

## 32. The Image of the Horse in Kazakh Poetry

Gülnaz TOKŞILIKOVA<sup>1</sup>

Abdulkarim ABDUL RAKHMANULY<sup>2</sup>

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### Abstract

The horse was always highly important for Kazakh society, especially considering that Kazakhs have followed a nomadic lifestyle for thousands of years. This article discusses how the image and symbolism of the horse in Kazakh poetry have developed from the XIX century to the present, comparing it with the historical processes of this period. The influence of voluntary and involuntary changes, complex transformations, and tragedies in the cultural-historical and social-political life of the Kazakh nation in recent centuries on the depiction of the horse in poetry is assessed. To evaluate the change in symbolic values assigned to the horse in Kazakh poetry, this study employed the method of intertextual analysis and cultural-historical contextualization. In this article, the development path of the horse from a symbol of beauty and gallant, nobility and companionship to a metaphor of solid character and freedom is described and explained with fragments of Kazakh poetry. In addition, the study examines the variety of vocabulary, artistic tools, similes, and epithets in the Kazakh's nomadic inheritance to describe the horse. The description of the horse in world poetry and its features and similarities in Kazakh poetry are compared. We posit that this research holds practical significance, with potential applications in literary and cultural studies. By enhancing comprehension of the literary and cultural landscape of Central Asia, our findings contribute to the advancement of knowledge in these respective fields.

**Keywords:** poetry, horses, Kazakhs, nomads, symbolism

### Kazak şiirinde at imgesi

#### Öz

At, özellikle Kazakların binlerce yıldır göçebe bir yaşam tarzı sürdürdükleri göz önüne alındığında, Kazak toplumu için her zaman çok önemli olmuştur. Bu makale, XIX. yüzyıldan günümüze Kazak şiirinde at imgesi ve simgeciğinin nasıl geliştiğini, bu dönemin tarihsel süreçleriyle karşılaştırarak tartışmaktadır. Son yüzyıllarda Kazak milletinin kültürel-tarihsel ve sosyal-politik yaşamında meydana gelen irade ve irade dışı değişimler, karmaşık dönüşümler ve trajedilerin şiirdeki at tasvirine etkisi değerlendirilmektedir. Kazak şiirinde ata atfedilen sembolik değerlerdeki değişimi değerlendirmek için bu çalışmada metinlerarası analiz ve kültürel-tarihsel bağlamaştırma yöntemi kullanılmıştır. Bu makalede atın güzellik ve yiğitlik, asalet ve yoldaşlık simgesinden sağlam karakter ve özgürlük metaforuna doğru gelişim yolu anlatılmakta ve Kazak şiirinden parçalarla anlatılmaktadır. Ayrıca çalışma, Kazakların göçebe mirasındaki atı tasvir etmek için kullanılan kelime

<sup>1</sup> Öğr. Gör., Abai Kazak Milli Pedagoji Üniversitesi, Kazak Dili ve Edebiyatı (Almatı, Kazakistan), gulnaz\_lit75@mail.ru, ORCID ID: 0000-0002-4116-5042 . [Araştırma makalesi, Makale kayıt tarihi: 09.06.2023-kabul tarihi: 20.07.2023; DOI: 10.29000/rumelide.1330513]

<sup>2</sup> Öğr. Gör., Suleyman Demirel University, Distance Education Division, (Kaskelen, Kazakistan), a.abdulrahmanuly@sdu.edu.kz, ORCID ID: 0000-0002-1143-4272

dağarcığı, sanatsal araçlar, teşbihler ve lakapların çeşitliliğini incelemektedir. Dünya şiirindeki atın tasviri ile Kazak şiirindeki özellikleri ve benzerlikleri karşılaştırılır. Bu araştırmanın, edebi ve kültürel araştırmalardaki potansiyel uygulamaları ile pratik öneme sahip olduğunu varsayıyoruz. Bulgularımız, Orta Asya'nın edebi ve kültürel manzarasının anlaşılmasını geliştirerek, bu ilgili alanlarda bilginin ilerlemesine katkıda bulunur.

**Anahtar kelimeler:** şiir, atlar, Kazaklar, göçebeler, sembolizm

## Introduction

The symbolism of horses in poetry provides a multifaceted analysis across diverse cultures and historical eras. The utilization of equines as a symbol can be traced back to antiquated societies and continues into contemporary times. According to Ferber (1999), equine symbolism is complex and can represent various concepts, including liberty, potency, aesthetics, grandeur, and resilience. Its depiction not only underscores the cultural importance of horses but also reflects societal progress (Hiltner, 2017).

