of their territory from Tabgach, it is imperative to revolt against the Tabgach Khagan, with the assistance of forty intrepid Turkic heroes. This plan was endorsed by Kapagan Khagan, who also expressed concern regarding safeguarding his people, the great Turks. The annals of history thus furnished the author with the opportunity to recount both the triumphs and the tragedies of Turkic history within a complex historical context. This reinterpretation of historical narratives enables the author to address the current difficult situation of post-colonial societies. The novel functions as a catalyst for reshaping of collective memory of contemporary postcolonial society by means of retelling these events.

In the Eastern Turkic Khaganate, Kur Shad was a significant figure from the Ashina family, the tenth Turkic Khagan, and the second son of Chuluk Khagan. The appellation Kur means "hero" or "winner," whereas Shad denotes

a member of the khagan's lineage and the rank of the khagan's assistant. Kur Shad, known in Chinese as Ashina Jiesheshuai, was appointed as a general of the Tang Empire in the 7th century. However, he ultimately fought for the freedom of the Turks. In the aftermath of Kur Shad's father Chuluk Khagan's demise, the authority was usurped by his younger sibling Kara Khan. Kur Shad's image is extensively portrayed in the novel *Death of the Gray Wolves* (2015) by Turkish writer Huseyin Nihal Atsyz (1905-1975). In the context of Turkic mythology, the Blue Wolf (or the Gray Wolf) is regarded as the progenitor of the Turks. This wolf is believed to embody the qualities of bravery, courage, and heroism (Akhmetova 77-97). Nihal Atsyz revived the legendary name of Kur Shad through his fiction, thereby highlighting his historical feat.

A significant number of historical sources also refer to Kur Shad by his Chinese name, Ashina Jiesheshuai, emphasising his importance in both Turkic and Chinese historical narratives. In recognition of his courageous actions, Kara Khagan bestowed upon him the name Kur Shad. Prior to this, he was known as Yashar Tegin (Atsyz 34-47). The novel *Bilge Khagan* provides a concise account of Kur Shad's endeavours to attain autonomy, encompassing his scheme to assassinate the ruler of the Tang Empire. In the novel, Kur Shad is depicted as a warrior and one of the forty men who organised a rebellion against China. After Chuluk Khagan's assassination by the Chinese, his brother Kara Khagan took over but was later captured alongside numerous Turkic soldiers, including Kur Shad, during a significant battle. Imprisoned in the Chinese palace, Kur Shad promptly instigated an uprising among the captive Turks against their Chinese captors. Kur Shad inspired the captive Turks with his speech: "The Turks are not to be enslaved, they're not to bow! ... One day you will all die. Die not in slavery, but in freedom!" (Sulton 24). Imprisoned Turkic men aimed to flee with Emperor Li Shun Ming, free fellow captives, and recapture lost territories. But their efforts were foiled by a sudden storm at the imperial palace in Shangan, China's capital. Forty Turkic warriors who escaped from the palace fought valiantly against three thousand Chinese soldiers along the river, ultimately dying bravely. This section of the novel aligns closely with historical accounts (Kur Shad revolution 2021). To summarise, the historical fact related to Kur Shad hero in Turkology remains unaltered in the novel. It is presented through a dialogue between Bilge Khagan and his cousin Kapagan Khagan.

By narrating these events to Ishbara Yamtar and Bulut through the character of El Bugu, the novelist aims to convey to the contemporary generation that Turks were a deeply patriotic and brave nation. This approach indicates that, during the post-colonial period, the Uzbek writer embarked on a mental cognitive exploration of the history of the Gokturks to illuminate the historical origins of his people. Moreover, the author refers to a significant historical context through the words of Kuna Sangun, a hero of Togiz Oghuz (one of the Turkic peoples depicted in the novel), who is addressed to Jangzhu Khagan:

“My dear Khagan, the Gokturks have begun to revive,” said Kuna Sangun. “We thought they would disappear after seven years of starvation. But they did not disappear, nor were they destroyed. They believed that if they remained in this state, they would weaken and perish. They have elected someone named Bilge Khagan as their leader, reputed to be intelligent. If we do not eliminate them before they grow strong, they could pose a threat to us. They could overwhelm and obliterate us completely.” (Sulton 20-21)

It can be inferred that the words “not disappeared, nor destroyed” indicate the survival of Turkic peoples from the 6th-8th centuries to the present day.

