

Mamadali Mahmudov: *Eternal Mountain*

Uzbek, fiction

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Synopsis

"The Eternal Mountain" is an allegory that can be read on different levels. On the first it is a story that does not fit into the Western tradition, about Buronbek, a young Uzbek and Rayhon the girl he marries, confronting rivals who resort to all means to conquer her, from kidnap to rape, in the late 19th century, when the conquest of the Uzbek khanate of Kokand by Russian forces was carried out, which was then placed under the protectorate of the Emirate of Bukhara.

It is also a wonderful evocation of the customs and culture of the Uzbeks at this time, but it is mainly a pretext to denounce Russian chauvinism, the human cost of conquest by Tsarist forces of the Kazakh steppes and Central Asia. It is a plea for a peaceful dialogue between cultures: symbolically, the marriage of Buronbek with Rayhon, a young Uzbek faithful to the traditions, is sterile, while the hero has a son during his brief liaison in Siberia with a Russian Anna Evseyeva, and can familiarize himself with the positive and negative sides of society and civilization in Russia. Conversely, Tatiana Volkova, Anna's sister, who agrees to settle at Kattabagh after the death of her husband, an Uzbek, is seen as a factor of justice and peace during the occupation of the Djizzak region by the Russian army.

Should we read the book as a polemic on the status of the Uzbek language, relegated to second place behind the Persian, the official language of the khanates of Central Asia up to the Russian conquest and behind Arabic used for prayers or see a veiled criticism of the use of Russian as the language of administration in Soviet Central Asia?

Buronbek who, through his education, culture and religion is Uzbek, recruits with his Kazakh friend Buriboy, in a spirit of patriotism, volunteers to fight the Russians, but is described by his Uzbek enemies as "Russian" because he learned Russian and he distances himself somewhat from the religious.

Initially Kunor and Kunis, two tribal chiefs lead their tribe from the city of Turkestan (located in the valley of Syr-Darya) in the mountains near Djizzak, where the Oqqoya, (White rock) are escaping from the destruction threatened by the forces of Genghis Khan. At the end of the 19th century, Buronbek, one of their descendants grew up reading the classics of his people, including the "Zafarnamé" Book of victories, of Tamerlane. He is impregnated by their spirit. His father toughened him up from an early age, he learns to use weapons, ride horses, to love nature and respect its history and the relationship between man and his environment. Buronbek, who is sent to study for seven years in a madrasah in Tashkent, also participates in the philosophical discussions between his father and his circle.

Through these discussions, Buronbek argues that the independence of Turkestan, and good relations between the Turkish peoples who live there are linked to the religious beliefs and cultural values they share. The willingness to fight for the liberation of the people can only take precedence over any harm if it attains the spirit of each person, if it becomes his creed.

At 21 years old, the hero, son of a bouzkashi (...) champion, as a true epic hero, gets an opportunity to show his mettle in fighting a bull that terrorizes the village. The bull becomes insane and begins to charge people at random. Buronbek hears about it when he is in the summer pastures. He arrives there at a gallop, he jumped off his horse skilfully, while the bull, which saw

him began to charge him. Buronbek took evasive action and the bull ran into the mulberry tree that was in front of him. He took shelter behind an elm that the bull charged again. Seeing Rayhon, a young girl who follows the scene with horror, the young man feels galvanized, and when the animal charged again, he jumped aside again, later giving it a formidable punch between the eyes. He then completed the act by striking the bull with an axe that Rayhon found for him. Then he triumphed over Aunghar, who was in love with Rayhon, in a duel after he had unsuccessfully tried to kidnap her.

Mirzabek, a childhood friend, caught a wolf cub while he was doing a hike with Buronbek in the Oqqoya mountains. This was where the ancestors of the village are buried. Mirzabek first wants to kill the wolf cub, but changing his mind he tries to force him to groan in pain in the hope of attracting his mother, in order to kill the wolf and her offspring. However, despite the suffering it endures, the wolf cub remains silent. In other words, it does not betray its mother. Giving up attracting the she-wolf Mirzabek angrily mutilates the body of the wolf cub leaving it to die. But the wolf cub survives and becomes the leader of a cruel pack that attacks people, so it requires collective action by the entire village under the direction of Buronbek, to eliminate the pack.

Just married, Buronbek travelled with a caravan with his uncle Oyghoqbek to Omsk in Russia, where he stayed for some time. He has an affair with Anna, the wife of Colonel Evseev, by whom he has a son. However, after his return, he is the subject of derision in the village because he has no children with Rayhon. His parents urged him to take his niece even, Rano as a second wife, which he refuses to since Rayhon is alive.

Then, taking advantage of the absence of Buronbek and his father, Mirzabek rapes Rayhon, and then kills her stepmother, who saw him when he was taking flight. Rahmat, the father of Buronbek surprised Mirzabek, while he tries again to rape Rayhon and who then kills them both.

