



# An Analysis of the Kurmanjan Datka Movie in the Context of Historical and Ideological Film Criticism

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## Abstract

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*Kurmanjan Datka Queen of the Mountains* (2014) is a Kyrgyz historical drama film directed by Sadyk Sher-Niyaz tells the story of Kurmanjan Datka from Kyrgyz history. In this article, how the mentioned motion picture is discussed in Central Asian, Russian, Turkish and Western digital media is analyzed comparatively in the context of historical and ideological film criticism. It is tried to be understood how each country interprets the film in their own media, how they look at the history of Kyrgyzstan and its ideological discourse. In the research, critical discourse analysis method was used and conceptual and thematic classifications were made. At the end of the research, while more history and politics were discussed in the Central Asian media, the Russian and Turkish digital media did not show enough attention to the historical flow, while the Western digital media discussed the film in a multifaceted way in the context of economy-political, identity, gender and aesthetics. Another remarkable difference was that some of the Kyrgyz or Kazakh critics (especially statesmen, historians or artists) criticized the film on the economic-political axis. The in-depth and multidimensional criticisms of the film developed by the eastern critics were found in the Western media or Western journalists gave place to these views in their own digital media.

## Keywords

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Kurmanjan Datka; Queen of the Mountains; Kyrgyz History; Russia; International Digital Media; Film Criticism; Turkish World; Central Asia; Kyrgyz Cinema; Kyrgyzstan; International Journalism



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## Анализ фильма о Курманжан Датке в контексте исторической и идеологической кинокритики

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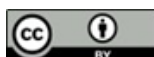
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### Аннотация

«Курманжан Датка: Королева гор» (2014) — киргизская историческая драма в режиссуре Садыка Шер-Нияза, рассказывающая о Курманжан Датке из истории Киргизии. В данной статье проводится сравнительный анализ обсуждения упомянутого фильма в центральноазиатских, российских, турецких и западных цифровых медиа в контексте исторической и идеологической кинокритик. Мы попытаемся понять, как каждая страна интерпретирует фильм в своих СМИ и как они смотрят на историю Киргизии и её идеологический дискурс. В исследовании использовался метод критического дискурс-анализа, проводились концептуальные и тематические классификации. В итоге мы пришли к следующим результатам: в центральноазиатских медиа обсуждались в основном история и политика, в то время как российские и турецкие цифровые медиа не уделили достаточно внимания историческому течению, а западные цифровые медиа рассматривали фильм многогранно в контексте экономико-политического, гендерного и эстетического аспектов. Ещё одно заметное различие заключается в том, что некоторые киргизские или казахские критики (особенно государственные деятели, историки или художники) критикуют фильм в экономико-политическом контексте. Глубокие и многомерные критические оценки фильма, разработанные восточными критиками, нашли отражение в западных медиа, или западные журналисты освещали эти взгляды в своих цифровых медиа.

### Ключевые слова

Курманжан Датка; королева гор; история Кыргызстана; Россия; международные цифровые медиа; кинокритика; тюркский мир; Центральная Азия; кыргызское кино; Кыргызстан; Международная журналистика



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## Introduction

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Kurmanjan is one of the rare women who was awarded the rank of general (datka) in the world history, is one of the personalities that not only Turkistan but also the whole Turkish-Islamic world attaches importance to. Kurmanjan was born in 1811 in the village of Orok in the Osh region of Kyrgyzstan. She married to Alymbek Datka in 1832 who was commander of the Alay district. Since Alymbek Datka had to be in the centre of Kokand Khanate frequently due to his duty, Kurmanjan carried out the affairs in Osh and Alay regions. In 1862, after her husband fell victim to palace intrigues, both the khanates of Kokand and Bukhara, and later Tsarist Russia accepted Kurmanjan as the ruler of the people of Osh and Alay districts and gave her the title of Datka (Kakeev & Ploskikh, 2002; Köse, 2002, pp. 55-62).

The Kyrgyz people that led by Kurmanjan Datka resisted the Russian occupation of the region till the end. Understanding that this struggle was carried out under unequal conditions, Kurmanjan made an equal agreement with the Russians to protect her people. (Aynakulova, 2011, pp. 217-230; Toktomamatov and Egenberdiyev, 2001, pp. 21- 23.)

It is stated in the studies in Turkey that the Islamic (mujahideen) personality structure, which Kurmanjan put forward with a supra-racial approach, is the basis of the successes achieved against the Russians. In this way, Kurmanjan was able to unite its dispersed people. (Keserci, 2019, p.72-75) Kurmanjan Datka is considered to be a historical personality that gives importance to consultation and has democratic features (Keserci, 2020, pp.53-54, Kelly, 2014).

After a two-year master's degree in screenwriting and directing in Moscow, Sher Niyaz returned to his native Kyrgyzstan and founded the film production company Aitysh Film in 2006 (Lyons, 2015, Sher Niyaz, İ, 2020). Sher Niyaz specifically states that the film aims to awaken the Kyrgyz people, and that he shot the film in order to convey to today's Kyrgyz people that the struggle for independence was won by paying a great price in history. Sher Niyaz also thinks that cinema has a power superior to politics and he wishes this film to unite the torn Kyrgyz (Sher Niyaz 2021; Dzhamankulova, 2015)

Sher Niyaz and Cholpon Idrisova states that the Kurmanjan character is consciously sanctifies and highlights the characteristics of patriotic duty or responsibility. According to the director, the film is a summary of the history of the Kyrgyzstan. According to Niyaz the history of the country was written under the influence of the Soviets, and he emphasizes that they did not know where the Kyrgyz lived and what kind of historical course they followed after Genghis Khan's occupation of the region, that is, between 1200-1700. For this reason, there is a need to retell the history of the Kyrgyz. Sher Niyaz states that the film presents art and history together by not changing the historical facts, but by using the features



of cinematic expression and increasing the dramatic effect with elements such as music and clothing (Canucks 2014; Esengeldiev, 2014; Ibraimov, 2014).