The present study aims to explore the complex symbolic representations, with a primary emphasis on the poetry of the Kazakh culture. The horse holds significant symbolic value in the cultural consciousness of Kazakhstan, with its origins dating back to the era of nomadism (Makulbek and Dzazylova, 2019). The equine motif is ubiquitous in Kazakh literary compositions, serving as a manifestation of an entrenched equestrian tradition that has undergone gradual development over extended periods as a result of nomadic practices (Smanov et al., 2020).

Although many academics, historians conducted a thorough investigation of horses in Kazakhstan through archaeological and ethnographic means, there still needs to be more scholarly inquiry regarding this subject matter (Chang, 2015). The present research addresses the void mentioned above in the scholarly discourse by examining the portrayal of equine creatures in select Kazakh literary works, namely the poetic pieces "Kulager" and "S. Kyzyl at" by poets I. Zhansugirov and S.Seifullin. Furthermore, the present investigation scrutinizes the portrayal of equine symbolism in contemporary Kazakh verse, subjecting the various construals of horse imagery that have evolved to critical analysis.

The primary objective of this research is to examine the evolution of equine symbolism in poetic literature and assess its transformations in response to various historical occurrences. This paper aims to present a novel method for analyzing and comprehending poetry to augment the general understanding of these modalities of aesthetic representation. This study aims to investigate the evolution of equine depictions in traditional verse from the 1800s to the present, focusing on the periods of nomadic Kazakhstan, Soviet communalization and contemporary independence period. This study examines the evolution of equine depiction in literary compositions across different periods. This study aims to illustrate the complex symbolism associated with horses and their enduring impact on literary works. Students, literary scholars, and those interested in equine-related matters will find the present helpful research.

## Literature Review

The significance of equine symbolism in Kazakh poetry holds immense value. Kenzhebaev's scholarly examination of Abay's poetry in his publication, "Problems of the History of Kazakh Literature," underscores the significance of equine imagery within the literary dialogue. Abay's proficient use of diverse poetic devices, including but not limited to epithets, similes, and exaggerations, elucidates this

aspect. According to Kenzhebaev (1973), a thorough examination supports the claim that Abay's poem "A partridge like a woodpecker, ears of a reed" demonstrates his proficiency in poetic composition and skilful use of equine symbolism.

The notable positions held by women in Kazakh society serve as evidence of their cultural and historical significance, and their associations with horses are a recurrent theme in poetry. According to Shynar's (1998) research, Kazakh poetry has eulogized several notable women, such as Queen Tumar, Turkan Katyn, Borte, Appak Sulu, and Domalak Ana. The equestrian warriors, frequently portrayed as heroic figures, are widely recognized emblems of bravery and fortitude. The poet's implication, as cited by Kenzhebaev (1973), that utilizing something from memory to avoid recognition is a viable strategy is a significant indication supporting this claim. The poet's inquiry regarding the scarcity of attractive individuals who ride horses further reinforces this argument.

In comparison, in other cultures, the exploration of equine imagery in poetry has broadened and diversified over time, reflecting an increased awareness of the symbolic role of horses in literature. Scholars such as Ferber (1999) have laid the foundation for understanding the diverse interpretations of equine symbols in poetry. Hiltner's study (2017) of pastoral poetry iconography during the English Renaissance notably explored the depiction of horses as embodiments of rural life and nobility. Horses in poetry have been studied in many cultural and historical settings. Creel (1965)'s study of horses in Chinese history and culture sheds light on their meaning in Chinese poetry. Hirschfelder and Molin (1992) examined Native American poetry's horse spirituality.

Kazakhstan's history, culture, and literature are unique. The horse is a powerful emblem in Kazakh mythology and epics. Kelimbetov (1986) calls him the hero's principal aide. In Kazakh literature, the 15th through 18th centuries were a time of nation-building and state-building. Therefore, these motifs were trendy. In their poetry, Zhirau understand the horse's function in Kazakhstan's societal framework. Zhirau's poetry shows Kazakhs' love of their homeland and horses. Medieval warriors' poetry shows their bravery, heroism, and love of horses (Karataev, 1967). The horse symbolizes courage, national identity, and history in Kazakh poetry. Equine-related graphic components give an overview of Kazakhstan's cultural and historical setting and distinctive insights into its societal transformation. The horse variety in Kazakh literature and culture communicates the country's social ideals and community virtues.

