

An Educated Fellow from the Steppe

By Mukhtar Auezov
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Mukhtar Auezov wrote the well known novel "Path of Abai". In his works the writer depicted the life of feudal and patriarchal society, challenged the laws. He analyzed the ways of social development of Kazakh society. In his works we can observe the impact of Russian classics such as L.N. Tolstoy, I.V. Turgenov and etc. His 100th anniversary was celebrated by UNESCO in 1997, and he was recognized as world scale writer. 'An Educated Fellow from the Steppe' was written in 1923.

It was middle of a severe winter. In a cloudless sky the sun was shining as brightly as on a hot summer day. Though light played on the snow grains, one could feel the sting cold sting of the air. The cold wind and the snowy hills reminded one that it was a cold winter.

The homes of this little Siberian town inhabited by Kazakhs seemed to be asleep beneath white coats. Only the smoke rising from the chimneys and slowly fading in the still air evidenced that the place was inhabited. The footprints on the ground cut a narrowgorge among the huge snow covered rocks.

The town was situated on the bank of one of the biggest Siberian rivers. The homeslay scattered across the wasteland. Among the shabby poor dwellings a few new houses looked like false teeth in a faded face.

Now only a few people passed along in the Zemski Road which led to the well head. From time to time there could be seen people carrying skins of sheep and horses on their backs. Sometimes one cannot but notice people from far away auls (villages) galloping on horseback in the snow-flowered steppe towards the town.

After a while a traveler driving in a sleigh broke the stillness He was coming to his friend Makhsut – an educated official of the town. He drove straight to the bazaar, turned right and stopped near a small house beyond a blue gate. When the horse stopped, he went towards the house quickly. His sullen eyes in his taut face fixed on this house. When he was about to open the door, a young beautiful woman stepped out to meet him. Sorrow also shadowed her face. She looked tired, pale and wan. Tears welled in her beautiful black eyes Meirkhan stopped and asked, "Why Kadisha, is he well? Why are you so sad?"

"Little by little he is growing weaker,"she answered. "I don't know what is in the store for us. In the morning he asked foryou, and we sent for you." Tears rolled down her cheeks, and she turned away and begun to wipe her eyes quickly. It was so excruciating to look at her, Meirkhan couldn't stand it and entered the house.

In one of the home's two rooms, on a high bed motionless Makhsut lay breathing heavily. It was nothing but skin and bone. His face was swollen, his eyes were red and full of tears.

Everything, which made him beautiful his thick, black moustache and eyebrows, combed back dark hair all seemed dead. Even his rosy lips had become dark and dry. His trembling slim hands continuously stroked his chest.

The sight of his friend shocked Meirkhan and something seemed to have got stuck in his throat, so that he couldn't get a word out. The two friends looked at each other for a while as if they were saying their last words in silence.

Makhsut tried to say something, but it was hard to understand. He tried to speak louder, but nothing more than whisper and delirium came out.

His words were mostly about his job, his lessons and the children he had been teaching. He was between death and life. He was too weak to speak, but he knew that he must say some words to his friend.

"I left my children. I couldn't do a good job. And now," he stroked his chest and stomach, "what will happen to me?"

He touched Meirkhan's hands and continued. "Don't blame me? It is not my fault."

After a while Makhsut's mother and his wife Kadisha carrying their little child came in. Neither knew whether Makhsut would survive. For Makhsut's mother there was nobody so dear than her son. He was the only one. Thus, the poor mother's eyes were full of tears, and she looked again and again at Meirkhan as if asking for a help.

Trying to console her, Meirkhan said a few words which were in vain. Tears falling down her cheeks, Makhsut's mother said that a doctor had come in the morning and had said it was too late to treat the illness.

When she finished, Makhsut stared at her for a long time and then turned his face to the wall. He might be thinking about his poor mother who would be left without any relatives to help her.

"What a life is waiting for you, my poor mom," he said, when he turned his face again to them, "who can I leave you to? Why didn't you go first?"

His words were full of sorrow, he was crying bitterly. How stuffy was the room! Why the God created the so-called human being if he would take him back? It was unfair!

