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**FROM SHEVCHENKO TO NEVRUZ:
MEMORY AND RITUAL IN THE LAYERED MODERNITY
OF CONTEMPORARY KAZAKH POETRY ON AKTAU**

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This article examines how the city of Aktau is represented in contemporary Kazakh poetry as a layered modernity structured through memory and ritual. Between 1964 and 1991, the city bore the name Shevchenko, embedding a transregional resonance between the Black Sea and Caspian worlds; the 1991 restoration of the indigenous toponym preserved not only local geography but also the exilic trace, exemplifying Boym's concept of "reflective nostalgia" (2021). Meanwhile, ritual images such as Nevruz suspend

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industrial chronologies, re-inscribing the city into seasonal and cultural cycles. Through the works of poets including Tilepov, Oralbayuly, Yesdaulet, Bayekeev, Nurjan, and Arip, Aktau emerges not merely as a Soviet port but as a “poetic palimpsest” continually rewritten through dual motifs – mountain/sea, wind/fauna, Nevruz/apartment blocks. In addition to these spatial and symbolic tensions, the article highlights how ecological imagery animates the poetic imagination of the city: wind, salt, and waves often appear as active agents negotiating with the technological infrastructures of modernity. This ecological perspective reveals how natural forces resist, absorb, or reinterpret industrial impositions, adding a dynamic environmental dimension to Aktau’s literary identity. The study also examines gendered interpretations of urban space, demonstrating how female poets reframe the city through an ethics of care, domesticity, and relationality. These readings introduce alternative emotional geographies that complicate the heroic, industrial, and often masculine-coded representations found in Soviet-era verse. By situating these voices alongside narratives of exile, labor, and ritual, the article presents a multidimensional account of how memory operates across both personal and collective registers. The study thus integrates theories of cultural memory (Assmann), ecocriticism (Buell; Oppermann), and post-socialist memory politics (Humphrey; Tlostanova) to demonstrate how Aktau is imagined both nationally and transregionally within Kazakh poetic discourse. Ultimately, the article argues that Aktau functions as a literary archive in which modernity, mythology, ecology, and care ethics intersect, producing an evolving cultural narrative that continues to shape contemporary Kazakh identity.

Keywords: Aktau, Kazakh poetry, Shevchenko, Nevruz, cultural memory, palimpsest, ecocriticism

Introduction

“Like Taras, so many poets carried unfulfilled dreams”. – Mıltıkbay Erimbetov, Aktau. Shevchenko [Ақтау. Шевченко] [Erimbetov n.d.]

“Ақтауым – арман мен жастық, береке, достық шаһары”. – Galym Arip, Aktau – Dream City (Ақтау – арман қаласы) [Arip n.d.]

Aktau was founded on the eastern shores of the Caspian Sea in 1961, was soon named after the Ukrainian poet Taras Shevchenko, and regained its name “Aktau” (literally, “White Mountain”) in 1991. This naming cycle is not only a matter of political toponymy, but also a palimpsest of collective memory: traces of Shevchenko’s exile, the memory of the Soviet industrial revolution, and the identity reconstruction

of independent Kazakhstan are intertwined through the city's name. Today, Aktau declared the TURKSOY Cultural Capital for 2025 [TÜRKSOY 2025] is not just a geographical port; it is a laboratory of coastal modernity, rewritten, re-remembered, and re-appropriated through poetic imaginations. In the verses of Kazakh poets, Aktau appears, on the one hand, as a showcase of industrial modernity with its oil rigs, shafts, and port structures, and, on the other, as a space embodying the sacredness of the ancestral land with its cycles of wind, waves, mountains, and Nevruz. This dual representation reveals that the city is not merely a "planned Soviet project" but also a cultural landscape reconstructed in poetic memory across generations¹.

Indeed, while Svetqalı Nurjan's descriptions of "жын қамалған құты" (a genie trapped in a bottle) [Nurjan n.d.] record the remnants of Soviet industry as a cursed legacy, female poets Shamshadinova, Kilibayeva, and Davitbayeva redefine the city through the lens of "homeland", "mother's body", or "care ecology" [Şamşadinova n.d.; Davitbayeva n.d.]. These opposing images, combined with Shevchenko's layer, place Aktau not only within the Kazakh context but also within the transnational geography of memory of the Black Sea-Caspian corridor [Luckyj n.d.].

