

A Poet in the Soviet Regime: Annasoltan Kekiliova A Turkmen

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Abstract

During the 1960s, when Turkmen literature was flourishing, the simple yet profound poems of a young woman began to attract attention. This young poet was Annasoltan Kekilova. In her earliest poems she depicted the village where she was brought up and the natural beauty of the hills around it. Later, she goes beyond this and deals in a philosophical way with serious issues of her time. *“Those Mountains too, Have Pain in Their Hearts”* is a poetic expression of dejection which empathises with mountains and forests.

Annasoltan Kekilova’s poems began to be published in newspapers and literary journals when she was a student. In 1968 a book of her poems called *Gara Saçlarym* (My Black Hair) was published. Literary critics, being aware of government sensitivities, did not pay much attention to this book. However, she became extremely popular after her second book, *Zenanlar* (Women), was published in 1971. Some of the poems in this book became lyrics for Turkmen songs, but she could not enjoy her success or get the time to listen to those songs, because in 1970 she wrote two letters to the 24th Congress of the USSR Communist Party Central Committee, complaining about Turkmen women being deprived of their basic human rights and suffering from sexual harassment. After that she was subjected to great political pressure from the government and was forced to resign from her job. Her communications with dissidents like Sakharov made her situation even worse and eventually, at the age of 29, she was put in a mental hospital. For 12 years, three times daily, she was injected with powerful drugs. She died when she was 41 years old.

When asked to renounce her beliefs, she said *“I will not beg on my knees for mercy in front of anyone who says that I should not write against injustice.”* If she had accepted the request of the government, she could have lived.

Introduction

Despite numerous literary figures and linguists being sent into exile, imprisoned and even executed, the Turkmen language and its literature still developed during the Soviet period. In the 1930s in Turkmenistan, as in other Soviet republics, Socialist Realism was foisted upon writers and critics. They were forced to produce their work in a style conforming to the principles of the Soviet School. Berdi Kerbabayev spent

three years in a Gulag camp for not complying with the requirements of the Soviet system in his work. Hydyr Deryayev, the author of the first Turkmen novel, *Ganly Penjeden* (From Bloody Palms), had to spend twenty years in exile in Siberia for his allegedly nationalistic views in his studies of Turkmen language and for having written a novel not acceptable in the Soviet system. *Ganly Penjeden* having been seized by the Soviet Government, Berdi Kerbabayev's *Aýgytly Ädim* (A Determined Step) is now thought of as the first novel in Turkmen literature. Kerbabayev, who for many years served as the chairman of the Turkmen Writers' Union, won the USSR State Prize for *Aýgytly Ädim* in 1948 and for his novel *Aýsoltan* in 1951. *Aýgytly Ädim* was translated into fifty languages. Other works of Kerbabayev have also been published in other languages.

Under Stalin Turkmen writers and poets suffered intense political pressure. Some writers and poets who wanted to ingratiate themselves with the Soviet regime by criticizing the works of their colleagues, conferring upon them the epithet of "Enemy of the People" as a result of which they were sent on exile, put in jail or executed. At that time, five Turkmen scholars who had published the epic story *Gorkut Ata* were sent into exile to Karaganda in Kazakhstan in 1952. They were able to return home in 1953 only after the death of Stalin.

In the relatively calm period after Khrushchev came to power, Turkmen literature flourished and enjoyed its most productive time. In the 1960s writers like Tirkış Jumageldiýev, Atajan Tagan, Beki Seýtäkov, Halil Kuliýev, Ata Gowşudov, Gurban Sähädov, Towşan Esenova, Akjema Omarova and innumerable other writers played important roles. Kerim Gurbannepesov, Gurbandurdy Ezizov and Annasoltan Kekilova stand out among many other talented poets who brought novelty to Turkmen poetry. Gurbandurdy Ezizov was gunned down together with some Russian poets by a Russian soldier when he was driving his guests to a poetry festival. He was 36 years old.