According to Tologon Kasimbekov who is one of the Kyrgyz intellectuals Russians had their own administrative ideology. The literature of the peoples of Central Asia was not as developed as that of the Russians, because they did not have the right to write their national literature and the nation's past. More precisely, they viewed with suspicion both those who wrote ancient Kyrgyz history and those who researched Kyrgyz mythology or the “Manas” epic. “Manas” was banned for many years because it was seen as the basis of nationalism. Only later some of them began to write the history of the Kyrgyz people, because all activities such as writing the history of the Kyrgyz, Uzbeks and Kazakhs, their heroes and their rulers were viewed as nationalism. They considered this contrary to Socialism or Russian literature and the security of Russians. They imprisoned best Kirghiz writers because they were nationalists (Yilmaz, 2007, p.119).

Akmatbek Keldibekov who was elected to the Nationalist Ata-Jurt Party from the Alay region, thought that the government should not be stingy in the process of protecting ideological values. On the other hand, Emil Jumabayev was not as optimistic as Keldibekov. It was reminded that *The Nomad* (2005, Sergei Bodrov and Ivan Passer) went through a similar process. In fact, although this film was shot with a 25 times bigger budget, it did not receive the attention it expected from the Kazakh people, and the film was also criticized by Western critics. The movie which is likened to “a mess” was shot with the support of the government and the directors and actors did not receive any awards due to ideological goals. In other words, like Kurmanjan this film was supported by the state with ideological concerns and a large budget, but it could not gain the appreciation of critics in terms of the intellectual argument it presented. (Rickleton, 2013)

On the other hand, films such as *Svet-Ake* (2010), which made the electricity cuts on the agenda in the country, returned with awards from countries such as France and Russia, despite their small budgets. According to the independent director Jumabayev, the Kurmanjan-type nobles act as an intermediary to distract people in the face of economic and social problems by revealing a costume fantasy in the film (Rickleton, 2013).

According to Adil Turdukulov, another person with negative reviews about the film, the rules were violated by not making an offer for the director during the process, with the financial burden placed on taxpayers. No effort was made for private financing, and the film was handed over to a novice director. As a reflection of the old disease of the Kyrgyz people, the director was able to complete his film with piecemeal budgets. Orunbek Samidinov is one of the leading lawyers in Osh, described the film as a public relations exercise for Kyrgyzstan which has major problems such as declining foreign investment, unregulated energy supply and increasing dependence on Russia for essential goods (Ibraimov, 2014).



Although Kyrgyzstan has many different ethnic structures since 1991, it has been carrying out a defined nationalism policy. The national symbols produced had not been enough to establish a social-cultural unity between the south and the north. Although the epic of *Manas*, translated with a nationalist discourse, achieved a certain success, it could only affect the Kyrgyz people of ethnic origin. Although Presidents Akaev and Bakiev developed a series of civilian policies in the late 1990s and mid-2000s, they did not succeed either; economic crisis, poverty and corruption remained the main problems of the country (Both, 2018, p.81-82).

According to Both (2018, pp.81-82), the main problem of Kyrgyzstan is the dominance of tribal identities and local and ethnic customs. The people do not define themselves at the national or state level. Ethnic non-Kyrgyz person is a subject for discrimination in education, justice and politics. Ethnic conflict, autocracy and religious movements that shape social life prevent the formation of common national values. Although Kurmanjan Datka tries to unite the country, it makes the same mistake. The film only addresses ethnic Kyrgyz. But there is such a point that Kurmanjan's preference for her country over her own personal interests and expectations is one of the best examples for today's politicians. Because this is something that Kyrgyz politicians rarely do.

## **Methodology**

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Critical discourse analysis is used in film criticism to understand ideological discourse. In his book classifying the types of criticism, Timothy Corrigan (p. 12) classified the approaches in the field of ideological criticism as follows: (1) Hollywood's hegemony, modes of production, ways of seeing and manipulation (2) Feminist approach and representation of women (3) representation of races and cultures, how they are depicted in films (4) How class power is distributed in society and the social and economic order presented in films (5) Post-colonialism and cultural imperialism (6) Alternative gender representations as a queer approach: the conflict of normative relations with heterosexual values, the forms of inquiry in films are a critique of how they have become complex.

The common point of those who write about ideology is that the dominant ideology is a "given ideology". The critic can only draw attention to them, however it is the duty of the reader/viewer to become aware of the ideologies and de-naturalize them. Ideological criticism requires the discussion of one or more terms, with the concepts exemplified below: dominant ideology, alternative ideologies, naturalization, infrastructure-superstructure concepts, false consciousness, justice, society, family, class, gender, moral values of a particular class, alienation, hegemony, subject, art. In the ideological approach, as in sociological criticism, it is possible to consider these concepts in other types of criticism. For example, the concept of family indicates a wide area that can be addressed in terms of political ideology, economic approach and gender. The ideological approach also has





an important use in historical criticism in the field of film studies. A large part of historical criticism must make use of ideological analysis. (Kabadayı 2013, p.62-63)

Rosenstone (2018) divides historical film into three broad categories: 'history as drama', 'history as document' and 'history as experiment'. History as drama is the dramatization of real or fictional characters against the backdrop of history in a film. History as a document is the presentation of films, photographs, paintings, newspapers, magazines and official documents that are visual documents, accompanied by testimonies and expert opinions. History as experiment is a non-didactic combination that includes the characteristics of these two categories. In all three categories, history is reinterpreted with cinema's unique narrative methods, technical and aesthetic elements, and 'historical reality this time undergoes a cinematic reconstruction' (Rosenstone, 2018, p. 159).

The film also includes sections where historians compare historical facts based on documents with how the historical narrative is portrayed in the film. Thus, with the approach of historians, the ideas of both the director and the critics were mutually analyzed.

