

CHO'LPON AND HIS NIGHT AND DAY

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Abdulhamid Sulaymon o'g'li Cho'lpon (1897-1938) is best known as the most outstanding Uzbek poet of the twentieth century. When he emerged on the literary scene in the years following the Russian February Revolution of 1917, he became a leading voice for the new Turkic lyric that came to dominate Uzbek poetry in the 1920s. He developed a reputation for an elegiac style punctuated with colorful imagery and an innovative use of traditional symbols and metaphors. In the late 1920s, as Bolshevik-trained Uzbek intellectuals took over the literary sphere in Uzbekistan, Cho'lpon's poetic fame transformed into notoriety.

He became a political pariah, the subject of constant attacks in the press. In 1934, attempting to reconcile with Soviet power, he submitted the present novel, the first book of a planned trilogy *Night and Day*, to a Soviet literary contest. Three years later, Cho'lpon was arrested by the NKVD (the People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs-Stalin's secret police) as part of Stalin's Great Terror (1936-1938). The work translated here, *Night*, was pulled from the shelves and banned; the sequel, if it existed, was likely destroyed by the NKVD. *Night* circulated in Uzbekistan in secret, influencing new generations of Uzbek litterateurs. Only with glasnost was the novel republished. It now stands as an exceptional piece of Uzbek prose. In the minds of Uzbek readers, *Night* tends to be overshadowed in the canon by the first Uzbek novel, Abdulla Qodiriy's *Bygone Days* (*O'tkan kunlar*, 1922), but Cho'lpon's chef d'oeuvre is arguably

the superior work. In post-Soviet Uzbekistan, Cho'lpon is perhaps equally well-known as a so-called "national caretaker" (*millat parvar*). In the second decade of the twentieth century, Cho'lpon and like-minded reformers, often called *jadids*, embraced a reformist discourse that involved, among other dimensions, an interest in European technology and the idea of the nation alongside traditional Islamic critiques of societal decline.

The *jadids* implored their fellow urban Turkestanis to merken themselves to the dangers of Russian colonialism and restore the lost glory of their people. Despite what modern Uzbek critics and Cold War-era Western researchers assert, these reformers' main rhetorical and political opponent was not Russian imperialists but the religious elite, the *ulama*, whom the *jadids* felt impeded their nation's progress towards modernity. For *jadids*, the Russian conquest of Turkestan was a result but not the cause of the decline of Islamic civilization. At the end of the present volume as Cho'lpon's character *Rarroq-suh*, so named for his duty to perform the call to prayer, loses his grip on reality, the voices around him poignantly ask, "who is crazy? The Russians or us?" These rhetorical questions direct the

reader to first seek fault for the novel's tragedies in Turkestani backwardness. Naturally, educated reformers like Cho'lpon presented themselves as the people best suited to lead Central Asia in the twentieth century, a strategy which brought them into direct competition with the ulama for the ears of ordinary people. Russian colonial administrators, for their part, bridled jadid ambitions, consistently siding with the ulama in all disputes to maintain their rule over Central Asian society.

The Russian revolutions of 1917, February and October, profoundly transformed the jadids and Cho'lpon. Whereas the Russian imperial state supported the traditional religious class, Lenin and the Bolsheviks found temporary allies in jadids. The Bolsheviks never trusted their native partners completely, knowing they were not Marxists. Nevertheless, the communists temporarily granted jadids the state tools to enact a jadid vision of modernity.

As their power grew, jadid ideas and philosophies transformed dramatically. The Turkestani Muslim nation they intended to revive before the revolution became a specifically Turkic nation. Before 1917, jadids wrote in both the local Turkic tongue and in Persian, often mixing the two languages. Soon after October, under the influence of Ottoman modernizers and Turkic reformists of the Russian Empire, jadids began to see Turkic culture as more suited to modernity than Persian.

Cho'lpon, one of the more active proponents of this view, introduced new Turkic meters and Turkified the lexicon of local poetry. By 1924, when Stalin ordered the national delimitation of Central Asia, splitting the territory into the contemporary five republics (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan), jadids had come to a consensus on the Turkic nature of their nation, calling the culture Uzbek, a name with Turkic origins, and the territory Uzbekistan.