After a few minutes the door opened and Makhsut's friends Zhumaghul and Akhtai came in. The atmosphere in the house made the situation clear for them and they couldn't dare to pronounce a single word but sat in grief.

Without looking at his mother Makhsut continued, "Kadisha is not your child. Everything would be fine and wonderful with her. She has many rich relatives. In case something happens they will be a shelter for her. Being settled in life she will also make you cry. The poor old woman cried bitterly, for it was difficult to hear such words.

"Don't cry mom, go to that room. Your tears are hurting my heart," whispered Makhsut.

It was excruciating for Meirkhan and the others to witness the scene and they said to the crying woman:

"Sleep my child, my dear one. I won't bother you any more." She sighed deeply and left the room. Kadisha went after her, not venturing to say a word to her beloved husband because of the outsiders.

With a pain in his heart, Meirkhan pictured to himself the future life of the poor woman. He thought: "It is true that Makhsut will die and the poor woman will suffer and pine when she is deprived of her dear son. This young beauty won't be sitting with her mother-in-law around her husband's hearth. She is a city girl, she will soon be compelled to marry again. Only the mother will be the pitiable victim of it."

Such heavy thoughts in a small house didn't last long. The sick man was getting weaker and sinking hourly. As he failed to breathe his breathing became a rasping sound. Looking at her motionless pale son, the old woman gave up hope. If she were left alone, she would burst into a violent sob praying the God not to torture her son. Her heart ached and was full of grief. Unfortunately, she couldn't evade the approaching danger. Nothing could help her son, even the Almighty God!

Makhsut's body had become cold, his eyes sunk in their sockets. Nearly all his relatives had lost hope when he opened his eyes again. As if he couldn't understand what was going on he murmured a word, a word hard to understand. Soon his face became pale, his eyes stared at the ceiling. His mouth was open, the teeth were bared, and the sign of death appeared. When the long-awaited time came, the whole house poured out its tears. The poor old woman lost her consciousness.

That same day the town learned of Makhsut's death. Thoughts of their close friend flashed through Makhsut's minds and their hearts longed for him. They all were saying, "He was a real gentleman among all the educated ones. Poor old woman, left alone. She will suffer and have a hard life."

The next day all his friends and other people came to say their last goodbyes to Makhsut. All were very sad and frowning. After a few minutes, carrying the deceased, all started for his ancestor's cemetery and laid him near the cold, dark grave. It was so hurtful, the young people couldn't look at each other. Only the mullahs circled like birds before eating. They were cold

hearted and ruthless, quarreling for the coat which covered the deceased and the clothes near him. In a few minutes or so they put Makhsut covered with a white shroud down in the bottom of the grave and begin hiding him from the outsiders with red bricks. When the mullahs had finished, people returned to their homes with faces as dark as rain clouds.

II.

Time flew by... . Passed months and years. Then came a hot summer carrying with it the fragrance of young grass which begun stretching towards the warmth of the sun burning day after day like a hot red eye. The trees in their green coats rustled and stirred somberly as if whispering among themselves.

The birds singing as they flew, made everybody happy with their harmonious concert. It was impossible not to notice the beauty of the nature. Everything was in perfect harmony. Only one person seemed not to notice. No one could distract her. She was Makhsut's mother. She went on living as if caught in a bad dream, as if paralyzed by some illness. Life was wormwood for her. Young Kadisha was also silent, leading a life which was unutterably gloomy for her. But she became more cheerful despite the depressing atmosphere and the sad atmosphere in the house. The only bridge between these two women was little Zhamila. When a little cheer drew the old woman out of her sad dreams, she would while away times playing with the child.

Meirkhan had not returned since Makhsut's death. He had escaped from them, escaped to see the women's unhappy faces.

Only Zhumaghul and Aktai came every day. When they first came they were as sad as these two women, but soon they began talking, and if Kadisha was alone they told cheerful, funny stories to her.