The Life and Poetry of Annasoltan Kekilova

Annasoltan Kekilova was born in 1942 in Köşi, a village near Ashgabat. She became interested in poetry and literature at a very young age. She wrote her first poems when she was in primary school. By reading her classical poetry and folk stories, her mother had created a literary environment at home. Believing that her mother had played an important role in her becoming a poet, she expressed her feeling in a letter to her mother as follows: "*With your exotic songs and stories, you gave me unending enthusiasm, happiness and the hope that would lead me to illumination. Under the blue sky, you saw me off on a long journey with your prayers dear mother. Therefore, I kneel before you.*" It is said that her mother Ogulgerek, loved her daughter calling her "Daglarbaşy" (The Peak of the Mountains). This seems

to mean that her mother believed that her daughter deserved a high position above the mountain tops. However, perhaps “Daglarbaşı”, more than an indication of love of a mother, reflected the belief of Ogulgerek as the mother of a poet, in the talent and bright future of her daughter; who knows? As for Annasoltan’s father Seyit, he was a hard-working man with strong determination who was highly respected by the inhabitants of Köşi. He was the eldest of the three Kekilov brothers. He had three daughters of whom Annasoltan was the youngest.

Annasoltan has written a long poem about her father, who she lost in the 1960s. Below, you will read parts of a long poem entitled “My Father Lives in the Pupils of My Eyes.”

.....

I come near you and caress your head,
I say: "I made tea, get up dad!"
My dad does not reply, I shake my dad;
Come on guys; what's going on?

The pupils of his eyes seemed to leave their sockets,
His body turned blue, so did his face.
I don't know why, but before his last breath
He said "Forward, forward, forward".

They take him, there they go,
On their shoulders are my father and the ladder, (*Note: Coffin is placed on a ladder*)

O manly youngsters carrying the ladder,
Know that I'll be indebted to you all my life.

Your coffin is disappearing before my eyes,
O dear father, you're going to the point of no return.
And at the intersection of two streets,
Desperate, I stay on my knees.

.....

I remember you and I miss you,
O father, I'm grateful for happiness you gave me.
Don't cry my sisters, be calm O mother,
My father lives in the pupils of my eyes.

.....

In this poem, saying “My father lives in the pupils of my eyes” Annasoltan, despite the fact that she is the youngest member of the family, undertakes a significant responsibility and asks her sisters not to weep any more and tells her mother to be calm.

At a young age Annasoltan stimulated interest in literary circles. Journals and newspapers competed with each other to publish her simple yet profound poems. Mammetgurban Mammetgurbanov who collected her poems and published them in a book, wrote in the introduction:

“When I was in the process of studying the poems of Annasoltan, I found her book “Gara Saçlarym” (My Black Hair”, a small book published in 1968, in the archive of the distinguished literary critic Saýlaw Myradov. Saýlaw Myradov had read all the poems in the book; we notice this from the notes he had written on the pages of the book. Myradov, in one of the notes says ‘There is something special about this young girl.’ By this sentence, which I read several times, the distinguished critic perhaps wanted to state that he had discovered a new talent.”

In her first poems Anna Soltan Kekilova describes the area where she was born and brought up. In these poems, while expounding about nature, she does not limit her poem to the depiction of nature; she goes so far as to express her philosophical ideas through striking aspects of nature. When she says “*Biziň gaymyzdan daglar görünyär / Şol daglaň hem öz ýüregniň dagy bar* “ (Mountains are seen through our door / Those mountains too have pain in their hearts), the poet shares her pains with mountains by comparing them to herself and at the same time she states the fact that mountains are capable of showing beauty despite their sorrow - just like an actor on the stage who entertains his audience even if he has just suffered a great misfortune. Thus she establishes a similarity between herself and the mountain through pathetic fallacy and personification. In another poem she says “*Adam gussa çekýär, daralýar dünýä / Bulutlaň içinde aý tutýar ýasy* (Man gets depressed and the world becomes tighter for him / And only the moon laments (for it) in the clouds). Here the poet explains how indifferent human beings are to the destiny of others; this is a sad situation which makes the lyric hero of the poet (the moon and nature) uneasy.