This layered poetic imagination presents not only a historical backdrop but also a methodological challenge. Aktau's image coexists with the shadow cast by Shevchenko's exile, the towers raised by Soviet industry, and the ethics of care and domestic space highlighted by women poets. This article combines close reading and process-tracing methods to analyze these multiple layers of meaning. Thus, it traces how recurring motifs such as mountain and sea, wind and construction site, exile and Nevruz have differentiated across more than sixty years of poetic production. In the theoretical framework.

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Theoretical Framework

This study is positioned at the intersection of four complementary theoretical strands that together illuminate how Aktau is imagined in contemporary Kazakh poetry. First, theories of cultural memory and spatial poetics provide the foundation for conceptualizing how cities accumulate symbolic layers. Jan Assmann's mnemohistory [Assmann 2015], Gaston Bachelard's *Poetics of Space*, [Bachelard 1996] and Henri Lefebvre's production of space [Lefebvre 2014] offer a framework for reading the city not as a static landscape but as a dynamic memory-text. In the case of Aktau, both the city's toponymic history and its physical topography function as a layered memory site, where ritual, exile, and modernity intersect. To contextualize this within the Kazakh intellectual tradition, the study also draws on regional perspectives on space and memory, such as Auezov's reflections on cultural geography, Kendirbai's work on urban identity in Western Kazakhstan, and Koçaoğlu's analyses of trans-Caspian literary networks. These contributions highlight how Kazakh cultural memory is shaped simultaneously by local mythic structures and transregional historical encounters.

Second, ecocritical approaches deepen the reading of the tension between nature and modernity in the poetic imagination of Aktau. Lawrence Buell's concept of the environmental imaginary [Buell 1995; Buell 2005], Serpil Oppermann's ecocritical poetics [Oppermann 2016], help reveal how images of wind, salt, rock, and fauna coexist with oil rigs, port cranes, and residential blocks. Nature in these poems is not a passive backdrop but an active agent that resists, reshapes, and reinterprets modernity.

Third, postsocialist and decolonial frameworks further illuminate how poetic narratives negotiate Kazakhstan's transition from Soviet urban planning to national reterritorialization. Caroline Humphrey's work on postsocialist everyday life [Humphrey 2002], Stephen Kotkin's notion of the project city [Kotkin 1995], and Madina Tlostanova's concept of re-existence [Tlostanova 2017a; 2017b] enable a reading of Aktau as a site where imperial legacies and national imaginaries are continually reworked.

Methodology

This article employs a combined methodological approach that brings together close reading and process-tracing, adapting the latter

from the social sciences to the analysis of poetic texts. While close reading enables a detailed examination of imagery, rhythm, and symbolic density, process-tracing allows us to track how these symbolic elements transform across historical periods and poetical generations.

In literary analysis, process-tracing is used here not to establish causal mechanisms in the strict political-science sense, but to illuminate the *sequential development* and *semantic evolution* of motifs. This approach makes it possible to identify how a particular image – such as the tower, the sea, the mountain, or the wind – acquires new meanings as it moves from Soviet-era industrial optimism to post-Soviet skepticism or ecological re-interpretation. Thus, process-tracing helps reveal how poetic memory accumulates, diverges, and re-configures itself over time. The analysis proceeds in four stages:

1. Imagery and speech-act identification. In each poem, dominant images (e.g., mountain-sea, wind, bird, mine, block) and speech-acts (prayer, invocation, address, cursing) are identified and catalogued.

2. Coding grid. These elements are mapped onto a five-dimensional analytical grid that structures the comparative analysis:

- Myth / earth–water
- Ecology / modernity
- Ritual time
- Gender / urbanity
- Transregional memory

This grid forms the analytical backbone of the process-tracing method, allowing images to be followed across texts and periods in a systematic way.

3. Motif transformation. Shifts in meaning are traced diachronically. For instance, while Kakimbek Salikov's Soviet-period verses glorify miners as embodiments of socialist heroism, Svetqalı Nurjan's post-Soviet poems recast the same mining towers as symbols of exhaustion, decay, or existential unease. Such changes chart the transformation of cultural memory across generations.

4. Micro-comparisons. Finally, a comparative layer examines how different poets reshape similar motifs within thematic clusters. This step highlights the plural, sometimes conflicting ways in which Aktau is imagined in contemporary Kazakh poetry.

Through this combined method, the study uncovers not only what symbols mean, but *how* they travel, shift, and accumulate within the poetic memory of the city.