The last few days Zhumaghul had been coming alone. He was so canny and sophisticated, his words made stories that were far from the truth. When they were alone, he would speak only about themselves. He changed the subject to another topic modern youth, their life filled with merry games and good natured squabbles. He would speak about Makhsut only with the old woman. In her turn, the latter thought him to be a good lad. As a result of his "hard work", Kadisha impatiently waited for him to come. She felt she had a liking to him. Outwardly she was as sad as before, but inwardly she was full of excitement that was so very difficult to hide from outsiders. She would think about her future but not past and began scheming different plans. Her house seemed like a black devil which would block her way to happiness. All these were the hint and the beginning of great changes that would happen in coming days.

Once, when Meirkhan had just come from his office, a lad in Kazakh national costume entered and gave him a letter which read, "Comrade Meirkhan! We invite you to our wedding party that will be held tomorrow at 12 p.m. Hope, you heard about me and Kadisha and our engagement".

After he had finished reading, he stood motionless as though frozen to stone. Meirkhan had no peace since he had received that letter, he was like a madman. At last he decided to send a message to Zhumaghul. He wrote with capital letters: " I'm Not Coming To Your Party. God Damn You!".

The next day two of his friends came to him. They had put on beautiful clothes especially for the wedding party. They were wearing blouses with white collars and were much excited.

Meirkhan told them: "You can't go there. Not long ago you celebrated Makhsut's wedding. How can you go to the wedding of Makhsut's wife and Zhumagul? It is inhuman!" But his friends wouldn't listen to him.

"Don't be an idealist," they persuaded him, "Why can't we go there and cheer up? We will have some good meals and liquor, that's all." Meirkhan tried to put them wise, but his attempt failed, so he agreed.

People in the party were so excited. Zhumagul and Kadisha seemed very happy. When they laughed their teeth flashed gaily. All guests wished them happiness, a long life. Later they all got drunk and the little house became more cheerful, one could hear hoarse shouts here and there joined in a crooning song. Even, Makhsut's close friend Meirkhan was so excited, he was drunk and hardly stood on his feet. Suddenly he shouted and stopped the people and said, "I want you to have this toast for Makhsut. May Makhsut's spirit live long."

People laughed at his words. So did Zhumaghul and Kadisha. They didn't think about these words, their meaning and continued laughing. Meirkhan's friends took him for a tipsy and made him sit down.

Time was passing by. Kadisha's father, a rich noble man of the town saw the newly married people off to Zhumaghul's parents to jailau (summer pastures/ quarters/ places). When the troika (vehicle drawn by a team of three horses abreast) with its bells jingling passed by Makhsut's gate Zhumaghul looked at it with shrewd eyes. Staring at them there was Makhsut's mother weeping inconsolably, it was hurtful and humiliating for her. The educated young people staying before her window didn't notice it. They wished happy journey to the newly married and left the place.

III

Once the chill rains of May came green grass covered the earth. Blades of couch grass and low growing bushes stretched themselves to the sky. A multicolored diversity of flowers grew among the green grass like ornaments of a Persian carpet.

Through the ravine near the big hill the rapid mountain streams murmured beautifully. The birch trees with green leaves, the forest stretching away to the mountains, the mirrorlike surface of the lake and its rapid waves playing with each other, [the lake cannot be mirror like

and also have waves] the high cliffs rising on both sides of the river, the chattering of song birds—furnished the ravine like the home of a young beauty.

This year people of this part of Jailau didn't lack water for their cattle. The cattle breeding near the lake were like big green stones on the green land. The white kyiz uis (yurts) on south slope of the mountain looked like white eggs. The aul was full of happiness.

Winter this year had not been unusually severe, so the shepherds and other people were riding on fine racers and yearlings. If three or four people got together, they would at once compete, pull each other off horse back, and would test each others in different ways. Aksakals (white bearded elders) were saying: "The foals are strong enough. It is high time to catch mares, for we can't go to the jailau without kumiz (horse's milk)." So it was that all auls were preparing kermes (halters, rope lines), and the women were sewing sabahs (a leather bag (usu. horse's skin) to pour the horse's milk in and process the kymyz). The last few days Zhumaghul's aul was also busy with such work. Though Zhumaghul's mother Kamaria was very stern and smart, rapacious and selfinterested from her young years, she had never been so economical. She got the knack of happy living and was quick with every preparation. That's why they had driven flocks of sheep and herds of horses very easily to the jailau and now were catching the mares near the aul. No loiterers lingered near the kerme for mares. Amire aksakal's neighbors and his slaves Amire didn't like it when a person wasted money for nonsense. His relations who knew it didn't show up during such events.