After the revolution, women's liberation became another critical part of the jadid program and one of Cho'lpon's main concerns. Jadids, like modernizing intellectuals in many other neighboring Muslim societies such as Turkey and Iran, were influenced by European concepts of sexual morality and domesticity and began to agitate for their society to adopt them. They championed monogamous marriages based on romantic love and in turn attacked polygamy, pedophilia, homoeroticism, prostitution, and adultery. While the jadids may have exaggerated the prevalence of these phenomena in their society, they were no doubt as in evidence here as in any other society. The jadid solution was to open women up to the world, to release them from the confines of their "four walls" (a common metaphor for women's internment in the home), and put them on more, though not completely, equal footing with men. Cho'lpon's 1920s elegies and later his prose in the novel therefore often take readers inside local women's sequestered lives, invading, with the reader, the intimacy of their homosociality in order to eliminate it. As a narrator, he mourns women's innocence and failure to recognize their own imprisonment.

As several scholars have noted, the jadid vision for women's liberation was far more limited than that of the Bolsheviks. In their literary portrayals, Cho'lpon and his fellow reformers rarely acknowledged women's agency. Cho'lpon's narrator often bewails Uzbek women's captivity but simultaneously relies on it for protection of the "innocent" femininity he feels is crucial to the preservation of Uzbek cultural heritage. Like many other reformers

in the Islamic world at this time, Cho'lpon saw women as mothers of the nation whom it was men's duty to protect, thus his advocacy of women's liberation was often at odds with his advocacy of the nation. At yet another level, Cho'lpon entraps his female characters: he fetishizes women's misunderstanding of their environment, transforming their ignorance into an aesthetic.

Cho'lpon's novel, as I will show in the analysis to follow, is full of the ignorance and indecisiveness that characterizes his poetry, setting it apart from many of the prevailing literary trends in the Soviet Union. Writing his novel in the early 1930s before Socialist Realism, the official literary method of the Soviet Union, had been canonized and defined, Cho'lpon proceeded along a different path. His characters do not come to the class consciousness that would be demanded by Stalinist critics in the late 1930s; rather they are "unconscious" in their indecisiveness, ignorance, and constant doubt. They misunderstand, misrecognize, and commit mistakes, always receiving epiphanies that are endlessly redacted. His characters are, in a word, incomplete beings, always deferring final judgment to another time, matching, perhaps only by a convenient coincidence, the incomplete form of the dilogy *Night and Day* (*Kecha va kunduz*). I use these characters and the structure of the novel to argue that Cho'lpon was himself undecided in his relationship to the Soviet Union, incomplete, like his novel, in his convictions, and thus always available for reinterpretation by future readers.

By bringing out the ambiguity in Cho'lpon's text and his biography, I intend to challenge the uncritical reception of jadids in post-Soviet Uzbekistan. Since Uzbekistan gained its independence in 1991, its intellectuals have done little in the way of rethinking the legacy of jadids and the larger Soviet system itself. Instead, they have largely inverted the Soviet historical narrative. Whereas the Soviet narrative held that the October Revolution freed Uzbeks from tsarist colonial oppression, gave birth to Uzbekistan, and guided its national culture to modernity, the post-Soviet narrative explicitly asserts Uzbeks transhistorical victimization under Russian imperial and Soviet rule. According to this account, the Russian Empire and the Soviets alike stalled Uzbek development and repressed Uzbek native culture in favor of Russian culture. Cho'lpon plays a major role in both narratives: he was reviled in the Soviet Union from the late 1920s up to glasnost as an enemy of the people, but now he is unequivocally celebrated as a national hero. Both narratives lack nuance and rely more on teleology than facts. They each attribute complete conviction to their actors, effacing the ambiguity intrinsic to any indeterminate future. An examination of ignorance in Cho'lpon's characters helps us grasp the author's own inconclusive musings on the Soviet state, which consequently permits a more dynamic and exciting engagement with Uzbek literature and history.

Here I offer a biographical sketch of Cho'lpon's life and times, the history of the novel, and an analysis of its contents. Cho'lpon left no diary or other material giving an account of his life, and thus any biography of him is nothing more than a sketch that relies on the self-censored testimonies of relatives and memoirs of friends. I fill in the gaps in the biographical record by introducing the reader to the historical context of Cho'lpon's life and his poetic oeuvre. For these same reasons, we know little about the process of writing the novel. Cho'lpon left no authorial explanations about his intentions with the work and

the sequel tisat he is rumored to have written. I therefore make abundant use of historical and literary context to form an argument about the author's goals with Night and Day.