This article also comparatively examines the ideological discourses of both the Kurmanjan Datka movie and the writers who criticize it. While making this analysis, it examines the comments on the themes of Hollywood influence, feminism, national and racial myths, class conflict, postcolonialism and gender, which are in the category of ideological criticism mentioned by Corrigan. This review considers the thoughts of both the film crew and the critics of the film.

The research questions (or hypotheses) of the article consist these questions. Since Kyrgyzstan is in a new construction process based on the myth of national unity and common identity after its separation from the USSR, does cinema mediate this myth? Since cinema is a tool of subjective creation, fictional realities and dramas are frequently used in historical films. This is frequently used in Eastern culture. Is Kurmanjan Datka also a film with a strong dramatic aspect? Western culture has a cultural basis that criticizes the economic-political structure along with the modernization process (capitalism and industrial enterprises). The western society also reads history and ideology on this axis. Is the economic-political approach dominant in the criticism of the Kurmanjan Datka movie? Which discourse is more dominant in the criticism of the Kurmanjan Datka movie regarding Eastern and Western culture (fictional history, documentary history, female representations, gender, postcolonialism, class conflict etc.)

Within the scope of the research, the databases on the internet were scanned and found a total of 26 critique/review samples directly related to the film. Ordinary promotional and informative reviews are excluded from the scope. In other words, in digital media the data research conducted on the film, social media channels, cinema magazines, daily or periodical newspapers and magazines were evaluated together and a total of 22 reviews criticizing the film on an ideological level were found. Reviews that do not contain ideological discourse are excluded from



the scope. According to the table, 11 of the reviews of the film were made from Central Asia, 1 from Russia, 3 from Turkey, and 12 from Western countries such as Europe and America. Within the scope of the research, the following film criticism articles were selected and analyzed:

No	Critic or film reviewer	Title of the Film Criticism Article	Media platform	Country
1	Alexei Tork	Interview with Bolot Shamshiyev	Fergana Agency	Russia
2	JarkynaiKuvat	The movie “Kurmanjan Datka”. Honor and dilemma.	AKIPress	Kyrgyzstan
3	Kyiyas Moldokasymov	Kyiyas Moldokasymov: “Sadik Sher-Niyaz showed events that are not in Kyrgyz traditions”	Gezitter	Kyrgyzstan
4	Ernest Abdyzhaparov	Ernest Abdyzhaparov, director: “Jyldyz Zholdosheva made a great contribution to the filming of the film” Kurmanjan Datka.	Gezitter	Kyrgyzstan
5	Sultan Raev	If a culture becomes commercialized, that culture will come to an end.	Novie Litsa	Kyrgyzstan
6	Olzhas Suleimenov	Olzhas Suleimenov about the film “Kurmanjan Datka”	YouTube	Kazakhstan
7	Nazira Nurtazina	Why didn't the Kazakhs create something similar (more like equivalent) to the Kyrgyz historical film “Kurmanjan Datka”?	Centrasia	Kazakhstan
8	Elena Stishova	Bring back the past!	Old Kinoart	Russia
9	Ömer F. Özen	The Queen of the Mountains, Kurmancan Datka, won the hearts of Montrealers	Bizim Anadolu	Turkey
10	Sinemasalı	Queen of the Mountains	Sinemasalı	Turkey
11	İpek Yolu	The Female Commander Who Destroyed Tsarist Russia: Kurmanjan Datka	İpek Yolu	Turkey
12	Alissa Simon	Kurmanjan Datka Queen of the Mountains	Variety	USA
13	Michael Rechtshaffen	‘Kurmanjan Datka Queen of the Mountains’ a stirring historical epic	Los Angeles Times	USA
14	Justin Lowe	Kyrgyzstan's Oscar submission is an epic drama set high on the steppes of Central Asia	The Hollywood Reporter	USA
15	Jorge Perezchica	Kurmanjan Datka Queen of The Mountains, Official Selection Of The Palm Springs International Film Festival	Coachella Magazine	USA
16	Mark Jahnke	Kurmanjan Datka: Queen of The Mountains	Monday Bazaar	USA



17	Elva Zevallos	Sharon Stone Hosts Vip Screening of Kurmanjan Datka Queen of The Mountains	Press Passla	USA
18	Chris Rickleton	Kyrgyzstan: Nation-Building Efforts Reach the Silver Screen	Eurasianet	USA
19	Erik Lundegaard	Movie Review: Kurmanjan Datka: Queen of the Mountains	Erik Lundegaard Blog	USA
20	Erin E. Gustafson	Kurmanjan Datka: the Voice of a Woman and Strength of a Mother	Popkult – Central Asian Studies	USA
21	Emily Kessel	Kurmanjan Datka: Historically Accurate; Emotionally Flat	Popkult – Central Asian Studies	USA
22	Alicia May Hodgin	Kurmanjan Datka: An Insightful Celebration of Kyrgyz Culture	Popkult – Central Asian Studies	USA

**Table 1. List of the movie (Kumanjan Datka) reviews articles analyzed in the article by country and media channels**

## **Historical and Ideological Discourse on the Film Kurmanjan Datka in the Central Asian Media**

According to the famous Kyrgyz Director Bolot Shamshiyev there are deficiencies in the film in terms of historical and cinematographic narrative. The Kurmanjan character is represented as an ordinary woman. The influence of Kurmanjan's husband is also limited, in fact, it has had more influence. Acting is also not accurate. The film's support from the state was not due to the artist's identity of the director, but to his kinship relations. This is a kind of corruption situation (Yılmaz, 2019, Tork, 2019).