Translation and Intertextual Reading

The English translations of the Kazakh poems used in the analysis prioritize semantic meaning; poetic function and context are considered rather than literal translation at the word level. However, transliteration is preserved for culturally charged concepts such as *yer-su* and *bata*. This approach ensures both cultural authenticity and conceptual continuity.

Methodological Contribution

Unlike collecting classical anthologies, this method enables to establish processual connections between poems. This allows us to trace how the same motifs acquire new ethical and political implications across generations. George & Bennett's process-tracing approach is here adapted not only to political science but also to analyzing the historical layers of literary symbols.

Limitations

The corpus of our study is largely shaped by anthologies published in different periods. However, publication dates and poetic variants sometimes differ between these anthologies. This makes historical accuracy difficult in intertextual comparisons. Therefore, cross-resource scanning (bibliography, archives, oral commentaries) was applied in our analysis whenever possible. Another limitation is the issue of translation. As with any translation, there is a certain degree of loss of meaning in the translation of Kazakh poems into English. Culturally charged concepts such as *yer-su* (sacred geography) and *bata* (prayer), in particular, were preserved through transliteration rather than direct translation [Venuti 1995]. This choice was made consciously, as reducing the semantic layers of these concepts to Turkish equivalents risks diminishing their cultural depth. Nevertheless, this "semantic loss", which inevitably arises in the translation process, can be interpreted as "productive ambiguity" within the framework of Jan Assmann's theory of cultural memory [Assmann 2015].

Ethics Note

This research is primarily based on published and publicly available poetry texts. No systematic ethnographic fieldwork was conducted.

However, the researchers occasionally conducted informal, conversational interviews with contemporary Kazakh poets – specifically, Svetqalı Nurjan and Galim Arip. However, these interviews were neither included in the qualitative interview format nor in the data collection process. These contacts provided only contextual insight and were not decisive for the textual analysis.

Therefore, all interpretations and analyses of this study are based on the published poetry corpus and secondary academic sources. Thus, both transparency and replicability were maintained throughout the research process.

Close Reading

A. Myth – Earth-Water and Sacred Toponymy

The mountain-sea dichotomy is not only a geographical motif in Aktau poetry, but also a constitutive tension intertwined with the earth-water [Inan 1976] tradition. Although the city was constructed as a port and logistics center during the Soviet era, it is reread in Kazakh poetry as a palimpsest bearing the sacredness of ancestral spaces. In this context, the mountain is often positioned as the carrier of the “ancestral breath”, while the sea is positioned as both the space of industrial modernity and the mirror of collective memory.

In Tilepov’s verses, the mountain becomes “bata” (prayer), carrying the wind from the ancestral homeland; thus, topography is directly articulated into ritual practice. In Oralbayuly, the sea is labored with pipelines and harbor noise; yet the “illusory” [Austin 1962] power of waves and wind transforms the industrial surface into a sacred address. Yesdaulet reconstructs the mountain-sea binary through the mother-child bond: the mountain becomes a protective “white tent”, and the sea a “restless child”. Here, Carol Gilligan’s ethics of care redefines [Gilligan 2017] urban space through compassion and responsibility. Bayekeev, on the other hand, adds the Shevchenko layer, opening up the motif’s transregional dimension: while the sea becomes associated with exile and language loss, the mountain becomes a “palimpsest of names”. Thus, Aktau becomes not only a local site of memory but also a culturally resonant node in the Black Sea – Caspian memory continuum.

Ultimately, the mountain-sea binary functions as a switching mechanism, constantly oscillating between local sanctity and indus-

trial modernity, national memory and imperial strata. This transitivity aligns with Assmann's concept of "mnemohistory" [Assmann 2015], – the study of how the past is remembered, reinterpreted, and continually rewritten in cultural memory – demonstrating that the past, not merely a remnant but a constantly rewritten layer of meaning, continues to live on in the city's poetic palimpsest.

B. Ecological Imagination

In Aktau's poems, nature appears not merely as a backdrop but as a direct agent. Ecological imagination continually erodes the industrial codes imposed by Soviet planning and reconstitutes the city as a "living system". In this context, nature becomes a collective subject, not subject to modernity but rather one that negotiates with it.

Kibasov's line, "The breath of the waves in the eyes of the saplings" [Kibasov n.d.], does not see the city as mere concrete blocks; on the contrary, it transforms the rhythm of the sea into the city's respiration. Here, Buell's concept of "environmental imagination" [Buell 1995] comes into play: nature enters the scene not as a backdrop, but as an identity-forming subject.