The whole winter the mares and the foals had runfree, so it was difficult to catch them. Therefore, the aksakal ordered the foals caught first. Horse herders with their long kuruks (a long stick with long rope and loop at one end) began catching the shrewd foals among the horses and tethering them.

When the shrewd foals were caught, they would leap and run but couldn't break free from the strong arms of horse herders. Sometimes they would fall. In such cases Amire would jump from his seat saying "bissimillah" (an Arabian word "biismillah", meaning "oh, allah; for the sake of allah") and scold at herders for being careless.

After they had caught nearly all mares, the women regaled the herders with hard saltywhite balls of kurt. and mai (salted butter) as was their ancient custom.

Amire spread the milk on kerme and joined the people eating the kurt and mai.

Soon they began chattering the latest news. It was mostly about Zhumaghul's marriage in the city. The aul didn't receive any information from Zhumaghul himself, but the people of neighboring auls spread rumors that "Zhumaghul got married to Kandibay's daughter. The rich father had given his daughter a considerable dowry. The fiancée's first husband had died and cut up fat. They had a newly built house of modern style. There was nobody very close to the lad except his daughter and old mother, so Zhumaghul and his wife would inherit his

possessions. One good day Zhumaghul would become the most important and wealthy figure of the aul". Amire aksakal and Kamaria also heard this news, but they kept close counsel and didn't show their happiness. People around them thought they were by no means delighted with their son.

Why, can't he marry a wealthy girl? We wanted him to be a man of leadership and take care of us. But he didn't do anything, a lazy bone one, he doesn't even know how to earn his living. We were thinking not to let him come back. He might have learned about it. But both of them were secretly anticipating the joy of greeting them. When other people learned about it they said, "Zhumaghul will come with his wife in a few days. Kumiz should be ready when they come. Now they are more venerable than before."

Some of them were saying, "Why don't they bring that old woman can hardly stand on her own feet? She doesn't need anything but someone to look after her."

Kamaria took an advantage of it and said, "If that woman is clever enough, she must realize that my son isn't worse than her son. If she wants, Zhumaghul can live with them. In her old age she will probably need a helping hand."

Amire didn't like it when their plans were known to people. Although he liked the conversation, he stopped Kamaria and said, "What a tongue you have got, we will see whatever happens."

It happened so that the secrets Amire and Kamaria wanted to hide from their neighbors were already known to everybody. Speaking about it, they were picturing to themselves the scene of a wonderful wedding party. But Amire was a self-possessed person and didn't show his real feelings. When the talk about Zhumaghul's marriage ceased, people went back to their homes. Some days passed. The sun with weariness was returning to its golden palace. Amire was driving his horses to the watering place. Lambs made the aul very noisy when Kamaria was giving orders to the women who had just returned from milking the sheep. At that time a little boy, a lamb herder came up to her and said, "Suinshi (good news for which the messenger usually gets presents) apa (gives meanings as granny, aunt depending on the dialect), Zhumaghul agha (uncle) is coming."

When people heard this news they made some fuss about it which showed that they had been waiting for this day impatiently. Women nervously running here and there, children laughing loudly at their games and seniors coming back from the watering places to the aul—all witnessed this instant happiness. Soon, far off a troika appeared. When the arbakesh (a coachman) saw the people, he made the horses go faster. Nevertheless, for the waiting people these minutes of anticipation seemed longer than the years they had been living. When the horses stopped near Amire's big white yurt, the people began kissing the passengers. After the passengers and villagers asked a few questions about each other's health, they came into the house. People in the house were examining the two newcomers, their clothes and their

manner of speaking, and they felt no correspondence between them. It was difficult to get used to each other, they were like people of different worlds.