Although Kyrgyz intellectual Prof. Osmonakun Ibraimov (2015) finds the historical narrative, characterization and intellectual stance of the film inadequate, he sees the film as an indicator of success for the Kyrgyz national cinema:

“I would not like to analyze the film by details and episodes, although it should still be noted that there are enough crude places and conceptual miscalculations in it to make well-founded professional claims. For example, the beginning of the film reminded me of the level of today's Kyrgyz pseudo-cinema, produced by various fans of local screen consumer goods, that I had to be wary of whether the exalted Sharon had gotten carried away after watching really successful episodes about the tragic fate of the Kyrgyz queen? Or did feminism, so widespread in America, and hostility to modern Russian neo-imperial policies, built on economic pressure and the annexation of part of the territories of less unprotected countries of the post-Soviet space, play a role? But no. The film really turned out well. Yes, the movie Alymbek-Datka looks very pale, and Kurmanzhan's childhood years are just as thin and unconvincing. And the scene in the yurt, where Alymbek, the undisputed leader of the great south and a very high-ranking Kokand nobleman, a kind of kingmaker of all Kokand, is received, in my opinion, by Zhantai Khan, who is shown almost as his benefactor and mentor, seems definitely parody, far from the truth and completely sucked from the finger. (...)”





Ibraimov (2015) thinks that the Russians defined themselves as "indigenous (natural indigenous element)" after occupying the region, which means ignoring their culture, human and national sovereignty. Ibraimov (2015) also thinks that the Soviets saved them from Tsarist Russia. Ibraimov (2015) states that today's Russia, with its effective media organizations, emphasizes that the USA is the most dangerous country in the world, and he also thinks that Turkey and China, as countries that pose a constant threat, create a basis for getting closer to "Mother Russia". According to Ibraimov (2015), the salvation of Kyrgyzstan depends on being a self-sufficient independent power and not easily trusting imperial states by taking lessons from Kurmanjan's historical legacy.

As to Bakyt Ibraimov (2014) who thinks that Russia stands out as a good ally in the face of the struggle for dominance of other countries (USA, Turkey, China). He argues that the Kyrgyz should not be fooled by these games; on the contrary, they should establish their independence for unity and integrity by establishing their own democratic order.

On the other hand, the well-known Kyrgyz blogger JarkynaiKuvat (2014) emphasizes in his article in Akipress that the Kyrgyz people are a people who constantly make sacrifices, they are not fed by their history and in other words, they are not conscious of a history inspired by the heroes. This situation also causes the dispersal of the Kyrgyz. The Kyrgyz do not see themselves as the dominant people. This is an inferiority complex that has been imposed on the Kyrgyz from the outside. That's why the movie is interesting. All intelligent people accept the power of Kurmanjan. The Kyrgyz could not write their own objective history. Kurmanjan was seen as a rebel at that time. The Kyrgyz forgot their leader. Until now, the epic of Manas has been boasted. Now there is the main cult of Umay to establish a nation. The tiger in the movie is the symbol of the one who goes to infinity (disappearing). What goes into eternity is the sense of independence and struggle that the Kyrgyz must have in order to build their history. The Kyrgyz make sacrifices instead of fighting, which has become a political tradition. The Kyrgyz do not say anything new; they do not take steps to develop a new discourse.

According to the well-known Kyrgyz Historian Professor Kyiyas Moldokasymov (2015), there is an unbalanced composition and unproven information in terms of historical narrative in the film. The effect of Alymbek Datka has been studied at a limited level. Kurmanjan owes its existence to Alymbek. Kulseit's weakness is like mocking a nation. This is historically unfounded. The fact that Kurmanjan wrote letters in runic script at that time is also contrary to historical facts. It is not seen in the archives that Kurmanjan can read and write. This is not surprising. There are examples of this at that time. According to Kyiyas Moldokasymov (2015), films manipulate history in this sense. Although it is known that the Kurmanjan-Alymbek family has a rich library, it is not featured in the film. While the Kurmanjan married her granddaughter and sent her to Samarkand, she also gave a chest of books among her dowry. These details are not covered in the movie.



As for Kyrgyz film producer Ernest Abdyzhaparov (2014) argues that the film should be evaluated politically, not artistically. He thinks that in the face of the disintegration of the country, elements such as fighting against the enemy, unity, patience, sacrificing his children on behalf of the country come to the fore in the film. Box office receipts are a minor issue, because the film is a government project.

Edil Baisalov (2014), on the other hand, thinks that although there are deficiencies in the historical materials and narrative in the film, the film should be watched because it invites a national awakening. Baisalov (2014), who thinks that the Russians are shown as polite and wise, even though they are not in reality, and the Kyrgyz are shown as a "wrong" primitive tribe, states that he finds Kurmanjan's active and leading role inspiring for today's Kyrgyz girls

Former Minister of Culture, Türksoy Secretary General and one of the three screenwriters of the movie, Sultan Raev (2015), states that he wrote the dialogue part of the screenplay himself, and while writing the script of the movie, they acted by preserving the political balance in a way that would not disrupt relations with Uzbekistan and Russia. Raev (2015) also advocates the non-commercialization of culture, arguing that what will bring Kyrgyzstan back to its feet is culture and history, adding that "Everything in the Kyrgyz revolves around the issues of economy and politics".

The famous Kazakh intellectual Olzhas Suleimenov (2014) stated that the film reflects history well, and that it even affected himself, who looks at films with a critical eye. Suleymanov, who sees the film as a tool that will unite the south and the north of Kyrgyzstan and serve to ensure national unity, thinks that Kazakhs and other peoples who gained independence should make a film of this scale about the events of that period. According to Suleymanov (2014), people need to know that their ancestors protected the land at all costs and what they inherited.

According to Kazakh historian Dr. Nazira Nurtazina (2020), actors reflecting the Turan race were chosen for the lead role in the movie. In Kazakh movies, the Mongolian race predominates. Kazakh directors resort to cheap erotic scenes with extreme squint for the sake of getting international awards. There are no such tendencies in Kurmanjan Datka. History is brought to life as it is. Their mountain spirit, pride, Muslim and Turkish identity and hopes they want to reach are reflected in the film. The pressures of Russians and Kokand are shown in the film. In Kazakh films, however, only the Cingars are the enemy, and since the Ching Dynasty destroyed it, Kazakh directors and Ministers of Culture can rest easy. While Islamophobia still exists as a stain of shame in Kazakh cinema, the influence of Islam is shown realistically in Kurmanjan Datka. The director of the film deliberately wanted Kurmanjan to write a letter in the Orhun-Yenisei script (runic). The film crew wanted to add the runic script, which is the common culture of our historical origin, to the film. After all, this is a movie, not a documentary. While the Christian and Soviet-centered ideology thought that "women were oppressed



in Turkestan” and the Salafist ideology “women have no place in politics and state life”, Kurmanjan defended and showed the opposite.