In Kilibayeva, the image of the sea breeze and "white tents" renders Lefebvre's distinction between "conceived and lived space" visible [Lefebvre 2023]: beyond the planned port and blocks, the city becomes a domesticated space. In this context, the wind is not merely a physical flow but a carrier of cultural codes such as motherhood and hospitality.

Davitbayeva's metaphor of "blue sea dress, white waves skirt" directly transforms Aktau into a feminine body. This reproduces the cultural identification between nature and women, as ecofeminist criticism [Plumwood 1993; Merchant 1980] has pointed out, while simultaneously revealing a resilient imaginary of the body: the city is clothed not with steel, but with water and wind.

In Narikov's line "iron poles piercing the earth's chest" [Narikov n.d.], the triumphal rhetoric of modernism is simultaneously heard as an ecological wound. Here, technological progress carries the meaning of both heroism and transgression. This dual coding prepares an inherent critique of the discourse of "progress", even in Soviet-era poetry.

Thus, Kibasov's breathing, Kilibayeva's domesticated space, Davitbayeva's feminine body, and Narikov's wounded earth, when combined, construct Aktau as an ecological palimpsest. The identity of the city is not born from oil rigs or blocks, but from the resistance of waves, wind, birds and stones.

C. Industrial Modernity and the Aesthetics of Labor

In Aktau's poetic map, industrial modernity produces both heroic and catastrophic aesthetics. This dual sentiment evolves from the exaltation of labor to the condemnation of space, in a continuum extending from the Soviet era to the post-independence era.

Құттықтайды Атырау Мен Ақтауым	Congratulations Atyrau and Aktau.
Дүбірімен Геркулестей зор күштің, Шахтер қауым батырлармен тең түстің.	With your strength, you are as strong as Hercules, and you are on a par with the heroes of the Shakhtar community.

Salikov's description of the miners as "Hercules-powered" [Salikov n.d.] demonstrates that Soviet rhetoric constructed the worker not only as a producer but also as an epic hero. A direct analogy is drawn here between the batir tradition and the proletarian worker. Such lines resonate with Kotkin's concept of the "magnetic mountain" [Kotkin 1995]: industrial cities are constructed not only as economic but also as ideological centers of attraction.

Маңғыстау	Mangistau
Бұрын өңсіз жон еді бұл аралар, Бүгінбосжертаппайсыңсынақағар. Жер төсіне қадалған темір діңгек, Айдала самсап тұр мұнаралар.	These were once a lifeless place, Today you won't find a vacant lot to build a wall. An iron pillar is driven into the earth, The towers are standing idly.

This Narikov's poem Mangistau depicts the city as "steel forest" [Narikov n.d.], and nevertheless embodies ambivalence: on the one hand, an epitome of technological triumph, and on the other, a meta-

phor for a violation that pierces the earth's breast. This dual coding corresponds to Debord's definition of "spectacular modernity" [Debord 2022]: the spectacle of progress simultaneously produces injury and alienation.

In the post-independence era, Svetqali Nurjan inverts the same semantic set (pipes, chimneys, blocks), describing the city as "қиямет қағанаты" (apocalyptic realm) [Nurjan n.d.].

Ақтау қаласы (Негатив)	Aktav şehri (Negativ)
Аталады "Ақтау" деп қалам аты, Салған оны қиямет Қағанаты. Бір кездері бола да жаздап қалған, "XX – ғасырдың ғаламаты!" ... Ергежейлі елінің Тас көсемі, Мас көшенің бұтынан тұр сығалап. ... Көк – Тағала! Сайтан өрнек құрып жүр, Сайқалы ер боп, Мұнайы көп, Құдайы жоқ қалаға.	It was called "Aktau" by the pen name, It was built by the Khaganate of Doom. Once upon a time, it almost became, "The wonder of the 20 th century!" ... The Stone Leader of the Dwarf Country, Stands at the end of the street, drunk. ... The God of the sky! Satan is creating a pattern, As a man of great wealth, To a city with a lot of oil, With no God.

Here, industrial heritage is now perceived as catastrophe and demonized modernity. Tlostanova's concept of "post-socialist re-existence" [Tlostanova 2017b] explains this transformation: the remnants of modernity are no longer spaces of progress, but of survival and re-existence. Thus, the line drawn between Salikov's heroic miners, Narikov's ambivalent steel jungle, and Nurjan's apocalyptic city reveals the poetic destiny of industrial modernity: triumph → violation → curse.