Zhumaghul and Kadisha wore quite decent summer clothes. Formal words filled Zhumaghul's speech. One could see such strange manners from the fiancée's side also. Instead of greeting her parents-in-law according to the old custom, she said only, "How do you do," and after that sat together with her husband in the place of honor for guests. Her whispering with Zhumaghul was so foolish. Kadisha was not educated. She merely was imitating the town people she was accustomed to deal with. Zhumaghul and Kadisha didn't realize how foolish they looked, that the women were laughing at them. But the men seemed serious as if they didn't notice anything. Only a few of them gave a slight hint. Amire remained enigmatically silent, his sensitive heart hurt. But his great hope for future stanching his anger. Thus, they all kissed Zhumaghul despite their hurt feelings.

In a few days father and son, mother and fiancée found their affection for each other growing. When they remembered about Makhsut's wealth none of them could keep aloof! They were of the same yeast. As a matter of fact it is a thing to know people by sight, quite another to know what is going on in their minds. These four people knew each other's minds, their thoughts; the barrier between them, which seemed insurmountable at first, didn't exist now. Kamaria was saying again and again, "We lost a great accumulation of our wealth on your education. It's high time for you to eke the gap by any means."

The fiancée's dowry seemed nothing now. There was only one aim before each member of the family, a vivid one—vie with one another for the care of the old woman. Zhumaghul and Kadisha didn't discuss it much before. But now if they were left alone, they made different secret plans. The thought of becoming rich and wealthy gave them not a moment of peace. Though young, they were clever and practical enough and knew all the ways of happy living. But Kamaria wasn't satisfied. She always found time and ways to talk about it. If she couldn't tell them straightforwardly, she would talk to little Zhamila as if she were their ears. "Will there be time for you to take your wealth back? When will you help us?" This way she showed her resentment towards their being too slow.

Since his wife was practical about making money, Amire began scheming other ways to gather wealth. They had a rich neighbor Zhanghazy. When Zhanghazy saw Zhamila and that she was very beautiful, he said to Amire, "I have a child born last year. I want to propose him to your grand daughter as a husband when they grow up."

It was what Amire had been dreaming of. Without wasting time, he told Zhumaghul about it. But the latter became angry with him and said, "There is no need of speaking about it. I don't want people to think about me as an imprudent rascal. On top of that, I'm going to tell the old woman that I will adopt the child and think about her upbringing. If we deal with Zhanghazy we would become a laughing stock of people. They wouldn't only laugh at us but would also despise us.

It was clear that Zhumaghul wouldn't agree. Amire said, "People never wish you well. If you become rich or have a better life, they don't like it. But always being afraid of them, you can never be rich. You will never be respectable and famous unless you are disposed to cheat."

IV

Three months passed since the arrival of Zhumaghul and Kadisha. People started to reap the fields, for the harvest was already ripe. The beautiful flowers and green grass had gone and one could not see anything but high feather grass on either side of the aul. The whole summer the cattle had been trampling on the green grass, and as a result the jailau became like a face of an old and ugly man. Thus, Amire aksakal together with other auls roamed with their animals from jailau to low ground between high hills.

Zhumaghul and Kadisha were glad they had come home. It was obvious that they put on weight. Their pale faces tanned, and they looked rested. They were respected by the whole aul, and there wasn't a single day they were left without invitation. Now, when the aul was busy with its fall troubles, they decided to leave for the town. Before their departure the family held a meeting to settle the problem of Makhsut's bequest.

After the hard work of moving from the jailau people were tired. In a cloudless sky the moon blazed brightly. Talking ceased and only dogs barked. Sitting around the campfire Zhumaghul and Kadisha thought about what to do. After a while Kamaria joined them. A saying goes, "Don't be a rival to the one whose salt you have eaten". Zhumaghul was afraid to touch the issue openly. He guarded his thoughts and listened to others. Kamaria and Kadisha warmed to the topic and spoke everything in their minds. They agreed that there was no one very close to Makhsut except the old woman. It is no secret that sooner or later she will die. What she needs is a person to look after her. No one objects if little Zhamila will be the heiress. Despite the risks, we must put everything down to Zhamila's name.

The next day Zhumaghul and Kadisha left the aul. Though they had had a good time, they missed the town, their friends.