### **Historical and Ideological Discourse on the Movie Kurmanjan Datka in the Russian Media**

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In the review article of “Bring back the past!” the Russian film critic Elena Stishova (2014) is emphasizing that the scene of Kurmanjan's meeting with the Russian general is far from reality, she also draws attention to the distance the Russian audience puts between it and the film.

“In several places, the director states that the people of the Alay region, who have officially embraced Islam, have not forgotten their old religion, Tengrism. Episodes of the Kyrgyz war with the Russians, Kurmanjan's talks with General Skobolev revealed new information to me and above all about 'us'. The subject of colonization was not popular in Soviet cinema. It has not gained popularity in recent years, either. The director shot the parts about the Russian army with extreme care and precision, softening the facts. The meeting of the Kyrgyz woman with the Russian general in the style of European diplomacy cannot be real. It is known that Kurmanjan was arrested and brought to Skobolev as an enemy. However, things develop differently. The Kurmanjan Datka film was screened in Yakutsk. Whether it will reach movie theatres in Moscow is a big question. Moreover, elite audiences are unwittingly imperialists from head to toe. Those they once called 'brother peoples' are now beyond their concern.”

The critic Stishova also points out that the movie broke the box office record and states that the Kyrgyz people who came to the movie said “the movie gave us our history back”. Based on Fukuyama's “End of History” thesis, Stishova also states that the USSR was dissolved and the Soviet Republics were looking for their own ways. The critic, who also gives an example that the Prophet Moses led his people around the desert to forget the 40-year period of slavery, thinks that 20 years was enough for the Kyrgyz and they found their own way:

“Nationalism thrives where the people often experience a crisis of identification produced by the historical inferiority complex, just as it is now in Ukraine. In my opinion, this is just the beginning, a transformation that I cannot predict how far it will go. But the vector is clear: former Soviet but now independent republics will take a rematch.”

### **Historical and Ideological Discourse on the Movie Kurmanjan Datka in the Turkish Media**

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Özen (2014), who titled “The Mother of the Mountains Kurmanjan Datka tempted the people of Montreal” in his related evaluation, states that the film effectively reflects the image of women in Turkish society. Özen (2014) asked the director about the purpose of using the Göktürk written language in the film. Then the director said that they wanted to emphasize that the written history of the Kyrgyz goes far into the past. Although the runic script was found



in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, according to the director, the Kyrgyz knew that alphabet long ago. The director conveyed the historical continuity and the written culture of the Kyrgyz with this symbol.

In an evaluation article published in Sinemasalı (2014), it is stated that the story of the film is an indication that there is no discrimination between men and women in Turkish society. It is also stated that since Tomris Hatun in Saka Turks, women are not seen as a gender, but as a humane and holistic being. Turkish women are successful in every field and there are many examples of this, Kurmanjan is not the only example.

In the article titled “The Woman Kurmanjan Datka Who Uprooted Tsarist Russia”, published in the publication called Silk Road in 2021, Kurmanjan's Islamic and mystical personality was highlighted rather than Kyrgyz identity. His devotion to Sheikh Mevlana Siracüddin and his struggle for Islam kept Kurmanjan alive. The main target of the imperialist England active in the region is India. Because Russia is uncomfortable with this situation, it wants to dominate small nations. Relations between Russia and Kyrgyzstan were made with diplomatic courtesy. According to the agreement with the Russians, in case of rebellion, not all people will be punished; The Kokand Khanate will be independent within itself and will remain free in its language and religion.

### **Historical and Ideological Discourse on the Movie Kurmanjan Datka in the Western Media**

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Alissa Simon (2014) from *Variety* criticizes the casting of the film by saying, “Datka sacrifices her private life and spends her life on society at a time when women are mostly seen as property” in her critique on the film.

Simon (2014), who also thinks that there are “paper-thin characterizations” and “there is no emotional hook that can be associated with the subject”. She argues that the Kurmanjan character remains superficial, away from the psychological depth like Wikipedia information, except for the last scene.

According to Simon (2014), the reason for the Russian occupation of the region is to reach India and colonize it. But the Khaganate has no chance to resist the Russian military power. On the other hand, it is seen that the Russians do not interfere with the lives and religions of the local peoples, thanks to the kind relations established by Kurmanjan with the Russians. Russian General Skobelev, on the other hand, respects Kurmanjan's intellectual capacity and restraint, as well as the courage of the Kyrgyz people to defend their homeland. Another General Shvyikovskiy, who succeeded this general, acts as an alcoholic racist, using all the power recognized by the law, and attacks the local people. Simon (2014) also states that the director tries to score points by using all the elements of cinema together in order to capture the cinematographic effect.

Michael Rechtshaffen (2014) who is writing in the *Los Angeles Times* raises the claim that the film is an expensive production for Kyrgyzstan, one of the former



Soviet republics. The film, which is seen to have an enthusiastic and pompous narration, has chronological compressions, making it difficult to follow.