In the novel, the author notes that in the 6th-7th centuries, Tabgach people sought to weaken the Turkic people by encouraging intermarriage between Turkic men, women and their own descendants. Tabgach’s analysis of Turkic consciousness and its connection to the land and people was founded on the premise that this identity would become increasingly diluted among a heterogeneous generation. Throughout the novel, the author repeatedly highlights the historical moment of intermarriage of Turkic and Tabgach people. The character Meili Chur is depicted as a Turkic soldier who aspires to marry a Tabgach girl and serve to Tabgach for a comfortable life. A concise analysis of this character is provided in the following section.

Interpretation of the concept of Turkism

In the author’s interpretation, the concept of Turkism encapsulates a multifaceted array of meanings, as depicted throughout the novel. Through the organisation of war events against the enemies of the ancient Turks and the monologues of key characters such as Bilge Khagan, Ishbara Yamtar, Kur Shad, and Meili Chur, the novelist elucidates the essence of Turkism and the defining characteristics of the Turkic people. A recurrent motif in the novel is the steadfast allegiance of Turks and their affiliated tribes to their reigning khagan, with obedience and honor being paramount virtues. This notion is encapsulated in Bilge Khagan’s spiritual declaration, which is reiterated throughout the narrative: “All human sons are born to die in time. However, it is not typical for a person to die prematurely, like a jackal.” (Sulton 4). Consequently, by means of reinterpreting the experiences of historical figures in his novel, the writer instils a sense of inspiration and historical resonance in the reader. Bilge Khagan emphasises that the concept he personifies as a khagan, to which he was committed during the establishment of his reign, was originally imparted to his people by Ishbara Yamtar. Moreover, the aforementioned allegiance is exemplified by the refusal of Togiz Oghuz hero Kuna Sangun to bow to Jangzhu Khagan, thereby demonstrating his unwavering loyalty to his own Khagan – the Togiz Oghuz Khagan. This concept underscores the author’s overarching theme that Turks endured in history by adhering steadfastly to their khagan, particularly exemplified by Bilge Khagan. The novel’s title, *Bilge Khagan* functions as a focal

point, serving to underscore the pivotal role of Bilge Khagan in preserving the Turkic nobility and reinforcing the principles of Turkism.

In the narrative of Meili Chur, who exhibited a childhood aspiration to become a khagan, the author underscores a fact: not all individuals were able to ascend to the khagan position within the governance system of the Gokturks. The future khagan must originate from the lineage that originally founded the khaganate, ensuring hereditary succession from father to son. Moreover, the Turks placed significant value on women, particularly mothers. For instance, during the battle at the Iaris Desert against On Oq and Khitan tribes, which was strategically planned by Tonyukuk and led by Bilge Khagan along with his younger brother Kul Tigin, the conflict was halted by an elder mother placing her white headscarf in the middle of the battlefield (Sulton 69-70). Notwithstanding the fact that they had been subject to the dominion of Tabgach for fifty years, the Turks were distinguished by their steadfastness, love of freedom, and refusal to acquiesce to external enemies. Tabgach provided the following characterisation of the Turks:

Turks shoot bows even while riding on horseback. But our cavalry cannot do that. Their difference from us is that they can endure rain and snow, hunger, and thirst. This ability is known from ancient times and is said to be part of their DNA. (Sulton 51)