Expressing the powerful ideas of the poet, the most popular poems, especially those that she had written when she was a student at the Faculty of Turkmen Philology, were sought-after literary works which were published in journals of art and literature.

Annasoltan's two uncles, Aman Kekilov and Şaly Kekilov were also important literary figures and scholars. Annasoltan's relationship with them might have been an important factor in her popularity. However, the poet never sought easy ways out by relying on her uncles' support; she chose her own way both in her private life and literary life. She expresses her philosophy in the following verses:

If I ever had an enemy in this world,
He should have the arrogance of a dragon.
Instead of sitting uneasily on ashes,
One should throw oneself into the fire.

The first surname of Annasoltan was Seyidova, because her father's name was Seyit; her poems were initially published with this surname. After marrying at 19, her surname changed to Ilyasova and her poems were published under this surname. After her divorce in 1968 she did not use Seyidova, instead she chose Kekilova- her father's surname..

According to information a Turkmen writer, Ak Welsapar, received from a translator, reports against Annasoltan began to be disseminated when she was working at the daily *Mydam Taýýar*. Apparently she wrote poems that were not politically acceptable, in addition to attracting attention by her dress and her social life. For these reasons there were people who spoke against her. However, for a long time people could not say much as she was the niece of the highly respected and popular writer and scholar, Aman Kekilov. People only hoped that her uncle would make her change her unacceptable lifestyle. Because of her uncle, her books were not proscribed initially. But the authorities later warned her uncle that if he did not stop her niece, they would stop her their own way. Aman Kekilov then went to see his niece and told her "If you do not do what I have told you to do, you cannot expect any help from me anymore!" So her situation worsened. Later Aman Kekiolov and his family declared that they had nothing to do with Annasoltan and had no relationship with her. The reaction of Annasoltan to her uncle's attitude was harsh. As if to say, "If you do that I will do this", she chose the name Kekilova to resemble her uncle's surname.

Annasoltan worked as a teacher after graduating from university. During this time she was interrogated about poems she had read on the radio which the authorities did not like. In 1968 *Gara Saçlarym* (My Black Hair) was published. The book was a sensation and attracted the attention of the readers, but literary critics who were sensitive to the law would not review it. A few of her Russian poems were published in an anthology of poetry by Russian women. Her status as a true poet was confirmed by her second book, *Zenanlar* (Women), published in 1971. Many poems in

this book had become lyrics for famous Turkmen songs. But, being stigmatized for being anti- Soviet and constantly persecuted, she could not enjoy the fruits of her success.

In 1970 Annasoltan wrote a letter to the Turkmenistan SSR Communist Party Central Committee, complaining about unlawful pressure against her, but her complaint did not yield any result. On 30th March 1971 in two detailed letters she wrote to the USSR Communist Party Congress in Moscow- a ten-day event- explaining that Turkmen girls and women were still deprived of their legal rights, that they lived under pressure from men, that they were not given the chance to progress in their work and that the leaders of the republic ignored these facts. A delegation from Moscow, was sent to Turkmenistan to investigate the case. However, the First Secretary of the Turkmen Soviet Socialist Republic Communist Party convinced the delegation that everything in Turkmenistan was in order and the complaint of Annasoltan should not be taken seriously.

After these events, under the instructions of the Turkmenistan Communist Party, pressure on Annasoltan increased further; her books were not allowed to be published and she was forced to resign from her job at the daily *Mydam Taýýar*.

The fact that the delegation from Moscow had not taken their job seriously infuriated Annasoltan. She wrote another letter to the USSR CP Congress saying that Turkmen women were working under unbearable circumstances; they were not given any role in the administration and they suffered from the feudal approach of the administrators towards them. At the end of her letter she mentioned that if the problems mentioned in her second letter were not seriously taken care of, she would renounce her Soviet citizenship. Probably this last sentence put her on a way that had no point of return and made her suffer for the rest of her life.