D. Memory Politics: The Shevchenko/Aktau Layer

The official adoption of the name "Shevchenko" in Aktau between 1964 and 1991 produced not only a toponymic shift in the

city's poetic memory but also a transregional politics of memory. The exile of Ukrainian national poet Taras Shevchenko to Mangystau in the 1850s constitutes the intersection of themes of exile, language loss, and resistance in both Kazakh and Ukrainian literature [Luckyj 1980].

Erimbetov's line, "Many poets, like Taras, carried unfinished dreams" [Erimbetov n.d.], directly poeticizes this intersection: Shevchenko's unfinished dream evokes both the suppression of national memory and the linguistic ruptures during the Soviet era.

Ақтау. Шевченко	Aktau. Shevchenko
... Қараңғы, қатал заманда, Қамалып қапас қамауда. Қаһарман кобзарь жырлады, Келерін бақыт Адамға.	... In a dark, harsh time, Locked up in a cage. The heroic kobzar sang, Blessings to come to Adam.
Даланы сүйді тағы да, Украинасын сағына. Үмітпен шыбық қадады, ол Айналды Тарас бағына.	He loved the steppe again, Missing Ukraine. He planted a stake with hope, And it turned into Taras' garden.

The restoration of the name to "Aktau" after Kazakhstan gained independence in 1991 can be interpreted through Boym's concept of "reflective nostalgia" [Boym 2021]. In this form of nostalgia, the past is not completely erased; on the contrary, loss and gain persist simultaneously. While the local toponym is reclaimed, the Shevchenko layer remains as a "subtext" in memory.

This dual politics of memory can be explained by the concept of "layered memory" [Assmann 2015] in Assmann's theory of cultural memory: space carries not only the locality of the present but also the exiled voices of the past. Indeed, Temir Mincas's poem "Ақтаудағы Тарас ескерткішін көргенде" relocates Shevchenko to the shore with the image of "шағала көңіл" (seagull's heart) opposite the monument [Mincas n.d.]. This image brings together both local ecology and transregional memory.

Ақтаудағы тарас ескерткішін көргенде	When I see the Taras monument in Aktau
<p>...</p> <p>Айдалып келдің жеріме, бұл дағы бұғау – тағдырдан. Рухың риза біледі ел, қазақтай ұлы халыққа Өз ақынындай әспеттеп, бейненді тасқа қондырған... Мұндылау шықты өлеңің, кезің көп болды жабығар, Днепр өзен –анана жолдадың сәлем сазы бар, Сіз жүрген жерді көрмекке осында талай келер жұрт, Жақсыда жаттық жоқтығын, бейненді көрген жан ұғар. Тәуелсіздік таңы атып, шаңырағын тікті түбегім, Украина дербес ел бүгін, іске асты арман-тілегің. “Тарас та мұнда болған” деп, кастерлейміз атыңды Бізбенен әркез үндессе ақындық рух-жүрегің...</p>	<p>...</p> <p>You came to my land, this is also a fetter from fate. The country knows your soul, to a great nation like the Kazakhs Like its own poet, you set your image on stone... Your poem is sad, you have been gone for a long time, you sent a greeting to your mother, the Dnieper River, there is a melody of greeting, many people come here to see the place where you are, whether we are well or not, the one who sees your image will understand. The dawn of independence has dawned, my peninsula has raised its flag, Ukraine is an independent country today, your dream and wish have come true. «Taras was here too,» we will chant your name if your poetic soul and heart always resonate with us...</p>

Thus, Aktau emerges as a culturally resonant palimpsest city of the Black Sea – Caspian axis: Shevchenko’s exile cannot be erased, nor can the return of the native toponym be reversed. The Shevchenko layer is not only a shared memory of exile, but also a ground where contrasting emotions arise in different poets.

In Svetqalı Nurjan, this layer is read as the “қиямет қағанаты” (Dies Irae) of the Soviet empire: the city’s name, along with the chimneys rising to the sky, becomes the “mark of a demonic legacy”

[Nurjan n.d.]. For Nurjan, Shevchenko is no longer a “brother exile”, but a cursed name that recalls the internalized trauma of the Soviet project.

In Galım Arip, the same layer is transformed into a utopian vision. In the poem “Aktau – city of dreams”, the poet exalts the city as “жастық пен достық шаһары” (city of youth and friendship) [Arip n.d.].