During the Turkic period, horses played a significant role not only in warfare but also in various aspects of daily life. “Turks were the first in the world to domesticate the horse and use it for service” (Durmush 2–9). The author effectively integrates historical materials into the narrative. The novel asserts that under Turkic law, neither children nor women suffered any harm or captivity during wartime, while Turkic soldiers adhered strictly to a code prohibiting engagement with singular enemies and refraining from harming those seeking peace. N. Atsyz’s novel *Kokboriler* recounts how liars and thieves faced execution, highlighting heroic feats like one Turkic soldier battling twenty Chinese troops during Kara Khagan’s reign (Atsyz 72). This battle was selected by the Khagans to demonstrate the prowess of the Turkic army.

As asserted by Koca (8), the extant evidence corroborates the hypothesis that the Turks were not distinguished by social classes or classifications. People were not categorised into classes or groups based on the color of their skin – white, black, red, or yellow. The author provides a comprehensive understanding of Turkic culture by meticulously examining the social structure and life experiences of Turks within their historical context. Moreover, the author establishes a cognitive link between the contemporary generation of Turks in the post-Soviet region and the era of their ancestors through a close examination of historical events. The author’s imagination functions as a potent catalyst, connecting author and reader on a level of creativity. This facilitates a mental revisitation of the past, evoking emotional responses in both parties. The author

asserts that the existence of Turks dates back to the creation of the world by God. The Turks are linked with the Divine, having been created with love and as a tangible expression of God's existence (Sulton 72). As demonstrated by ancient stone inscriptions, which are integral to the novel's narrative, this belief is conveyed:

Oh, my blessed tribe, created by God! The Earth was created beneath you and the Sky was created above you. You (Turkey) were born in the middle of both of them!" (Sulton 73)

Don't forget your God no matter what the day is! A great nation that never forgets its God, live forever! (Sulton 77).

The inscriptions embody the ancient Turkic conviction that national longevity hinges on Divine allegiance rather than mere military might or territorial expanse. The author reinforces this through a character named El Bugu, who declares: "One should know that this is us [Turks]" (Sulton 77). Bilge Khagan's divinely favored reign catalyzed a revival among the impoverished Gokturks, whose heroes' hunting exploits—symbolising divine preservation—are interwoven within a utopian-mythical narrative grounded in historical evidence. The author posits that, within the historical context of the Old Turks, the hunting economy was notably well-developed (Koca 15).

The novel is predicated on the author's conceptualisation that "Turks shall not be enslaved, Turks shall not bow to the enemy." In contrast, the author draws parallels between the Gokturks and Tabgach (Chinese), emphasising the former's affinity for liberty and their predilection for a freer existence. For instance, Tabgach disliked nomadism. Moreover, the author highlights the Turkic aversion to the sedentary lifestyle of Jangzhu, their external adversaries, through the following interpretation:

Kuna Sangun [the hero of the Togiz Oghuz tribe] was astonished upon visiting the Jangzhu fortress. They dwell in helmet-shaped homes made of stones and earth. "How do they even move?" he wondered. (Sulton 20)

Drawing on ethnographic research in Turkology, the novel recounts the ancient Turks' struggles amidst invasions, depicting their survival efforts across expansive lands devoid of clothing, food, and drinkable water. The salient point is that they maintained their qualities as advocates of freedom. On Kogmen Mountain, the Turks vanquished the Tabghach and re-established their law when they regained independence fifty years later under Bilge Khagan. One of the articles of Turkic law described in the novel states that Turkic "identity is intrinsically linked to equestrian prowess; mounted Turks are characterised as powerful warriors with a horse, while dismounted ones lose this distinction." (Sulton 114). In nomadic culture, the horse was especially revered, participating in wars on an equal footing with Turks themselves during invasions. The horse has been identified as a symbol of both Turks and nomads. The Gokturks – a

people who maintained their own legal system, linguistic and cultural distinctiveness, and governance – established a robust and formidable state. The author's emphasis on the history of the Gokturks, their origins, and the establishment of their state is indicative of a national awakening in the post-colonial era, characterised by a pursuit of self-identity.