According to Justin Lowe (2014), the writer of *The Hollywood Reporter*, although the film has epic and nationalistic features, it is not convincing because it is based on incongruous narratives and does not have interesting performances. In this respect, it is very unlikely that the film will receive an award. According to Low (2014), Central Asia looks like a dispersed geography, first by Genghis Khan, then by Timur's armies, and then by local raids in the region. It is seen that Kurmanjan married someone who was there, but she has to flee from there because she is accused by her husband and family. This is a source of embarrassment for the conservative and Muslim family of Kurmanjan. However, Khan's jealous son opposes unification requests as he tries to centralize power under his family's control and secretly sends an assassin to kill Alymbek, who is trying to make peace with the northern tribes. According to the critic, the fact that the film contains too many stories from the period and is fed from a wide range of sources creates problems in capturing the focus of the film. In addition, the temporal leaps in the development of Kurmanjan are given incongruously in the film. The existence of power breakers, which have an ambiguous effect on Kurmanjan, is among the other problematic aspects of the film. However, there is a remarkable aspect of the film that the costume designers depicted the cultural characteristics of the period in impressive detail.

According to Jorge Perezchica (2015) writing in *Coachella Magazine*, the success of Kurmanjan is that she ruled the country at a time when women had no rights. Separation from his wife was a rebellion against tradition, which Kurmanjan succeeded in. As a matter of fact, the problem between the two families was resolved by Alymbek Datka, the ruler of the Alay region. According to the critic, the "wild tiger" used in the movie is also one of the important symbols. In the words of the director, the tiger represents "Kurmanjan's spirit and struggle for life" and symbolizes the characteristics of "courage and endurance". Also, the fact that the tiger's name is Shakira is not a coincidence, it is a reference to a famous female singer. As the critic pointed out, it is the Russians who have to sign peace in the film. Because their numerous raids did not reach a conclusion. Another success of the film is that it was able to get permission to shoot on Petersburg Square in front of the Winter Palace in Russia.

As Mark Jahnke (2016) from *Monday Bazaar* emphasized that many people in the Khanate of Kokand were fighting under the leadership of Kurmanjan against the southward advance of the Russian army. According to Jahnke (2016), there is not only an anti-imperialist situation. What Kurmanjan admires is that she predicted that the Russians would actually be victorious, and that she was able to persuade her people to a peace that would ensure survival rather than war. In this way, the Kyrgyz people were able to preserve their language, identity and religion. Even sacrificing her son for this cause is for the sake of the Kyrgyz and their future.





While this historical legacy of Kurmanjan has made her a feminist idol for some, it has also caused her to be compared with some Asian leaders such as Indira Gandhi, Benazir Bhutto and Aung San Suu Kyi.

Looking at the evaluation written by Elva Zevallos (2014) from *Press Passla*, the critic shares the views of Sharon Stone, Kelsey Scott and the producer of the film, Dzholdoshova Zhyldyzkan Zholdosheva. The common point of these three filmmakers is that they read the film as “women-oriented”. The film showed how the political power of women can have an impact on the destiny of a people. The woman's personal preferences, having to choose between her family and her people, has made her a holy, pioneering personality by choosing her people. While Dzholdoshova Zhyldyzkan Zholdosheva thinks that the world is a liveable place thanks to women, Kelsey Scott underlines that what she does in the cinema is not different from Datka's story.

Chris Rickleton (2013) from *Eurasianet* thinks that Kyrgyz leaders are trying to achieve their national and cultural unity with a film in their countries where there is social unrest. Since 1991, Kyrgyz leaders have been struggling to unite the culturally and socially diverse south and north of the country. But this way of building a nation is overly ambitious. It is worrying that this has resulted in a fiasco. Although Manas is the only universally recognized national hero, he has been disfigured by the nationalists who came to power after the 2010 ethnic conflict. The government, which seeks solutions, allocates limited funds to the common symbols of the country and proposes expensive but impractical projects such as changing the colour of the national flag, which has become the focus of attacks and criticism.

According to Rickleton (2013), what makes Kurmanjan different is that she protects his people and primarily her country instead of her family. This was a rare occurrence in the predecessors. She was even able to sacrifice her son's execution for this cause, and avoided the wrath of the Russian government by rebelling.

According to Erik Lundegaard (2015), who evaluated the film in his blog, the Kyrgyz people “look like Asians, dress like Mongols, practice Islam and are forever threatened by Russia”. It should be appreciated that Kurmanjan knows where to stand, as the war with Russia means that the Kyrgyz will perish.

In an analysis titled “Kurmanjan Datka: American Students Review a Modern Kyrgyz Film” published in *Popkult*, it is seen that American students watched, discussed and commented on the film as part of the Central Asian Studies course offered by SRAS and London School. The three comments shared below are very important in terms of showing the cultural differences in the way the film is perceived.

Erin E. Gustafson (2020) evaluated the issue in the context of gender and emphasized that Kurmanjan struggles as a woman in a male-dominated society. Gustafson (2020) also mentions the tiger metaphor in the movie, he thinks that



the tiger represents courage and personal strength, and that the tiger emerged with Kurmanjan's own determination and will.

The critic Gustafson (2020), who also draws attention to the fact that Kurmanjan sacrificed her son's life for the future of her country. The Critic thinks that this is a great sacrifice. The critic sees this as an extension of Kurmanjan's desire to rule his country based on citizenship ties, not blood ties. Gustafson (2020), who states that he does not evaluate the film in a feminist line in this sense and he thinks that Kurmanjan is portrayed as instinctive, punctual and warlike, like a mother. Gustafson (2020), who also evaluates Kurmanjan's success in the world of men, who stands out with the phenomenon of motherhood in the film. He thinks that Kurmanjan owes her dignity and purification from his sins to "motherhood". A victory achieved by unity is not achieved by the militaristic power of men, but by the diplomatic grace of a woman with her maternal instinct:

"Kurmanjan's voice was heard and as a maternal figure in her later years, found herself in a place of dignity and respect among other leaders and rebellious men. The film illustrated this contrast in the beginning, in two ways: when her parents were begging for the blessing of a son, and when a promiscuous girl was to be stoned to death. In both situations did the film instill the fact that men were of a higher and more dominant social status than women. In both cases, though, did grace become reality. Her parents were told that Kurmanjan would be worth ten sons. The promiscuous girl was freed of her sins against the regional faith. This set the tone that success does not spawn solely from militaristic or brawny victory but also through the grace and simplicity of a woman's choices. Not many films highlight this."