### **The image of a horse in XIX-century Kazakh poems**

The poetry of 19th-century Kazakhstan is characterized by a profusion of lyrical expressions that portray a life imbued with valor and sagacity, a profound interdependence between humanity and the natural environment, and a particular emphasis on the equine motif. In this era, individuals such as Abai Kunanbayev, Shal Zhirau, Dospambet Zhyrau, Makhambet Otemisuly and other authors in 19th-century functioned as intermediaries facilitating communication between the terrestrial and celestial realms. The authors endeavored to elucidate the enduring linkage between these two regions utilizing their literary aptitude, frequently employing equine imagery to portray diverse facets of existence and civilization. Zhyraus are recognized for their cognitive abilities and affinity towards the environment. Through their poetry, they exalted the valor and fortitude of their community. The poetry produced by the individuals in question functioned as a cerebral ally during the societal conflicts and challenges of the era. The equine, a fundamental component of their literary or artistic creations, depicted distinct attributes of potency, valor, and tenacity. Zhyrau's verses personified horses as heroes, reflecting the

sensitivity and empathy they held for these noble creatures. For example, Makhambet Zhyrau, in his poem during the fights against the Russian occupation in Kazakh lands, highlights the importance of horses for Kazakh batyrs:

*The strike did not kill the horse,  
Unable to grasp the sovereign spear,  
Don't be sad,  
Can't bear the brown cold  
The soles do not rot in sweat,  
The sweat does not melt like oil,  
Will the work of men end?  
Without seeing the sun on a horse,  
nor famine, nor desert,*

Their advice about choosing and taming perfect horses for batyrs, warriors of the Kazakh society, underlines his understanding of these majestic creatures. The horse, for Zhyrau, transcends its literal existence, assuming a role that resonates with both beauty and utility. Their sentiments, draped in their verses, shed light on the poet's appreciation of the horse's nobility and loyalty, especially in times of war and hardship. Moreover, their romanisation of the horse as a beautiful wife and a reliable relative indicates a deeper meaning. It underlines the inseparability of man and horse, emphasizing their mutual dependence. The intricate detailing of their horse imagery marks a distinct realist tradition, promoting a rich tapestry of Kazakh poetry and establishing a potent symbol in Kazakh cultural consciousness. For example, Aktamberdi Zhyrau, in his poems, idealises horses by saying:

*Is there a better person than a beautiful girl?  
Is there any animal greater than a horse?  
Horses' milk is yellow honey,  
There is no better taste than kumis!  
..The beauty of the girl is locked,  
The beauty of a guy is in the horse!"*

In comparison, Abai Kunanbaev, the torchbearer of Kazakh literature, presented the horse as a symbol of aristocracy and beauty. His idealization of horses echoed the traditional Kazakh ethos of valor and dignity. He defined the criteria of a perfect horse, focusing on its external beauty and inherent strength. The horse, in Abai's verse, was an epitome of perfection, an ideal that reflected the poet's aspiration for his people. His verse:

*"Reed ear with a partridge like a thresher,  
Goat nose, pouty lips, long teeth  
It is strong with walls and a ridge.  
Lumpy flesh, juicy,  
Cold-breasted like a tawny eagle,  
  
If you walk without stumbling or blundering,  
It's beautiful if you tap your chin and smile.*

*Fast, strong, thick, smooth,  
I wish I didn't ride such a horse"*

- which portrays the aesthetic attributes of a galloping equine, indicating Abai's keen observation and appreciation of these magnificent creatures. The poet emphasised the significance of equines in Kazakhstani culture, their remarkable stamina and agility. The Kazakh populace's ambitious aspiration and valiant display of fortitude in pursuing this aspiration indicate their resilience during challenging circumstances. Abay's poetic works feature the equine character as a tacit observer of Kazakhstani society, enduring the vicissitudes of time and articulating the aspirations and principles of the populace. Abai's poetry showcases his advocacy for cultural and social development by portraying the horse's gracefulness.

In summary, the depiction of a horse in 19th-century Kazakh literature exemplifies the virtues of tenacity, fortitude, bravery, and unwavering resolve in pursuing success among the Kazakh populace. The symbol mentioned above was employed by renowned poets, including Abay Kunanbaev, to articulate the principles and beliefs of their community, thereby leaving an indelible imprint on the literary milieu of Kazakhstan. The poems of the Kazakh people evoke a sense of patient wisdom akin to that of a galloping horse in the vast steppe, serving as a source of inspiration and guidance.

### **The image of a horse in Kazakh poems of the first half of the XX-century**

The 20th century witnessed notable transformations in the portrayal of the equine figure in Kazakh literature. The creature mentioned above is notable in Kazakhstan's economic and social framework and is widely acknowledged as a remarkable cultural and literary symbol. In the early 20th century, equine transportation was utilized to convey social circumstances. With the Soviet Union's methodical cultural and political expansion in Central Asia, equines emerged as famous emblems of opposition, autonomy, individuality, and reminiscence. The literary works of notable poets I.Zhansugirov and S.Seifullin have thoroughly explored and imbued the equine animal with deep emotions.