The usage of anthroponyms and toponyms in the novel

The novel *Bilge Khagan* serves as a prime example of the artistic incorporation of ancient anthroponyms and toponyms related to the Turks, a technique that has become increasingly prevalent among modern Turkic writers. This approach not only enhances the narrative but also brings historical materials to life in an artistic sense. The novel features numerous geographical locations inhabited by ancient Turks and names of significant Turkic khagans, important figures, and heroes. The novel features a number of key figures, including Kapagan Khagan, Elteris Khagan, Bilge Khagan, Kara Khagan, Kul Tigin hero, Ishbara Yamtar, and El Bugu. These appellations represent eminent historical figures of the indigenous Turks whose legacies have endured through the ages. Furthermore, the novel highlights sacred and significant geographical spaces such as the Otuken region, the Altyn aymak (the Golden Region), Kishi aymak (the Small Region), Kogmen Mountain, Temir Kakpa (the Iran Gate), Besbalyk, Kadyrkhan settlement, and Suchuk Lake as the settings for various historical events and negotiations. The utilisation of these appellations and toponyms is consistent with their historical designations, as evidenced in other works such as *Mangitas* (Eternal Stone) by the Kazakh writer Tursynkhan Zakenuly. In the contemporary literary landscape, writers often opt to retain the original names of ancient anthroponyms and toponyms, thereby preserving historical authenticity. This practice provides readers with a vivid and accurate mental image of the historical and cultural landscape of Turks. The appellations and characters are frequently derived directly from written monuments and historical sources, thereby further anchoring the narrative in historical reality. The incorporation of historical and archaeological data into the novel's framework serves to advance the concept of reintroducing indigenous historical geography to members of post-Soviet society. The novels *Bilge Kagan* (2022) by Uzbek writer Isajon Sulton and *The Eternal Stone* (2012) by Kazakh writer Tursynkhan Zakenuly feature a broad array of toponyms and anthroponyms that are characteristic of Turkic history.

In contemporary Turkic literature, writers frequently employ ancient Turkic geographies as a creative milieu for their novels, with a particular emphasis on the historical regions that correspond to their present-day states. The authors concentrate on locating areas in modern states that align with the historical territories of the ancient Gokturks. In the novel *Bilge Khagan* the author identifies Parkana (present-day the Fergana region of Uzbekistan), Kangly, and Khorezm in the Aral Sea region the historical homeland of the Turks for millennia. In a

similar vein, Tursynkhan Zakenuly's novel *The Eternal Stone* alludes to the historical presence of Turkic populations in specific regions of Kazakhstan. These regions encompass the Saryarka region, which includes parts of central and northern Kazakhstan, and the Aral Sea region. The novel *Bilge Khagan* places significant emphasis on the sacredness of the Aral Sea as a cherished homeland for the Turkic peoples, asserting that the Turkic roots of these peoples can be traced back to this region. Historical evidence supports this interpretation, indicating the enduring significance of the Aral region for Turkic heritage. Furthermore, it prompts considerations regarding the correlation between ancient and present-day Turkic-inhabited territories. The novel advances the theory that the Otuken Valley, where Bilge Khagan founded his Khaganate, lies within the Aral Sea area. Subsequently, it illustrates the Otuken landscape subsequent to a meeting involving Ishbara Yamtar, Bulut hero, and Bilge Khagan in the following words:

After a midday trip, the Otuken valley was visible in the distance. It was one of the blessed places occupied by Elteris Khagan, the base of the Golden Region, the great fortresses of the Turkic khagans that spread over the earth. These fortresses, previously separated from the countries on the other side of the Aral Sea, fought against the Chinese khagans. (Sulton 22)