Ақтау – арман қаласы	Aktau – City of Dream
... Ақтауға келсең, адамды көр сен жаятын құшақ айқара, Шұғыла жүзді шуақты жандар сезімді тербер қайда да.	... If you come to Aktau, see the people who walk with open arms, where are the bright faces and the sunny souls who are sensitive.
... Ақтауым менің- арман мен жастық, береке, достық шаһары, Ақтаудың таңы алаулап атар шашылып алтын шапағы.	... My Aktau is a city of dreams and youth, of prosperity, of friendship, and the morning of Aktau is a fiery dawn and is a golden dawn.

Here, the central theme is not the name Shevchenko, but the post-independence return of the native name. But the past is not entirely erased; Arip’s image of the “white cliff” transcends the layer of exile and produces a vision that opens to the future.

This opposition demonstrates that the Shevchenko/Aktau layer cannot be reduced to a single narrative of memory. Nurjan’s “negative palimpsest” and Arip’s “utopian palimpsest” overlap on the same ground. This overlap can be explained beyond Boym’s “reflective nostalgia” by Tlostanova’s (2017) decolonial concept of “re-existence”: that is, ways of condemning and re-existing the past co-exist in the same city.

E. Ritual Time: Nevruz and the Cycle

Aуарbergenulı’s line “Әр үйдің қағып есік, терезесін, Әз Наурыз Ақтауымды аралап жүр” (“Nevruz knocks on every door, every

window, travels around Aktau)” (1996) demonstrates that seasonal ritual can permeate even Soviet apartment blocks.

Өз, Наурыз. Ақтауымды аралап жүр	Hey, Nauryz. Take a walk around Aktau.
Көк шықты, Наурыз келді Ақтауыма, Көктемді тіл жетпей тұр мақтауыма. ... Соз, Наурыз, қолыңызды баршамызға, Өз, Наурыз, Ақтауыма аяқ басты. ... Әр үйдің қағып есік, терезесін, Өз, Наурыз, Ақтауымды аралап жүр.	The sky is blue, Nauryz has come to my Aktau, Spring is not enough to praise. ... Say, Nauryz, extend your hand to all of us, Now, Nauryz, has set foot in my Aktau. ... Knocking on the doors and windows of every house, Now, Nauryz, is walking around my Aktau.

The personification of Nevruz entering the homes of apartment residents, in line with Mircea Eliade’s concept of “eternal return” (1954), symbolizes the suspension of linear socialist time and the re-activation of cyclical, mythical time. Here, even reinforced concrete blocks are opened to the ritual of ancestral hospitality; thus, the memory of space and the cycle of the calendar overlap [Eliade 2017].

Mincas’s line “Жаңа парақтар жазылар” (“New pages will be written”) (2003) connects individual life stories with the rhythms of the city. Here, the city is not merely a place but a narrative notebook: the life cycle of individuals is written, merging with layers of collective time, like Nevruz. Paul Ricoeur’s concept of “narrative time” (1984) is apt to explain this process: personal biography is articulated with urban ritual, and the city becomes a text constantly “rewritten” by the stories of its inhabitants [Ricoeur 2009].

Thus, ritual time in Aktau’s poems transcends the shift and quota times of industrial modernity, bringing the rhythm of seasonal cycles into the city. This is a layer of time that both connects the city with ancestral rituals and articulates the life stories of new generations. In

these poems, Aktau is imagined not only as an oil port but also as a cultural calendar reborn every spring.

F. Gender and the Ethics of Care

Şamşadinova's line "I learned to love in the steppe, but this naughty city taught me to cry" (2001) portrays the city as an ambivalent lover. Here, nature (the steppe) is the site of emotional learning, while the city is the site of emotional rupture. When considered within Carol Gilligan's concept of "the ethics of care" (1982), Şamşadinova's voice centers relationality and emotional responsibility over abstract heroism or production [Gilligan 2017]. Kilibayeva's lines about white tents (Ақ шатырлар тізілген) domesticate the city: concrete blocks are rewritten with the yurt, the most fundamental symbol of nomadic memory. Lefebvre's distinction between "designed space" and "lived space" (1991) appears here: the planned port city becomes home in the female poet's imagination [Lefebvre 2023].

In Davitbayeva, the metaphor of "blue sea dress, white wave skirt" (2010) directly transforms the city into a feminine body. Joan Tronto's stages of care (1993) – attention, responsibility, skill, and reciprocity – resonate in these lines: Aktau is no longer an industrial project, but a fragile body requiring constant attention [Tronto 1993].