During the initial half of the 20th century, the poetry of Zhansugirov and Seifullin was characterized by its genuineness in portraying the challenges and ambitions of the Kazakh populace. The literary work "Kulager", authored by Zhansugirov, portrays the horse as a poignant representation of grief and lamentation. A piece of literature can be likened to a competitive horse race or, more specifically, a narrative centred around horse racing. The central theme of the literary piece centres on the tragic fate of Kulager, the equine protagonist, and, subsequently, the harrowing misfortune of Akan Seri. Zhansugirov employs the horse's fate, precious riches, societal strife, and despondency as a reflection of reality:

*What did I get when I killed Kulager?  
Everyone's destiny is given by God.  
To my beloved animal Kulager,  
I wish death to the wicked,*

Akan Seri, the protagonist in Zhansugirov's poem, is depicted as a complex character who shared a deep emotional bond with his horse, Kulager. The horse, described as a soulmate, embodies the character's emotional spectrum. Kulager's death profoundly impacts Akan, representing a significant cultural loss.

It is an allegory for the loss of traditional Kazakh values in the face of changing societal norms. It was mostly portrayed by nostalgia and beautiful moments of the past, like the following examples:

*A galloping horse, a sonar hut, a girl-forty,  
A person who spends his life at his own pace.  
Life is not bitter, but also sweet  
Play with fun, girl with your smile.  
Out of a thousand, out of a hundred,  
He spent the day staring at many beauties.  
Listening to the field of interest,  
Floating like a dreamless goose, swimming like a god...  
Not a person who has gathered many letters,  
Touching a person that did not happen.  
The noble bird holds purity in its hand,  
A dream is to love beauty.*

Concurrently, Saken Seifullin's poem "Red Horse" was another significant work that employed the horse's image to represent the reality of the times. The horse in Seifullin's poem symbolises the turbulent and revolutionary era. The poem narrates a conversation between a red horse and the poet, representing the village's poverty, economic crisis, and socio-political turmoil. Through the horse's narrative, Seifullin critiques the wrongdoings of the government representatives, expressing the people's anguish and desperation by saying:

*Worms and fat of the collective farm,  
He didn't put it away, he didn't steal it.  
What happens to famous stallions,  
What should I do with the cattle that I have eaten?  
A grey horse, a horse, a milk mare  
How did the intruders do it?*

To conclude, the horse depicted in Kazakh poetry during the twentieth century, as evidenced by the literary works of poets such as Zhansugirov and Seifullin, held a significance beyond its utilitarian value as a domesticated animal. The symbol possessed significant potency as it represented the various challenges, desires, ambitions, and cultural heritage of individuals. The aforementioned lens functioned to observe and comprehend the evolving Kazakh community amidst a period of upheaval. The horse is a significant element in Kazakh culture, society, and literary works, as evidenced by its various depictions.

### **The image of a horse in Kazakh poems of the second half of the XX-century to modern day**

During the latter half of the 20th century, notable alterations were observed in the portrayal of equines. The symbol mentioned above has transformed in its representation from signifying societal conflicts to functioning as a mechanism for opposition, autonomy, individuality, and reminiscence. Despite its cultural significance, the horse was regarded as a potent emblem of the nation that invigorated the populace's morale and instilled hope during adversity.

E. Raushanov's incorporation of the equine motif in his poetry is a significant facet of his oeuvre, reflecting his profound exploration of human behavior within contemporary societal contexts. This disposition has positioned him as a prominent contemporary Kazakh cultural landscape poet. The "Red-Eyed Horse" literary piece adeptly communicates the transitory essence of being and serves as an ideal manifestation of the author's refined poetic abilities. The author depicts the village inhabitants as "ineffective and juvenile equines" and effectively communicates the adversities faced by individuals who have undergone challenging circumstances. The deduction mentioned above highlights the poet's adeptness in proficiently utilizing the equine as a metaphorical instrument to communicate emotional strain.

Esengali Raushanov uses the image of the Adai horse in his poem "Kokmoynak oyiri". According to the Kazakh encyclopedia, the Adai horse is a resilient breed known for its endurance and unique physical features. In the poem, the depiction of Kokmoynak's herd not as purebred horses but as the nobility and virtues of the nation exemplifies the allegorical use of the horse to depict the internal suffering and adversity of the Kazakh people during tumultuous times.