Faced with the advance of Russian forces under Cherniaev, who had just taken Tashkent (1865), Buronbek and the Kazakh Buribek combined to form a unit of volunteers. He leads them. Then he attacked the Russian army by surprise, forcing it to retreat. Buronbek was then invited to a private party given under the pretext of honouring him by Muhammad The Giant, an opponent he had defeated in a tournament organized by the emir of Bukhara. He was then beaten, kidnapped and taken to the bed of a river, where he was tortured, but was finally saved by Buriboy, who then hid him in a cave of Oqqoya to heal his wounds. Once recovered from his injuries, Buronbek was determined to continue to fight against the czarist power.

While the Russians march on Samarkand, a detachment commanded by Colonel Edward M. Evseyev occupies Katabagh to avenge the resistance movement led by Buronbek. After killing those volunteers he can find, Colonel Evseyev sets fire to Buronbek's house despite not capturing him.

The structure of the history and language used mirrors that of the Central Asian epics (dastan) and at the same time, it could be, in coded form, a narrative of the life of the author as some critics felt. However, the hero is not a superman. He has no winged horse (tulpar), or magical weapons and waits to become an adult before fighting for the liberty of his peoples.

The work, which appeared in the early 1980s includes many pokes against religion, was originally considered as a response to the canons of Soviet realism. The story itself, preceded by a long evocation of morals of the inhabitants of the Djizzak region, has helped to promote awareness of the identity of Uzbekistan and was awarded the Tcholon Prize in Uzbekistan after its independence 1991.

Arrested in the wake of attacks in Tashkent in 1999, Mamadali Mahmudov (Evril Turan) was convicted after a sham trial to 14 years in prison for Islamism. He had already been arrested

in 1994 and sentenced to four years in prison. He spent some time in the colony-46, a real death camp located in the desert near the town of Navoi, before being transferred to Chirchik prison. He won the PEN / Barbara Goldsmith Freedom to Write Award in 2001. His son was also briefly arrested in 2004.

Sample translation

About this time, dirty deeds were being plotted in an orchard house, where Rayhon lives. Rayhon's orchard house was situated between two mountains. Bluish rocks as if deliberately surrounded this place named Ordatosh. A large waterfall was falling from a big stone behind the garden, which had created a small white river. The cataract's sounds could be heard from a considerable distance. Rayhon's family used to move with light baggage to this remote place every spring. After picking apricots, cherries, plums, nuts, they used to move to Kattabogh, the Big Orchard. They had two savage dogs. They used to be chained to the nut tree and in the evenings they were released.

Ungar Polvon knew this fact. Therefore, he was letting himself down from a smooth rock with a long woollen rope near the cataract. Ungar Polvon intended to kill the dogs in a noisy place and then to enter secretly the room where Rayhon was sleeping, and to kidnap her.

Probably, as he for the first time resorted to such a deed, his emotion was increased as he approached the large waterfall and his heart began to beat faster and faster. Although there was lightning and it was thundering and raining heavily in the garden, his temperature was rising.

Qodirbek, who was chasing Ungar Polvon, was watching him very carefully like a goshawk. When he was about to reach about thirty feet, he untied the rope. Despite his fitness, Ungar Polvon fell down to the small river like a falcon. Strong waves removed him like a straw.

The giant dogs, which can see from near and far and are capable of hearing the slightest rustle, barked strongly and rushed to the bank. While the dogs were running to the bank, and digging up the earth and were barking ferociously, Ungar Polvon thought: 'Everything is over!' and crawled to the bank hopeless and exhausted.

The dogs severely attacked him. He lost his balance for a second. Sometimes, even a second performs a decisive role. One dog bit his right hip and the second one bit his left hand.

Ungar Polvon used to practise perfectly well the goat dragging and falling from horses. Therefore, he was experienced and battle-hardened. With lightning speed he took himself in hand and strongly plunged his dagger into the lion-shaped dog's head. Having seen its partner lying on the ground, the other dog started to bark, both escaping and approaching. The dog was afraid to attack the man, the owner of the dagger, which was glittering in the dark under the rain.

While he was coming to this place he recollected that his horse frequently snorted as though it was afraid of something, and his heart was alarmed, and he himself repeatedly looked back. While recollecting that moment, he felt tingles down his spine.

'Damn him, the foul one!', Ungar Polvon said with vexation. 'Damn him, the foul one!', he repeated. 'I will settle scores with you not only if you study in Tashkent, but even in Mecca or Medina. You will have me to reckon with. I will get even with you as a man, not secretly, like you!'

When Ungar Polvon started to flee towards the waterfall; some commanding voices burst out in the darkness.

'Stop, cursed man, we will shoot you like a dog!

Little Qodirbek mistakenly identified him as a brother-in-law of his sister Rayhon and dug out Ungar Polvon's gift that he left under the snow.