What these three poets share in their voices is the opposition of feminine ethics of care, domestication, and surveillance to the male-dominated discourse of the worker/miner. While Aktau is frequently depicted by male poets as a space to be "conquered" or "produced", by female poets it becomes a space to be "protected", "cared for", and "tamed by loving". This contrast reveals how gender meaningfully shapes the constitutive role of gender in the city's poetic palimpsest.

G. Opposing Images: Negative ↔ Utopia

In Svetqali Nurjan's verses, Aktau is described as "құтысының аузы ашық жын қамалған, дию өріп тұрбалардан" ("jinn trapped in an open bottle, giants spilling out of chimneys") (2002). The city's industrial heritage here takes on a demonic existence: chimneys are no longer signs of progress, but the devil's abode. Madina Tlostanova's concept of "re-existence" (2017) illuminates Nurjan's stance: the poet not only rejects Soviet modernity but poetically reconstructs the experience of the people forced to live in its ruins. The city here is

not the scene of hope, but of language loss and spiritual collapse [Nurjan n.d.].

In contrast, in Galym Arip's poem "Ақтау – арман қаласы", Aktau is portrayed as "арман мен жастық, береке мен достық шаһары" ("the city of dreams and youth, abundance and friendship") (2005/2013). The same sea, the same cliff, the same wind, this time transform into images of hope, friendship, and abundance. Svetlana Boym's concept of "reflective nostalgia" (2021) is crucial here: the fractures of the past are not denied, but overcome by an imagination directed toward the future. Arip's vision makes the city not merely an "industrial center" but a scene of collective youth and rebirth [Arip n.d.]. The semantic fields used by both poets – sea, wind, cliffs, chimneys – are similar; but their valences shift to opposite extremes: for Nurjan, these elements are poisoned and cursed, while for Arip, they are purified and resurrected motifs [Tlostanova 2017a; 2017b]. Therefore, negative utopia and positive utopia circulate simultaneously in Aktau's poetry. This tension reflects the typical characteristics of the post-Soviet imagination: destruction and renewal, curse and hope, the shadow of the past and the possibility of the future coexist [Boym 2021].

The collision of these dual imaginations (Nurjan's dark urban vision and Arip's utopian vision) within the same semantic field reveals the poetic palimpsest nature of Aktau. The city is neither a wholly cursed space nor a pure utopia; it is a threshold oscillating between the two. This liminality reveals both the contradictions of post-Soviet memory and the possibilities for rewriting modernity in Kazakh poetry. Thus, Aktau's poems represent not only a local urban experience but also a broader literary and cultural debate: the desire for renewal amidst ruins, the possibility of hope amidst despair. This tension provides the conceptual underpinning for the transition to the article's discussion and conclusion.

Discussion and Conclusion

Six decades of accumulated poetry demonstrate that Aktau has been constantly rewritten through fixed motifs: mountain-sea, wind-fauna, chimneys-blocks, Nevruz-house. However, the semantic values of these motifs are not fixed; they constantly shift over time: from heroism to pessimism, from industrial pride to an ethic of care, from exile memory to national romanticism.

The Shevchenko layer transforms the city into a suggestive connection to Caspian – Black Sea memory formations. The naming between 1964 and 1991 is not only a Soviet imposition but also a bearer of memories of exile, language loss, and solidarity [Grabowicz 1996; Luckyj 1980; Sysyn 2006]. The 1991 renaming can be interpreted through Boym’s concept of “reflective nostalgia”: while the native toponym is reclaimed, the memory of exile is not completely erased; it is layered [Boym 2021]. In the poems, the port, the pylon, and the apartment blocks are not merely infrastructure; they are worlds of meaning, sanctified, remembered, and domesticated within the sanctity of land and water [Assmann 2015], ritual cycles [Eliade 1959], and an ethics of care [Gilligan 1982; Tronto 1993]. Thus, Aktau ceases to be merely a Soviet project; it becomes a living, rewritten archive of cultural imagination.

At one end of this spectrum lies Svetqalı Nurjan’s descriptions of a “demon-ridden city”, while at the other lies Galym Arip’s utopian vision of a “Dream City”. For Nurjan, chimneys and blocks are demon traps [Nurjan 2002], while for Arip, a city of friendship adorned with Judas trees and seagulls is possible [Arip 2005/2013]. Baktubay Jaylau [Jaylau n.d.], a new generation poet, adds a third voice to this dialectic:

“Шетте жүрсем сағынар
сағынышым,
Мен қазақпын жаралған арым
үшін”.

