

## IDENTITY IN KYRGYZ WOMENS POETRY

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## ИДЕНТИЧНОСТЬ В КИРГИЗСКОЙ ЖЕНСКОЙ ПОЭЗИИ

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*Abstract.* This paper reflects our experience teaching contemporary American women's poetry and translating Kyrgyz women's poetry into English. This paper mainly intends to explore essential questions and issues that lie at the very heart of what it means to be a woman in today's world - questions such as "What is a woman?", "What does it mean to write as a woman and to read as a woman?", "How is the concept of being female described in Kyrgyz poetry?", "What kinds of challenges, women's strengths and weaknesses do poets see in themselves?", "What do women value or believe in?", "How can poets express themselves through poetry?". In the attempt to address these questions, we investigate some of the ways that Kyrgyz and American poets handle nature of female poets, women's experiences in contemporary society, and the effects of prejudices and stereotypes described in women's poetry. Examples are taken from the works of contemporary American women poets (Maya Angelou and Amy Smith) and from the collection of translations of Kyrgyz women's poetry into English ("Girls you... / Kyrgyz Women Poetry", translator Kalieva K., editors Simone P. Bures and Daniel Kittle).

*Аннотация.* В настоящей статье представлен наш опыт преподавания современной американской женской поэзии и перевода киргизской женской поэзии на английский язык. Данная статья предназначена для изучения основных вопросов и проблем, лежащих в самой постановке вопроса, что значит быть женщиной в современном мире, — таких вопросов, как «Что такое женщина?», «Что значит писать как женщина и читать как женщина?», «Что значит понятие женственности в киргизской поэзии?», «Какие вызовы, сильные и слабые стороны женщины видят в себе поэты?», «Что ценят женщины или во что верят?», «Как поэты могут выразить себя через поэзию?». Пытаясь ответить на эти вопросы, мы исследуем некоторые способы, которыми киргизские и американские поэты апеллируют для установления природы женщин-поэтов, опытом женщин в современном обществе и влиянием предрассудков и стереотипов, описанных в женской поэзии. Примеры взяты из произведений современных американских поэтесс (Майи Энджеллоу и Эми Смит) и из сборника переводов киргизской женской поэзии на английский язык («Girls, you... / Киргизская женская поэзия», переводчик Калиева К., редакторы Симона П. Бурес и Дэниел Киттл).

*Keywords:* contemporary poetry, women's poetry, Kyrgyz poetry, identity.

**Ключевые слова:** современная поэзия, женская поэзия, киргизская поэзия, идентичность.

Kyrgyz women's poetry is exciting and beautiful, and it is characterized by simplicity, logic and deep philosophical insight that we are sure readers will find pleasurable and meaningful. Most of the translations of Kyrgyz literature were done from Kyrgyz into Russian, then from Russian into English, or into other languages. But as a rich language with its unique culture, Kyrgyz literature needs to be translated directly from Kyrgyz into English.

The idea of translating Kyrgyz women's poetry was supported by American Fulbright scholar 2008 Simone Poirier-Bures and she edited the verses in close collaboration with the translators. The collection of poetry translation, which we have entitled *Girls, You...* (Kyrgyz Women Poets) (1936-1969), includes 35 poems selected from the collections of nine Kyrgyz Women Poets, presented side by side in Kyrgyz and in English [1, 2].

Translating poetry by Kyrgyz women was beneficial for many reasons. The main benefit of this activity is to promote an awareness of the contributions of Kyrgyz women poets, to introduce Kyrgyz Women's Poetry to the English-speaking world, specifically the poets who came to literature in the period of 1937-1969, in Soviet period. It is a cultural source to learn about Kyrgyz culture through women's poetry, and it can serve as a mediator between two languages and cultures, it contributes to cross-cultural understanding, peace, friendship and cooperation between two nations. Reading and comparing two languages helps readers to discover cross-cultural differences and similarities among values and beliefs of the nations. Scientific researchers can use the book in their linguistic, poetical, social- and cultural researches.