This news spread throughout the village as it dawned. The dawn was transparent and the sky was blue. Like in a legend there were green grasses and the birds were singing. Some half-dry refreshing fragrance was left everywhere. Clear small pools appeared here and there. Only Kattaboghsoy's water became muddy, its water rose and was flowing rapidly.

At his wife's urgent request the miller Qudrat came to the mosque, over the khonaqoh [dervishes' room] in order to release Sust khotin [According to Uzbek people's tradition, they sing a song, imploring the God to give more rain in spring for agricultural crops]. Rahmat Polvon could not accompany him, because he had to stay with his beloved grandson, Qodirbek, who had suddenly caught a cold.

After breakfast, Uyghoqbek, Qahramonbek, Buronbek set off for the foothills of Ungartosh – a dewy pasture, where wild wheat and yellow clover was growing. For centuries a giant plane tree had been inclining its leaves over a lake. The lake was situated in the middle of the pasture that absorbed the overnight rain in abundance. According to an old tradition of Qattabogh, a thief (no matter whether he steals cattle or kidnaps a girl) should be bound to this plane-tree and be beaten. The whole village was shocked probably due to the absence of a similar event in the last thirty years.

While the three of them were going along a winding path, forming a line and enjoying the beautiful changes in the nature, Buronbek:

'It flourished everywhere within the night,' he said. 'Water resembles the Mother, more precisely, it is possible to call it Mother-Water. Mother water resuscitates the universe, and fosters and nurtures it.

'That is true!' Qahramonbek looked at the Sun that was rising at a place where the turquoise, blue sky and snowy mountains joined. 'However, in one night we could very nearly have lost Rayhon.'

'I was mostly astonished by Qahramonbek's heroism.' Uyghoqbek interrupted him.

Buronbek suddenly was silent for some reason. Then he desperately looked at the cranes that were flying forming a triangle, and reluctantly heard the screams of children, who were shouting: 'Get a rope, get a carpet!'

The people of Kattabogh gathered around the plane-tree. Ungar Polvon was brought on a bareback donkey, sitting back to front. Within the night, his eyes had deeply sunk down, his jawbones had become visible and his hair turned grey. These changes in his body were not because of the fact that he had been afraid, but because he burned with shame and wished the earth could swallow him up. Actually, he was an honest lad. However, as every perfect man has one defect, he also had one weak point in his behaviour. He was hot-tempered and vindictive.

While Buronbek was looking at his bare head and yellowed face, he thought: 'If I ask the people, could they forgive him? Is there any person, who did not make a mistake in the world? Well, he is the lad, who spread Kattabogh's reputation to Central Asia! Poor fellow, he had a fault in his

character. Is it possible that the people will forgive him? No, they will not! When they see a thief these obstinate people's hearts become of stone.'

By the order of the village headman, Ghoyib bobo, three fellows put Ungar Polvon's hands and feet into irons and a rope round his neck. Due to the almost complete absence of crime there was no one to carry out punishment nor policemen in the village. The three fellows had been elected just a while ago by the people. As the crime had been committed in the shariah judge's house, Ghoyib oqsoqol [the headman], having on a white turban and a white sleeveless jacket, with a smiling face, clever eyes, and grey beard was conducting the process.

Although the people knew the reason of the theft, Ghoyib bobo read it out. Then he required the three fellows to: 'According to the agreement of Kattabogh's people, lash the thief 60 times.' Only that time Ungar Polvon raised his head and looked around with sorrow and scorn as if he was seeking after somebody. As his disdainful glance fixed on Buronbek, his eyes sparkled coldly like a dead man's eyes

However, at this moment the three fellows started to lash Ungar Polvon mercilessly. Following each lash on the shoulder, he trembled and shook all over. But he never groaned.

Only his adam's apple nervously now and again ascended and descended. A little later his body was covered with spots of blood, his white shirt and breeches were torn and drenched in blood. Round the plane-tree became red.

Powerful as a mountain Ungar Polvon was still standing on his feet. Following consecutive lashes he got lost like a drug addict and was moving around the plane-tree. The people were astonished that he was erect and powerful like a plane-tree; they were surprised that he was still standing after fifty seven lashes.

Seeing this, the three giants, who could grind a mountain into particles, became furious. They went into hysterics from the hard-hearted people's shameless shouts, too.

'You should be severely whipped, ha ha!'

The three fellows gave him the last severe lash with vexation, anger and contempt. Ungar Polvon went down on his knees. However, he did not fall.

According to their custom, Ghoyib oqsoqol said the last words: 'According to our ancestors' tradition, from now on let all of us call Ungar Polvon, Ungar-the-thief!' Following these words, Ungar-the-thief collapsed. Everybody dispersed. Before going home, Qahramonbek said: 'My friend, Buronbek, Ungar-the-thief cast a hostile glance at you. You should beware of him.'

'I am not afraid of him!' Buronbek gave a brusque response, and suddenly his face turned pale then he was furious.

'This evening we will continue the party at my place.' Qahramonbek seemed to ignore Buronbek's words.

'All of you come early'.

They parted.

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