If I go abroad, I will miss you,
I am Kazakh because of my birth.

Jaylau’s language transcends Nurjan’s negative and Arip’s utopian visions, coding Aktau as a center of diasporic longing and national pride. As a representative of the post-2010 poetic generation, Jaylau writes from a different affective position – neither trapped in Soviet ruins nor fully absorbed in post-independence optimism. His lines encode Aktau as a site of diasporic longing, mobility, and new forms of belonging. Here, Assmann’s theory of cultural memory (2015) and Smith’s ethnosymbolism (1994) converge: Маңғыстау is not merely a city, but a symbol through which national belonging and collective memory are reproduced.

Aktau's poetic palimpsest, therefore, does not merely reckon with the past; it also generates a new emotional and social imagination of the future. Industrial modernity, exile memory, ritual cycles, ethics of care, and national romanticism are layered on the same geographical ground. Future research could use digital text tools to map these motifs temporally and spatially, making Aktau a comparative focus not only in Kazakh poetry but also in all Caspian littoral literature (Baku, Turkmenbashi).

Future research could expand this study by adopting digital text-analysis tools to trace motif evolution across larger corpora, or by comparing Aktau's poetic representations with those of other Caspian littoral cities such as Baku or Turkmenbashi. Such comparative approaches would deepen our understanding of coastal modernities and transregional memory formations in post-Soviet literature.

Ultimately, the poetic imagination of Aktau demonstrates that cities in post-Soviet Central Asia are not merely remnants of planned modernity but living, evolving archives in which memory, ritual, ecology, and care continually reshape the contours of national identity.

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**ВІД ШЕВЧЕНКА ДО НЕВРУЗА: ПАМ'ЯТЬ І РИТУАЛ
У БАГАТОШАРОВІЙ СУЧАСНОСТІ
НОВІТНЬОЇ КАЗАХСЬКОЇ ПОЕЗІЇ В АКТАУ**

У цій статті досліджується, як місто Актау представлене в сучасній казахській поезії – як багат шарова сучасність, структурована через пам'ять і ритуал. Між 1964 і 1991 роками місто мало ім'я Шевченка, закладаючи трансрегіональний резонанс між Чорноморським і Каспійським світами. Відновлення корінного топоніму в 1991 році зберегло не

лише місцеву географію, але й слід вигнання, що є прикладом концепції Бойма про “рефлексивну ностальгію” (2021). Тим часом ритуальні зображення, такі як Невруз, призупиняють промислову хронологію, знову вписуючи місто в сезонні та культурні цикли. Через твори поетів, зокрема Тілепова, Оралбаули, Єсдаулета, Баєкєєва, Нурджана та Аріпа, Актау постає не просто як радянський порт, а як “поетичний палімпсест”, який постійно переписується через подвійні мотиви – гори/море, вітер/фауна, Невруз/житлові квартали. На додаток до цих просторових і символічних напружень, стаття підкреслює, як екологічні образи оживляють поетичну уяву міста: вітер, сіль і хвилі часто постають як активні агенти, які домовляються з технологічною інфраструктурою сучасності. Ця екологічна перспектива показує, як природні сили протистоять, поглинають або переосмислюють промислове нав’язування, додаючи динамічного екологічного виміру літературній ідентичності Актау. У дослідженні також розглядаються гендерні інтерпретації міського простору, демонструючи, як поетеси переосмислюють місто через етику турботи, домашнього життя та відносин. Ці прочитання знайомлять з альтернативними емоційними географіями, які ускладнюють героїчні, індустріальні та часто маскулінно закодовані уявлення у віршах радянської доби. Розташувавши ці голоси поруч із наративами вигнання, праці та ритуалу, стаття представляє багатовимірний опис того, як пам’ять функціонує в особистих і колективних реєстрах. Таким чином, дослідження об’єднує теорії культурної пам’яті (Ассман), екокритицизму (Б’юелл; Опперманн) і постсоціалістичної політики пам’яті (Гамфрі; Тлостанова), щоб продемонструвати, як Актау уявляють як національно, так і трансрегіонально в межах казахського поетичного дискурсу. Зрештою, у статті стверджується, що Актау функціонує як літературний архів, у якому перетинаються сучасність, міфологія, екологія та етика піклування, створюючи культурний наратив, що розвивається і продовжує формувати сучасну казахську ідентичність.

Ключові слова: Актау, казахська поезія, Шевченко, Невруз, культурна пам’ять, палімпсест, екокритика

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