There is no doubt that Annasoltan's letter caused concern in some circles in Moscow, because at that time, Sakharov, Solzhenitsyn and many other Soviet intellectuals were fighting against Soviet oppression. For the Soviet regime, a Turkmen intellectual in the far- east of the Soviet Union, in a region thousands of miles away from Moscow, fighting against the system, was not a tolerable situation. For this reason the Soviet KGB kept her under surveillance. A frightening emptiness then befell Annasoltan. People who knew her did not wish to see her; they did not even want to say "hello" to her. To express her protest at this situation, Annasoltan declared that she had renounced her citizenship and went to meet Sakharov who had graduated from the university in Ashgabat in 1942 and his wife Elena Bonner who was born in Mary, Turkmenistan. At the same time she applied for asylum from the UK embassy. Her application was accepted, but the KGB did not allow her to leave the

country and sent her back to Ashgabat. After all these events, when she returned to Ashgabat, on 26th August 1971 she was taken from her home and put in a mental hospital. Then the depressing life of the asylum began for her.

This was how the Soviet regime took revenge on the free-thinking poet- to shut her up forever. The mental hospital was effectively a prison. No one approached the poet or supported her when she was in the hospital - neither relatives nor friends, nor her poet or writer colleagues or anyone from the Turkmen Soviet community. Not a single **man of God** ever visited her! Everybody had accepted the tragic situation of the poet and kept quiet, except one person - Ogulgerek who had familiarized Annasoltan with poetry and literature when she was a little girl by reading classical poetry and stories for her. Agitated, she desperately roamed around the hospital all day long, but she could not envisage her daughter leaving the hospital. She could not take the cruelty of such an inhuman life and she died.

They kept Annasoltan in the mental hospital for twelve years for not saying “*I will never again criticize the Soviet system and I accept that the policy of the CP is right.*” Her body could resist the heavy drugs given to her only until she was forty one years old.

When she was in the hospital, she expressed her feeling in the following lines:

I saw restraint beyond this wall,
I saw cruelty beyond this wall,
I saw death beyond this wall,
I am dirty, I must wash myself.

Ramiz Rrövşen, a famous Azerbaijani poet who had written on a similar theme says :
“*İlahi bir yağış yağdır / Biraz bulaşık kimiye* (O God make the rain fall a bit / I seem to be somewhat dirty).

Annasoltan, in another poem that she wrote in the hospital, says:

If I could not find justice in this forest,
I would not need the wealth of that forest.
The kingdom of the corpse-devouring ravens,
Practises its ruling power over a poet.

In this poem “forest” symbolizes the country and the environment where the poet lives, and “the corpse-devouring ravens” depicts the regime that oppressed her all her life. In the following poem entitled “The Ravens”, Annasoltan explains allusively the nonsensical attitude of the ravens in the environment which they control:

The Ravens

Cold clouds clash on the sky,
Strong wind blows, snow flakes fly about.
Whereas flame flaring up in my heart,
Makes a thundering noise like a burning stove.

I lost my way in the frozen forest,
My lips dried up,
I lick the snow,
It does not quench my thirst,
I am still thirsty.
Sliding over my head are the black ravens.
I ask them:
“Where is the spring?!”

The ravens shout:
“Gak-gak and gak-gak.”
It seems to me they say
“Don’t look for it, there is no spring in this forest.”

Then what should I do,
Where should I go?!
O ravens, see me off out of the forest.
The ravens shout again “gak gak!”
Perhaps they say:
We won’t see you off, no.

Ah, it seems to me these
Are my vain imagination,
Those creatures perhaps
Do not even see me.