Emily Kessel (2020) evaluated the film in the context of sexism, racism and Russian hegemony. In this evaluation, which emphasizes the feminine, peaceful and productive characteristics of Kurmanjan leadership, Kessel (2020) helps us to be aware of this type of leader model in terms of power balances in Central Asia.

Kessel (2020)'s criticism of the film comes to the fore in the context of drama. Kessel (2020), who thinks that the multiple representation of the Kurmanjan character is a disadvantage. He argues that the periodical transitions are very fast and there are no signs to guide the audience in this regard. He also thinks that apart from the last scene of Kurmanjan about her son, there is no scene where we can understand her feelings and psychology. She states that the actors are not portrayed in depth, so the audience has difficulty in establishing an emotional bond with the character. Finally, Kessel (2020) also thinks that the film is historically very accurate and realistic. This film is an opportunity to learn history for those who do not have history and literature knowledge. However, the excessive visuality of the war scenes overshadows the romantic features of the film.

Alicia May Hodgkin (2020) states that at all stages of the film, the personality traits of Kurmanjan are associated with the tiger. Personality traits such as calmness, roaring, courage and pride are conveyed by the tiger metaphor.

Hodgin (2020) thinks that one of the sources that makes Kurmanjan strong and effective is the epic of Manas. Hodgkin (2020), who also states that they have studied



this epic in depth in their lessons, argues that thanks to Manas' inspiration, Kurmanjan struggled instead of leaving his country. However, Kurmanjan could not convince the male leaders of the tribes in this process. She was not even allowed to attend a meeting as she was a woman in several previous scenes. The film could have increased its accuracy a little more if there was a little more emphasis on her mutual love for their country, tradition and culture. In these respects, the Manas effect in the film should have been portrayed more strongly.

## **Conclusions**

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Since Kyrgyzstan is in a new construction process based on the myth of national unity and common identity after its separation from the USSR, cinema mediates this myth. It is seen that the character of Kurmanjan is highlighted in the film as a lyrical and epic character inspired by the tiger, nature, costume and rhythmic fictional techniques. In the second question it was stated that since cinema was a tool of subjective creation, fictional realities and dramas were frequently used in historical films. This was frequently used in Eastern culture. Kurmanjan Datka is also a film with a strong dramatic aspect.

On the other hand Western culture has a cultural basis that criticizes the economic-political structure along the modernization process (capitalism and industrial enterprises). The western society also reads history and ideology on this axis. When Western critics' criticisms of the film are examined with an inductive approach, it is seen that economic-political approach dominant in the criticism of the Kurmanjan Datka movie.

In the last question, among the critics who asked what kind of historical approach there was in the film, Western critics mostly included fictional historiography, while Asian critics made a comparison between documents and fictional history. Western critics have made comments that point to identity, gender and aesthetic problems rather than historical issues.

When we look at the comments on politics, Central Asian media think that the film is a public relations campaign and that a country with structural problems (foreign investment, energy and economy) cannot ensure the unity and integrity of the country with such films. On the other hand, there are those who think that the film serves a national awareness campaign. The need for the existence of such films especially in terms of gaining historical consciousness was especially expressed. However, it is seen that Kyrgyzstan does not have a conscious, strategic policy in this regard. Because there are not many examples other than this movie in Kyrgyzstan.

Russian and Turkish media made rather shallow comments on politics when compared to Western media. While the issue of colonization was not on the agenda of the Russian media, the Turkish media made a wider reading and drew attention to the other actors in the region, England and India and reminded that the Russians are trying to be the dominant power in this area.



In the Western media there are alternative determinations in the title of politics. According to Western media, it is the Russians who have to sign peace in the movie, in cause of their numerous raids has not have success. Another success of the film is that it used Petersburg Square in front of the Winter Palace in Russia for shooting. Western media finds the contribution of the Kurmanjan character to the creation of a civic culture positively. Kurmanjan is considered to be a leader who favours peace instead of war, diplomacy instead of fighting. However Kyrgyzstan is a country which allocates limited funds to art, has not been able to unite the north and south of the country since 1991. Although the film tries to develop civic culture, it also reinforces ethno-nationalism and causes another mistake.

When we consider the approaches to history, positive and negative views are seen together in the Central Asian media. According to critics in the Central Asian media with negative thinking, the historical narrative in the film is distorted and mediocre. There are no historical personalities other than Kurmanjan in the film. The settled Kyrgyz are not included in the film. Kurmanjan's relations with China and England are not included in the film too. In this sense, the film does not say anything new. Noble figures such as Kurmanjan act as an intermediary to distract people from economic and social problems by presenting a costume fantasy in the film. Those who interpreted the film positively in the context of historical narrative in the Central Asian media made idealistic comments. According to those who think in this way, not feeding on history is the main cause of today's problems. Therefore a historical consciousness inspired by the heroes is required. In the film, it is correctly conveyed that the Kyrgyz people are Turkish and Muslim, and that they are mountainous and proud. According to critics in the Central Asian media Runic writing was used deliberately to construct a common historical memory (Kazakh-Kyrgyz) and to remind the fact that the Kyrgyz were an ancient people. The film shows that even though the Kyrgyz are divided into 40 groups, they can unite when necessary when disaster strikes them. The film looks at the colonial behaviour of the Russians at that time and describes this fact. According to critics in the Central Asian media the film is a historical summary of the Kyrgyz people. According to them the history of the Kyrgyz was written under the influence of the Soviets and there are big gaps.