During the Turkic era, it was widely held that if the Khagan resided in Otuken, it would engender a state of contentment among the Turkic people. The concept of kut, or blessing, occupies a pivotal position within the Turkic worldview. Otuken is portrayed in the novel as a bountiful and sacred land for Turks, featuring verdant pastures and plentiful water sources. This depiction resonates with Kazakh author Tursynkhan Zakenuly's representation in *The Eternal Stone* (Zakenuly 117–138), highlighting remarkable parallels between historical accounts and mythological traditions. Central Asian writers preserve these legends intact, harmoniously interweaving historical truths with mythological interpretations to reinvigorate the venerated image of Otuken. Numerous legendary narratives link the origins of Turkic peoples to wolves, suggesting descent from a wolf-human union (Latipov 9-10, Eshonqul 164, Auespayeva 50-54).

To enrich the thematic analysis of the novel, its author integrates the legend of Ashina, detailing a catastrophic battle leading to the survival of a single pregnant woman who gives birth in a wolf's den before perishing, leaving her infant nurtured solely on wolf's milk. Nurtured by wolves, the child acquires attributes of resolve and vigor, earning the epithet Ashina across various ethnic groups. Legend has it that Ashina would emit a wolf-like howl preceding combat. His progeny, nourished on wolf's milk, self-identified as Gokturks, embodying notions of might and authority. Henceforth, the wolf iconography adorns our flag (Sulton 81). The novel incorporates folklore and mythological legends as its

narrative bedrock. Through metaphors drawn from these tales, such as the comparison of Turkic people's fortitude to that of a wolf in Tursynkhan Zakenuly's work *The Eternal Stone*, the author underscores qualities like endurance, strength, and bravery inherent to Turkic identity. This literary device effectively conveys the resilient and valiant essence of Turks in conflict.

The sacred site *Otuken* and the communicating ritual with God

The novel portrays Otuken as a sacred site, emphasising its sanctity through Bilge Khagan's discourse with Ishbara Yamtar and Bulut during their visit to address the famine crisis afflicting the Gokturks' Small Region. Bilge Khagan, the ruler of the tribes in Otuken, proposed the relocation of the Small Region people to Otuken with a view to alleviating their suffering. He provided them with horses and sheep to ensure their survival. Otuken became a secure refuge under the foresighted rule of successive khagans—Bumin, Istemi, Elteris, and Kapagan—who transformed it into a sanctuary marked by safety and prosperity.

In accordance with the prevailing scholarly consensus, the ancient Turkic khagans were believed to possess the ability to communicate directly the divine. This ceremony, which is described in detail in the novel discourse, was believed to have taken place exclusively on the sacred mountain known as Muz Tau, which translates to "Ice Mountain". As stated in the ancient texts known as *Bilge Khagan*, *Tonyukuk*, and *Kul Tigin*, the Turkic khagans established their Khaganate through divine intervention. This worldview is also reflected in the events of the novel. Confronted with the imminent threat of cultural degeneration and the deterioration of moral values among the Turkic populace, which was reliant on Tabgach for its subsistence, Bilge Khagan sought celestial guidance by ascending the Ice Mountain. In this text, the author synthesises history with imaginative storytelling, illustrating God's response – a celestial lightning strike followed by snowfall – as reinforcing the Turkic conviction that their fate, triumphs, and allegiance to khagans were divinely ordained.

In the novel, the novelist extensively incorporates well-known motifs from the text of the Orkhon inscriptions. Following his encounter with God, Bilge Khagan convened a meeting with his people and addressed them, stating, "You were the people who had your own Khagan. Where is your Khagan?" To which state will you pledge your service and fight for?" (Sulton 34-35). This statement corresponds to the text of the *Bilge Khagan* stone inscription (Akhmetuly 178). Throughout the novel, a plethora of texts from the *Bilge Khagan* and *Kul Tigin* monuments are employed as inspirational speeches by Bilge Khagan in which he exhorts the Turkic people to engage in combat against Tabgach. These stone inscriptions are integrated into the novel as intertexts, albeit with minor modifications. The narrative under scrutiny herein details how, in the fifty years preceding the ascension of Bilge Khagan to authority, the Turkic bek-rulers exhibited a marked paucity of both strength and rectitude in their