The poor old woman had lived on, always restraining her tears and complaining of her unjust fate and appalling life. After Kadisha had married, she had invited her lame brother to live their unhappy lives together. When she heard about the couple's return to town, she didn't sleep whole night waiting for them to come. Having learned about it, Kadisha came to her with Zhamila. After they entered the house they asked about their acquaintances. The old woman cried bitterly embracing the little girl. But it didn't move Kadisha. She remained cool. It was so tiresome for her to sit around the old woman and she left the house quickly. When Zhumaghul came home, Kadisha's father Kandibai told them, "Don't waste your time stuffing your heads with nonsense. Talk to your friends and claim what is yours."

So Zhumaghul and Kadisha set to work instantly. After consulting with several people, Zhumaghul concocted a fiction to convince an official of the education department to issue a writ demanding the old woman leave her wealth for the education of their child. . At last it was decided that Makhsut's legacy would be given to Zhamila, and till she grew up, Zhumaghul would be the custodian. Akhtai was one of the people who helped them to file a suit against the poor woman and increase their wealth threefold.

Akhtai had a reason for being friendly to them. As soon as Zhumaghul and Kadisha had gotten married, Akhtai's brother came from aul. The latter burst into anger when he learned what had happened. He swore, "You don't have the knack of happy living. It should have been you and not Zhumaghul to marry Kadisha and be owner of the wealth. You never knew how to seize a chance, and you will remain forever with nothing to live on". What his brother had said was true. But it was too late. He had no way out but help and fawn upon them.

When Kadisha brought the order from the education department, Kandibai sent a man to Makhsut's mother. He said, "It is no good for her to be alone in her old age. She needs a person at a hand. What she has to do is to give everything she owns to Zhumaghul and join her fate with them."

It was worse than Makhsut's death. It was as if God struck her with his mattock a second time. She knew that misfortune never came alone. For the first time in her life she felt unhappy without hope and realized what loneliness would mean to her.

Unfortunately, Duisen, who brought the news, didn't understand her feelings. Though she turned blue with fury, she plucked up her courage and said, "Zhumaghul is nothing more than an enemy for me. As long as I'm alive I won't give them my things. Though I have no child, I have many relatives. I have strength to fight against you. If you are brave enough try to touch me."

But when she heard about the writ, she lost her presence her mind. She knew that she had been attacked in some manner, but what on earth could she do? She was helpless and vulnerable. No human soul who would stick up for her, or sympathize with her. Suddenly she remembered her son's friend Meirkhan. She took her lame brother with her and came to him, bursting into tears. She appealed for help, and added that Kadisha had taken all her dowry back, and now they were trying to take Makhsut's welfare. She asked Meirkhan to help her, to save her soul from this violence. Meirkhan didn't know how clever his enemy was and promised to help.

The next day he came to Zhumaghul. "How can a man be so inhuman? You are a person of a high rank, you are educated. You've got married to a rich girl, ha taken back everything that belonged to her. It is impossible that you need more to take care of your wife. Do whatever you want to, but do not make the old woman cry."

Zhumaghul thought Meirkhan was jealous of him and said, "It is not my handiwork. Kadisha knows how to act. I can't stop her. If you are illintended, do tell us openly, and don't forget that there will time for us to stand against you.

Meirkhan did his utmost, but it was error to take them for educated and modern. They were shameless and inhuman. So he left them. Meanwhile, Zhumaghul and Akhtai spread false rumors that Meirkhan was jealous of Zhumaghul being rich. When the old woman learned about it, she nearly lost fainted. She was delirious. Her quiet face become outraged and cold. She was touching everything continuously and saying, "I won't give everything to you. Kill me. Tomorrow I will go to my Makhsut, and give everything to him."

What a shame?! That evening Zhumaghul heard about it and gave his incriminating document to militia after which he and three soldiers came to her.

When old woman's stunned eyes met their eyes , they a fire kindled in her. She sat up on her bed and cried, "I don't give anything."Kill me, kill me. Makhsut, my child, help me, they are killing me, they are torturing me, save me from them."

She could hardly finish these words and fell down. When Zhumaghul and others came to her, they saw no sign of life in her eyes, but there was a contemptuous laugh on her face.

In a few minutes she died. Zhumaghul and Kadisha's wishes came true.