When we look at the comments made in the context of history in the Russian media, it is seen that the historical issues are not discussed in detail. When we consider the prominent comments, it is stated that the historical information described in the film is accepted as new information in Russia. In order to better understanding of the comments in the Russian media, it is necessary to look at the film's own story, its agenda reflected in the press and the public. The film was nominated among the Commonwealth of Independent States films in the Russian NIKA competition, but did not receive any awards. NIKA is Russia's most important film award competition, which also reflects Russia's or Moscow's point of view. On the other hand, the film received various awards from film festivals



in the republic of Saha (II. Yakut Film Festival), Bashkir (Akbulat) and Tatarstan (XI. Muslim Film Festival). Considering the developments, the Russian administration also wants to ignore the film, as Russia does not want to bring the negative events of the Tsarist period to the agenda again as its heir. For this reason, the film was not released in Russia, and comments and criticisms remained at a limited level. The film was screened for the Kyrgyz diaspora in Moscow and the Kyrgyz showed great interest in the film.

There is almost no comment on history in the Turkish and Western media. According to the opinions in the Turkish media, the Runic script used in the film shows that the Kyrgyz have a written culture. In the Western media, on the other hand, it is accepted that the historical narrative in the film is very accurate and realistic.

On the issue of gender, two views dominate the Central Asian media. One of them is that women are not in a passive position as in Soviet culture or Islamic-Salafi belief. At that time, women were strong and had the power to dominate. The film is a message in today's male-dominated world. On the other hand, there are those who think that Alymbek is not shown enough. For those who think this way, Kurmanjan owes its existence to a male ruler.

There is no gender-based thought in the Russian media. In the Turkish media, on the other hand, the idea that the film effectively reflects the leading woman image in Turkish history comes to the fore. In the context of the gender debate, two views dominate the Western media. There are those who read the representation of Kurmanjan through feminism as well as those who read it through motherhood. Western media do not think like Asian and Turkish media, on the contrary, they think that women were not valuable at that time. Because as a woman, Kurmanjan found herself valuable only when she sacrificed herself to her society. In this sense, the film contains the metaphor of motherhood, not feminism. However, there are also those who read Kurmanjan's success in ruling the khanate in the axis of feminism in a period dominated by men.

When we consider the approaches on identity, there is no thought in the Turkish and Russian media. In the Central Asian media, there are a number of positive and negative thoughts together. In the movie, the epic of Manas and Umay are used for the main national identity. The movie reflects the Turan race. For those who think negatively, the film does not reflect the Kyrgyz customs and traditions. In the film, the Kyrgyz are humiliated. There are only Kyrgyz people in the lead roles in the movie.

When we look at the approaches to identity in the Western media concerning the film are mostly negative. According to the Western media, the idea of building the idea of nation of the Kyrgyz in the film also shows an overly ambitious approach. Although Manas is the only universally recognized national hero, it is also emphasized that the issue was deformed by the nationalists who came to power after the ethnic conflicts in 2010. Among the positive comments in the Western media,





the leadership characteristics of Kurmanjan are correctly emphasized. The Kurmanjan leadership model is feminine, peaceful and productive.

Religion is the least discussed subject in the media of all four cultures. While there is no commentary in the Central Asian and Western media, the Russian media sees the characteristics of Tengri religion along with Islam in the film. In the Turkish media, on the other hand, there is a dominant view that the national unity of the Kyrgyz is ensured by the “Islamic-Sufistic personality of Kurmanjan as a mujahid woman”.

When we consider the thoughts on aesthetics in the film, no comment was found in the Russian and Turkish media. On the other hand in Central Asian media it is found the aesthetic reviews of the film inadequate in terms of both cinematography and acting. It is evaluated that having too many supporting actors makes it difficult to watch the movie.

In the context of aesthetics, it is seen that more criticism is made in the Western media. According to the Western media, unsuccessful narration and poor performances place the film somewhere between art and politics. The film which seems to have an enthusiastic expression also has chronological compressions, making it difficult to follow. Another factor makes the movie difficult to watch is that it has too many stories at the same time screening. Although films such as *Svet-Ake* (2010, Aktan Arym Kubat) have small budgets, they have returned with awards from countries such as France and Russia for their artistic aspects. In the mentioned films include artistic approach that brings them success rather than politics.

In the Western media, besides the director of the film, evaluations were made about the producers, actors and its effects in the USA. While this situation emphasizes the critical feature of the Western media, comments and expert opinions about the film's economy-politics and aesthetics were also mostly featured in the Western media. Critics in the Western media interpreted the linguistic, cinematographic and dramatic features of the film in a comparative and more profound way. While the information presented by the criticisms and interviews in the Western media reflects a deep or detailed perspective, the conceptual diversity and contextual features in the reviews of other countries are weak compared to the Western media.

Another remarkable difference is that some of the Kyrgyz or Kazakh critics (statesmen, historians or artists) criticize the film on the economic-political axis but in the Western media. The in-depth and multidimensional criticisms of the film developed by the eastern critics were found in the Western media or Western journalists gave place to these views in their own media.

Kyrgyzstan is slowly but surely progressing towards becoming a state and a nation. Historical consciousness has changed positively compared to 30 years ago. When there was a border problem with Tajikistan, when ethnic events occurred in Osh and Jalalabad, it was clearly seen that the Kyrgyz community could unite. Since independence is achieved without bloodshed, it can be said that although



there are some lack of awareness on this issue, positive progress has been made in general. Recent events in Kazakhstan have shown that money is not enough to strengthen the state and unify the nation. Factors such as the active and open society of Kyrgyzstan, its independent media compared to its neighbours, the fact that the people began to solve their own economic problems can be seen as positive steps towards becoming a nation state.

As French Marxist philosopher Louis Pierre Althusser stated in his definition called “ideological devices of the state”, culture, art and education are also among the ideological devices of the state. In the movie *Kurmanjan*, the financial support given by the state to the movie shows that cinema has turned into an ideological tool. The ideology here becomes clear at the point of revitalization of the Kyrgyz national state and society. However, as the director of the film Sher Niyaz emphasized in the interview we mentioned at the beginning of the article, Kyrgyz history was written under the influence of the Soviets or Russians. A new historiography is needed to break this influence and resurrect the Kyrgyz nation. Cinema, as a tool in the construction of national identity, has been transformed into an ideological tool of the state.

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