governance of the nation. The indigenous peoples of Tabgach were deceived by the opulent fabrics of gold, silver, and silk, which ultimately led to the colonisation of their land. In summary, the Turkic bek-rulers were unable to establish a strong power similar to that of their ancestors who founded the Khaganate. Consequently, they lived in a subordinate position to Tabgach. The text illustrates this decline with the phrases “When Turkic beautiful daughters become maids, and the brave sons become slaves” and “Wish the tribe not to die, wish the prosperity of the country” (Sulton 34), which were used when Turkic tribes were on the brink of extinction. The place of communication with God — the Ice Mountain and God’s Mountain — is depicted with a mythical-utopian image. In the context of Turkic religious discourse, the concept of the Eternal-God is paramount. This notion is characterised by the depiction of the deity as eternal, signifying that only the divine entity is immortal. The novel encapsulates this notion in a passage in which Bilge Khagan prays:

“Oh, Lord, only you are Eternal. You are the one who creates and destroys countries and nations. You are the one who gives birth to giants, sends blessings, and makes them blessed. May you bless my nation, don’t make us bow our heads, may you protect our honor!” (Sulton 35-36).

This passage underscores the author’s acknowledgement of God as the sole eternal entity, transcending countries or nations. In 2014, Kazakhstan introduced the concept of *The Eternal Country* as a national idea. As is often emphasised in historical and literary texts, the term *The Eternal Country* is used to denote the eternal independence of the people. The research related to this topic has posited that a people would live forever only through their national values and art (Akhmetova 45). Literary and historical records suggest the establishment of an eternal nation in Otuken, grounded in Turkic beliefs. *The Eternal Country* spans from Kadyrkhan Mountain to the Iron Gate, conceived as a divine construct safeguarding both inhabitants and terrain.

Conclusion

The present article has presented an analysis of Isajon Sulton’s novel *Bilge Khagan* through a post-Soviet theoretical lens, with a particular focus on themes of national identity, post-colonial collective memory, and the role of fiction in reconstructing historical narratives. The study demonstrates that contemporary Central Asian writers have transformed fiction into an instrument of cultural and ideological decolonisation. By reinterpreting Turkic elements – or Turkisms – these authors seek to reclaim and reconstruct historical narratives that were distorted or suppressed during the Soviet era, thereby challenging lingering colonial consciousness. Literature has demonstrated its capacity to arouse national consciousness through reconceptualising narratives of ancestral valor, the accomplishments of the Gokturk Khaganate, and shared histories of trauma,

thereby significantly influencing the transformation of collective memory within post-Soviet societies. The Orkhon inscriptions, specifically those of *Bilge Khagan*, *Tonyukuk*, and *Kul Tigin* located along the Orkhon River in Mongolia, serve as foundational historical sources that inform the revival of Turkic identity within the novel. These inscriptions provide the foundation for inspiring the narrative structure and serve as a catalyst for the author's creative reconstruction of Turkic historical memory.

The interpretation of Turkisms also conveys insights derived from the cultural memory of the Turkic people. In accordance with the tenets of ancient Turkic belief, eternal status was deemed to be reserved for those who demonstrated unwavering commitment to their religious obligations and maintained steadfast devotion. During the sixth to eighth centuries, under the rule of the Gokturk Khaganate, Otuken held a position of great esteem as a sanctuary. This sanctuary is believed to have provided sustenance and blessings to both humans and animals. In the ancient Turkic worldview, there existed a utopian-mythical notion that only khagans possessed the ability to commune with God, a ceremony conducted exclusively atop mountains. When Bilge Khagan ascended the Ice Mountain and implored divine intervention to liberate the Turkic peoples from Tabgach colonialism, the sky was filled with streaks of lightning, accompanied by a cascade of snow. This event served to reinforce the Turkic belief in a divinely ordained world order, with the conviction that their existence was solely by the will of God. The Turks were acutely aware that the outcome of their conflicts with external or internal adversaries was contingent upon divine providence.