In this poem the profound understanding of the poet captivates the reader. The lyric hero loses her way. Only ravens can show her the way. The concept of “raven” has been explained above. Turkmen readers understand this readily. The ravens say something in their own language; as if they are saying, “Do not look for it girl, there is no spring in this forest.” However, the girl does not get frustrated and asks for help saying: “O ravens, show me the way out of the forest.” For some reason the girl cannot get what she wants. The girl does not blame the ravens, saying, “Those ravens

do not even see me.” In this poem the poet with great skill depicts an environment where she cannot explain her problem.

Annasoltan Kekilova, who had written beautiful poems and managed to move her readers with them until she was 29 years old, did not stop writing when she was in hospital. She continued writing poetry both in Turkmen and Russian. According to her middle sister Kiçi, Annasoltan gave her poems in a large envelope to her elder sister to send to Moscow. Kikçi sent the envelope to Moscow, but she forgot to whom and to which address she had sent it. The poems she had written about Afghanistan in Turkmen when she was in hospital have also been lost.

Annasoltan never showed any sign of weakness when she was a victim of injustice; she stood tall and upright. In a letter she wrote on 24th January 1983 she says *“I will not kneel and beg before anyone who says that I cannot write against injustice.”*

On 19th June 1983 relatives of Annasoltan took her body from the hospital. In one of the hospital documents in connection with the poet, the following note was written: “At the request of her son, Annasoltan was released from hospital to be looked after at home.”

Most Turkmens were aware of the extraordinary poetic talent of Annasoltan , but no one could express his/her views and no one could write a single line about the poet. And poor Annasoltan could not hear the comments she had deserved to hear about her poetry. In the Soviet period, nobody could write about her, but is the situation different now? It is 27 years since Turkmenistan became independent, but the poetry of this great poet has not been studied and not much has been written about her. It seems that the political authorities are still afraid of Annasoltan and her thoughts.

One of her last poems she wrote in hospital is presented below:

To the Little White Butterfly

What is the use of the place I live,

When I cannot go out and walk about.

What is the use of the desire to die,

If you cannot hug death before you die.

What is the eagle good for when it flies away

If it seizes me not to take me away.

What do I need the kingdom of ravens for

If I cannot learn their language.

What can a disloyal loved one be good for,

So being an ignorant son or ungrateful daughter,

Or how could the time of spring and autumn be

Good for me when my heart opens with excitement.

What need have I of the shade of green trees,

(When) I notice a strange sun in the distance.

A little white butterfly in front of the window,

Moves around fluttering over there.

The only one that shares my secret in this world,

O little butterfly, you're worth the world's riches to me.

You anxiously flutter feeling sorry for me,

Whereas I weep for your situation.

Annasoltan in this poem which she wrote in hospital is not worried about herself, she is concerned about those who feel sorry for her.

Conclusion

As mentioned before, many people were aware of the poetic talent of Annasoltan; her publications always constituted attractive literary events. However, no one had the courage to review her poetry and admire it. Her poetry was used as

lyrics for the most famous Turkmen songs. Her Russian poems were published in a book in Moscow. The great poet could not enjoy the fruits of her success. She suffered the oppression of the Soviet system. Twenty-seven years have passed since Turkmenistan became independent. The attitude towards poetry and the ideas of Annasoltan has not changed. The government could at least have named a school after her. At a time when the name of Gurbansoltan, the mother of the previous President was promoted even in calendars, Turkmen poet Şiraly Nurmyradov in one of his poems said: “We want Annasoltan, not Gurbansoltan.”

One cannot help thinking that when Andrey Sakharov and Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn made their demands for democracy and less political oppression, they raised a subject which became topical around the world, but the young voice of Annasoltan who had fought for the same things was never heard.

Kekilova said: “*I will never say that I will never talk about mistakes and injustice and I will never write about these matters.... I will never kneel and beg before anyone.*” This rebellious outcry of Annasoltan not only worried the authorities in Turkmenistan, it also frightened the Soviet authorities who had by then experienced the opposition that had arisen in Russia. She had set an example in Central Asia that could have been more of a threat to them than Sakharov or Solzhenitsyn in Russia.

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