Kyrgyz people, one of the oldest peoples of Central Asia, were famous for their unique folklore and original poems. The world view of the Kyrgyz people, their attitude toward nature, their historical events, and their life style were captured in the songs that people have preserved to nowadays. Centuries and centuries of rich oral tradition carried the history, culture, and tradition of our nation. The Kyrgyz language was enriched by nameless creators, who also kept alive the memory of our nation's remarkable sayings, poems, proverbs, and songs. Written Kyrgyz women's poetry began in 1920, after the Great October Revolution, and women poets came to literature at the end of 1930s. Certainly there were women poets before then, but the lack of written language made it impossible to know about them. Kyrgyz Women Poets have not been studied well before. We aimed to research and translate them in order to make their work available for readers.

The subject of female identity development has been the focus of psychological, historical, social studies, American studies, women's and gender studies; here we consider this topic from a literary perspective. Identity can be defined in a number of ways; it is defined as a "self-definition which is comprised of goals, values and beliefs to which the person is committed and which provide a sense of continuity over time" [3, p. 496]. Studies show that there a variety of factors that contribute to the formation of identity as a woman. It is clear from such sources that "identity should not be perceived as a general notion, but as a range of subtle representations that change with time and place" [3]. Identity defined as a "means of recognizing those with whom one shares values, experiences and beliefs as well as those considered to be different, whether at the level of self, family or community" [3] contributes to the understanding of women poets writings which impact on the formation of women's identity in soviet and post-soviet time.

A systematic review of the poems written by Kyrgyz women and their translations was used as a research methodology, and the poems were analyzed using a content analysis, comparative, qualitative and conceptual analysis methods. Additionally, we used contextualizing approach, i.e. themes in poetry are discussed alongside American women poets' poems and within literary,

cultural and historical background. The findings revealed great impact of women poet's writings on the formation of identity. Analysis of translation from feminist perspective has focused on examining the impact of gender consciousness, cultural peculiarities and translator's ideology on the translation process, exploring translation strategies, and analyzing the content of gendered language in the translated text. The findings have provided researchers with a comprehensive understanding of the current state of Kyrgyz women's poetry and the importance of their translations. Evaluating translations of poetry, the paper focuses on the problems posed by Kyrgyz women's poetry, where we consider that the reader of poetry was held to be as important as the poet in creating interpretations, so, evaluations involving these poems and their translations inevitably require reader-response data.

Female identity is constructed by what is known as a competent observer, or representative of that culture. For example, women in Kyrgyzstan is associated with poems, songs and musical instrument ooz komuz (mouth harp). Mouth harp represents not only musical instrument, but philosophy of nomadic nation. In order to speak out, to express their inner world Kyrgyz women used ooz komuz. Women characters in Kyrgyz epic trilogy Manas, Semetey and Seytek are compared to the sound of ooz komuz:

*Жылаажындуу дабышы  
Жез комуздай шаңк этип,  
Акундун кызы Айчүрөк.  
Akun's daughter Aychurek,  
With a loud voice, sweet and tender,  
Rejoicing like a copper harp. [4, p. 293]*

Kyrgyz girls' identity has been trained since very early age in their lives to value family, relationships, to respect elders and see themselves as members of a family or tribe. Comparing to other women from Islamic world Kyrgyz women worked equally as men, and this is the basics why women are respected in the community. We can see it all this in the poems and stories, in everyday expressions and proverbs. Furthermore, Kyrgyz people appreciate directness, and in some cases, they consider themselves to be frank and open, in their dealings with others. Studying cultural peculiarities of Kyrgyz girl's identity, we may say that Kyrgyz people appreciate girls who are modest, silent and speak indirectly to elders. Women's poetry also explains these values and beliefs indirectly and calls girls to positive changes. However, in researching poems we can say that communication between Kyrgyz people is mostly indirect. In poems referring mostly to women and girls, indirectness is considered somehow to be a requirement for female members of the family. Usually they just imply or suggest what they mean. Even in some poems we need to read between the lines. The truth, if it hurts, should be tempered or hidden. Relationships and friendships are more important than getting into a conflict with somebody, and saving face takes precedence over the "truth". What one says and what one feels often are not the same. It is important to maintain harmony, for most of Kyrgyz people saying "no" is difficult, they would rather use lie or use indirect communication. Mairamkan Abylkasymova's poem "Why did He Go Away?" can serve as an example of this topic, theme of lie in order to behave as "a good girl". The author wants to show how important to be honest when dealing with a beloved person. In this example the poet warns the readers indirectly "to be direct." In this quatrain poem we can see how the girl, brought up to respect culture, ruins her own happiness:

*When he asked: "Do you love me?  
I said "No" ... but water fell from my eyes.  
He believed my words instead of my tears,  
Wondering now, why did my beloved go away? [1, p. 40]*

Identity of a woman is described in Tenti Adysheva's poems very often, as one of the representatives of Kyrgyz women's poetry, Adysheva describes identity of a poet in her poem "The Poet Is" as a person "who takes happiness from small things, and who feels sorrow and injury from nothing", advising others "not to be intense like poets, but share their hearts, their beautiful hope and care" [1, p. 34]. As a benevolent mother and beloved wife, Tenti Adysheva dedicated many of her poems to empowering girls and women. Her life was full of triumph and tragedy. One of the qualities of Tenti Adysheva was her ability to be sincere and honest not only in her poems, but also in real life. But she suffered for her honesty and her directness was the reason of for many of her problems with authority. So often her poems center on a question about women's happiness, either explicit or implicit, and nearly as often the "answer" she finds there is another question, like "What is woman's happiness?". Her poem, *What is Happiness* [1, p. 35], describes the women's experience and being alive, again with a series of questions and advices:

*They say:  
Happiness is – true love,  
Happiness is – to strive greatly for a purpose.  
Happiness is – to appreciate what you possess.  
If you count this way, happiness is a lot,  
But the most valuable,  
Happiness is – to be alive!* [1, p. 35]

The idea is central to Adysheva's poetic philosophy is woman's equality:

*Once women were scorned,  
Tormented throughout history.  
Now woman's name is honored  
Held dear, because, this is happiness.*

When T. Adysheva wrote about women she composed her poems with a sense of emotional impact. In reading her poems about women we can hear the melancholic, sorrow notes of women. In her poem "Woman's load" she describes women's life, the responsibility of being a mother and a wife. The poem describes the journey of life through the centuries, for mothers and daughters, the difficulties of life, and the joy and happiness as well. The theme is mortality and eternity. The author sees the happiness of woman in her child, in her "flower" that she planted. She calls on her daughter to accept life and enjoy it no matter how difficult. The poet describes the hard life of a woman and her difficult responsibilities to her family. But Tenti Adysheva arrives at an optimistic conclusion by pointing out the woman's happiness in her being "a mother":

*A woman's cart is full of weight  
Day and night she pulls it without a break.  
The daughter takes over the mother's load  
And again the cart's creaking sound is heard.* [1, p. 32].

Traditional family values include love and respect for parents, as well as for all members of the family. As people grow up, they learn certain values and assumptions from their parents and other relatives, their teachers, their books, newspapers, and of course, from poems. The theme of mother and child appears in many poet's creations. In her poem "What is Constant Love?" Jumakan Tynymseitova expresses a mother's constant love with deep emotional impact:

*If someone asks: "What is constant love?"  
I have a ready answer to this question.  
Only maternal love is constant,  
A mother never grows tired of her child.* [1, p. 46].

Respect for elders is a major tenet of Kyrgyz culture. The Kyrgyz language has special ways to respectfully address elders. Firing older people to hire younger people is not encouraged. Parents' investment in their children, they do not save money for their old age, and the tradition where the youngest of the sons should take care of parents is passed from generation to generation. Old people have the responsibility to be the head of groups and to begin ceremonies, parties etc. and to give blessings. Young people are taught to honor old people and respect their parents.

*I'd sacrifice my life to mothers,  
Mothers are precious and dear to all us.* [1, p. 50].

Kyrgyz people are famous with their hospitality. The talented Kyrgyz poet Mariam Bularkieva, describes the nature of Kyrgyz hospitality in her poem "Come over, guest":

*Come over, guest! I'll welcome you warmly  
In spite of the white winter blizzard.  
I'll stop and shut my eyes to everyday life  
And today I'll become a host for you.* [1, p.45].