The symbolic representation of Kokbori (a grey wolf) in the novel is a representation of the resilience of Turkic peoples against nature, their strength, love for freedom, bravery, and their capacity to endure prolonged hunger and thirst when fighting with the enemy. The Kokbori symbol originates from legendary discourse and is integrated into the novel's narrative. Within the novel's context, the horse serves as a symbol of Turkic mastery in mounted warfare and represents nomadic agricultural practices.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to express their gratitude to the reviewers for their invaluable comments and suggestions, which have considerably elevated the scientific quality of this study. This article was produced as part of Project AP13067896, which is entitled *Central Asian Literature: Postcolonial Aesthetics and Literary Relations*, funded by the Ministry of Science and Higher Education of the Republic of Kazakhstan.

References

- Akhmetova, Ainur. "Artistic Representation of The Concept "Eternal Nation" in the Novel by Tursunkhan Zakenuly." *Bilig*, 100 (2022): 77-97.
- Akhmetova, Ainur. *The concept of "Mangilik El" (Eternal Nation) in the Kazakh novel of the 21st century (2000-2015)*. Thesis defended for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy (PhD). Almaty: Al-Farabi Kazakh National University, 2020.
- Atsyz, Nihal. *The Grey Wolves: Death of the Grey Wolves and Revival of the Grey Wolves*. Istanbul: Otuken Neshriyat, 2015.
- Akhmetuly, Shadyman, ed. *Literary relics*. Twenty volumes. Volume 1. Literary monuments of ancient times. Almaty: Taimas publishing house, 2007.
- Auespayeva, Pakizat, ed. *The words of the ancestors*. One hundred volumes. Volume 78: Kazakh myths. Astana: Foliant, 2011.
- Durmuş, İlhami. "Horse in Turkic Cultural Environment". *Aya Araştırmaları Uluslararası Sosyal Bilimler Dergisi*, vol. 5, no. 1, 2021, pp. 1-12.
- Eshonkul, Jabbor. *Dream and its artistic interpretation in Uzbek folklore*. Toshkent: Institute of Language and Literature named after Alisher Navoi, Academy of Sciences of the Republic of Uzbekistan, 2011.
- Kur Shad revolution (the first Turkic hero who fought for independence in history)*. 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fWADNCEFBzQ>. Accessed 24 January 2024.
- Harrison, Nicholas. *Our civilizing mission: The lessons of Colonial education*. Liverpool University Press, 2019.
- Khujayev, Sidik. "The artistic and aesthetic function of the triad in the novel 'Bilge Khagan' by Isajon Sulton." *Oriental Renaissance: Innovative, educational, natural and social sciences*, vol. 3, no 4, 2023, pp. 613-618.
- Koca, Salim. *Social and Economic Life in Ancient Turks*. Vol. 3. Ankara: Yeni Türkiye Yayınları, 2002.
- Latipov, Jasur. *Arkanakun epic and its historical roots*. Buxoro, Durdona publishing house, 2021.
- Solgun, Aydogan L. *A review on the Bilge Hakan novel of Uzbek author Isacan Sultan*. Ege University, Institute of Social Sciences, 2023.
- Sulton, Isajon. *Bilge Khagan*. Toshkent: Factor books, 2022.
- Tashagyl, Akhmet. *Turks*. Vol. 3. Ankara: Turkish Historical Society Printing House, 2004.
- . *Turks*. Vol. 1. Ankara: Turkish Historical Society Publications, 2003.
- Zakenuly Tursynkhan. *The eternal stone*. Almaty: Davir-Kitap, 2015. 480.