Similarly, the poetry of Svetkali Nurzhan, enriched with Kazakh tradition from the Mangistau region, prominently features the image of the horse. In his verse, "Sometimes a black cloud covers the moon... My horse is more beautiful than a dream," the metaphor of a galloping horse represents feelings of bewilderment. This metaphor embodies the poet's melancholic emotions and unresolved personal issues, mirroring the nation's tragedy, it can be seen in his popular poem "Saigulik":

*Sometimes a dark cloud covered the moon,  
I come to my house in silent sadness.  
After arguing, I go to sleep,  
If I go to sleep, I will see horses in my dreams...  
Here, the valleys are covered in front of me,  
I will climb over the mountains, bypassing the lawyers.  
I leave the speed of light on the road,  
As for me - a dream, my horse, - more beautiful than a dream!*

Toktareli Tanzharyk, another unique voice in modern Kazakh poetry, employs the horse as a symbol of the existential dilemma in his poems. His verses hint at the unidentified nuances of the modern age through the metaphor of a horse's uncertain colors, reflecting the plight of ancestors who once thrived freely in Saryarka. Additionally, the poet subtly uses a longing for the lush pastures and neighing horses of Saryarka to powerfully portray the desolation of the modern individual, for example:

*We're looking for it right away.  
We are looking for them - nomadic horses.  
We don't know if it will fall, brown or dry  
An unknown species color for us*

*Now I sit silently  
in mind with longing yellows,  
bulging the wormwood,*

*Spring is the season of flowers.  
During the fall,  
They don't know this misery of mine,  
I want to cry (neigh) forever.*

Similarly, Zhanat Dzhangkashuly, a passionate young poet, explores multiple dimensions about horses in his poems. He uses the phrase "To go to God on a horse" as a metaphor, referring to the ancient nomadic tradition of burying heroes with horsemen, creating a poignant image of transcending the human condition.

*Don't touch me,  
Fate put a horse on my side.  
Not on foot, like slaves,  
But I went to God on horseback.  
My era has passed, alas, I know  
It's all gone, my sweat is red.  
Withdraw your hand, son of a bastard,  
I will also enter your history with a horse!*

The present anthology of contemporary Kazakh poetry is deemed deficient in its scope without the inclusion of Galym Zhailybay's literary oeuvre, which exhibits a distinct emphasis on the Kambar equine species. The poet's verse accentuates the unique aesthetic qualities of this particular breed, portraying the equine as an emblem of liberation that transcends conventional limitations. The poem shows the poet's deep affection for equines, portraying them as priceless assets that cannot be traded.

Ultimately, the portrayal of equine creatures in contemporary Kazakh literature offers various allegorical and emblematic depictions. The artwork portrays diverse experiences and emotions, encompassing individual hardships and broader societal issues. Additionally, it explores philosophical dilemmas and ideals of liberation. The enduring impact of these poetic depictions persists in shaping and impacting the realm of literature, revealing the intricate interplay between traditions, values, and contemporary perspectives within Kazakh society.

## Conclusion

All in all, the horse in Kazakh poetry represents the nation's cultural, historical, and social progress. Kazakh literature features horses for millennia. The horse is linked to Kazakh culture, valor, and national identity. Due to cultural changes and significant historical events, symbolism emerged and expanded over time. Zhyaus and Abay Kunanbaev employed the horse to symbolize courage, heroism, and perfection in 19th-century Kazakh poetry. The equine emblem, which shaped Kazakh literature, symbolized the community's beliefs and ambitions. Kazakh literature's image of horses symbolizes the Kazakh people's courage, persistence, and resilience as they climb mountains to succeed.

However, 20th-century Kazakh literature depicted horses differently. The object's role has changed from expressing social issues to resistance, liberation, self-expression, and extreme emotional outpouring throughout cultural and political shifts. Poets I.Zhansugirov and S.Seifullin employ equestrian imagery to show society's slavery. Equestrian themes in Kazakh literature have changed significantly since the



second half of the 20th century. The item represents a yearning for autonomy, individualism, and nostalgia for bygone ages. Famous poets like Yesengali Raushanov, Svetkali Nurzhan, Toktarali Tanzharik, Zhanat Zhankashaly, and Galym Zhailybai have utilized horses to express the tension between the community and the individual, existential barriers, and self-restraint. Equine imagery in Kazakh literature shows the literary legacy's rich metaphors and symbolism. Kazakhstani culture, customs, and viewpoints create a literary mood in various places.

This investigation shows how deep equestrian symbolism has shaped Kazakh literature. This research stresses the cultural relevance of horse types and their effect on literary tales, making it relevant in cultural studies. This study emphasizes the relevance of studying literary depictions of equines to comprehend social development and cultural change better.

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