The benefits of educating people through poetry— to countries, to families and to girls themselves — are so substantial. Educating girls using poetry not only stimulates spiritual and individual growth, it improves their understanding of values and beliefs, cultural do's and don'ts, their participation in all spheres of life and gives them more responsibilities in their communities. This quality of poetry was used during the Soviet time to gain and understand soviet ideology. Most of the poems by women poets worship Soviet system, they glorified proletariat, and call people to accept ideology, and get knowledge. Most of the early Kyrgyz Soviet women poets' realistic creations examined the transformation from a nomadic, rural country to an industrial, socialist, developing one as in Nurcamal Jetikashkaeva's poem *Girls... You!*

The philosophy of women's poetry is concerned with universal questions about life, death, nature, love. The true nature of their achievement is in deep meaning of their poetry, in their ability to be sincere and honest in their poems. The basic themes tend to encompass the relationship between people and nature, to discover love through pain, sadness and suffering, to appreciate being alive, being a mother, to appreciate the culture, to enjoy happiness and to realize how precious life really is:

*Dear friends,  
If you have warm words,  
Tell me while I'm alive.  
If you have harsh words,  
Hide them hard with a lock in your heart.  
If you are benevolent, hurry to my house,  
I'll open the doors to honor you.  
If you are malevolent, go back,  
Don't hurt my heart.* [1, p. 45]

Kyrgyz culture has been enriched by the values and belief systems of the nomadic lifestyle of the mountain people as well as by many multinational influences. A rich mix of ethnic groups and the Soviet system had a great influence on Kyrgyz culture, too. Kyrgyz people are generally less concerned about privacy and individualism than Americans or Europeans. Samuel P. Huntington [5] emphasizes the cultural values of developed countries, such as "thrift, investment, hard work, education, organization, and discipline". Despite geographical location, different historical events and quite a different way of life, Kyrgyz people are gaining universal values and a new generation is learning more progressive ethics and a productive way of life which in turn develops of and promotes cultural changes for the better.

As compared with Kyrgyz women's collective aspect of identity American women feel themselves as a unique individual. The poem *I am a Phenomenal Woman* by Maya Angelou (1994), Black American contemporary poet, describes her "inside self", her power and her identity as a unique "phenomenal" woman:

*I'm a woman  
Phenomenally  
Phenomenal woman  
That's me. [6, p.15]*

In the poem, *Phenomenal Woman* [6, p. 15]. Angelou presents a woman with a proud confidence and her strength as a woman. We understand that her phenomenality is in her personality which makes a woman phenomenal and special and different from those around her. In her another poem *Alone* Maya Angelou [6, p. 15] describes true state of a woman, her inner world and secret:

*Lying, thinking  
Last night  
How to find my soul a home  
.....  
Alone, all alone  
Nobody, but nobody  
Can make it out here alone. [6, p. 15]*

In this poem, Angelou reveals the truth in which we try to find happiness in all the wrong ways, but we fail finding happiness and suffer from being alone in the world. And the main idea of this poem is that if we find again ourselves it would be another experience, so time passes and feeling of happiness also changes. These poems once again defend the universal truth that poets are closer to being.

A poem *Being a Girl* by Amy Smith [7] is the response to the question what the social and individual identities of a girl are essential in today's world. The first part describes universal features and requirements of a girl according to universal worldview of people and stereotypes, but the second part describes girls' uniqueness and emphasizes on the thing how girls are different from each other:

*Girls need to be strong and soft  
Girls need to act weak and tough  
Girls must be pretty and thin and always say they love the gym  
.....  
They must be open but stay closed  
But what if we want to be different girls?  
Girls who are strong and can lead the world  
And valuing ourselves and our health and our happiness  
So we can, together, be simply and utterly fabulous. [7]*

Finally, we may arrive at the conclusion that poetry has a great influence on the life of world people and on the formation of their identity. It helps people to express their feelings in certain forms of poetry that carry styles, images and collocations. By examining our cultural values, we conclude that poetry is used as a reflection of the innermost emotion and thoughts of a poet's inner world and springs from the national culture as well as from feelings including happiness, hope, joy, pain, and sadness. Poetry helps readers to interpret meanings appropriately and to serve as the mediator between different cultures, thus poetry presents the culture, art, literature and life style of the people to the world.

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*Работа поступила  
в редакцию 13.11.2022 г.*

*Принята к публикации  
19.11.2022 г.*

*Ссылка для цитирования:*

Kalieva K., Naimanova Ch. Identity in Kyrgyz Womens Poetry // Бюллетень науки и практики. 2022. Т. 8. №12. С. 589-595. <https://doi.org/10.33619/2414-2948/85/79>

*Cite as (APA):*

Kalieva, K., & Naimanova, Ch. (2022). Identity in Kyrgyz Womens Poetry. *Bulletin of Science and Practice*, 8(12), 589-595. <https://doi.org/10.33619/2414-2948/85/79>