

AK WELSAPAR

THE
Tale
OF
Aypi



NOVEL



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Translated by W.M. Coulson



Glagoslav Publications

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by Ak Welsapar

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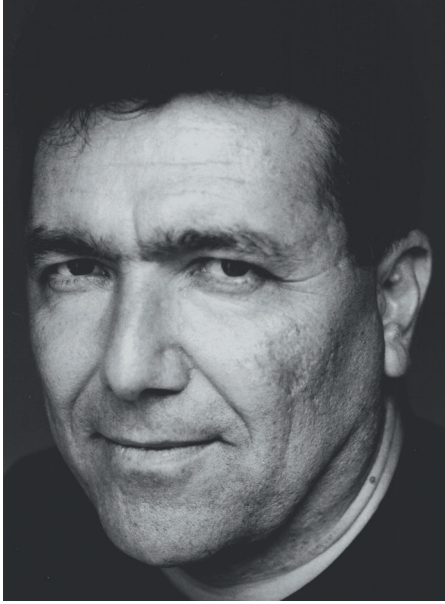
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Ak Welsapar
(Photo by Fanny Eriksson)

About The Tale of Aypi

An impoverished pair, Araz and his wife Ay-Bebek, lie in bed arguing. Soon they must leave their village – their old village on the shores of the Caspian Sea. How very topical is this tale of the disruption of ordinary lives, of quarrels and corrupt governments. Misery abounds and there are ghosts about. Yet human determination survives.

Does this sound familiar? What is strikingly unfamiliar is that this remarkable novel, where centuries seem to roll back into desert, is the first novel ever to emerge from Turkmenistan. Having lived for a while in that beautiful, harsh land, I can swear by the brilliant atmosphere of this epic tale, and advise all readers to experience it for themselves.

Brian W. Aldiss

*(Brian W. Aldiss is an English writer,
SF historian, and a critic).*

The sorrowful tale of Aypi, her story with no beginning or end; spurned until only the backbone of its significance remained. Not a single person had taken any notice of the young woman's tragic end or her short life. She was lost in the darkness of centuries along with her true name – a victim of unfounded fears.

To fate: betray not these hopes!

Makhtumkuli, 18th century

1

A tanned skinny boy of ten or twelve years old leapt down from the ledge of a run-down hut propped up on stilts. Hopping like a desert mouse, he made his way through the winding streets of his village which lay just a stone's throw from the sea. His piercing cries disturbed the tangled alleys full of houses still asleep, all so like his own.

“Sturgeon! Sturgeon for sale! Sturgeon!”

Bearing a woven basket full of fish, he weaved between the shabby huts, identical like twins. Although he was moving further away, his high-pitched calls of: “Sturgeon! Sturgeon!” were still ringing all over the place.

That sound was what woke a fisherman from the sweet dawn-time sleep that he'd just found after returning home late from the sea, only to be torn away from his rest. With difficulty he rubbed both his eyes, exhausted from staring all night into the fickle autumn sea, and gloomily looked around. Not seeing his wife, he raised his voice:

“Ay-Bebek!”

No response. The thick, sandblasted fabric covering the door rustled in the wind against the old-fashioned reed walls of the house, striving to make its own meagre contribution to the perpetual rumbling of the surf. Listening to the ceaseless thundering of the waves as he had since childhood, their sound was a balm to his tired ears whenever he slept in his own home. It was irritating to be disturbed in such a crude way.

“Ay-Bebek!” he shouted again, first tilting his head, then squinting to try to keep out the pain-inflicting sunbeams coming through the porch shutters.

A dainty attractive female head with its neatly brushed hair peered out from some inner chamber.

“Calm down, I’m right here” she answered, as she straightened the black hair hanging to her knees with an ash comb. “What is it?”

“Can’t that rascal be taught not to stomp around the village like that? He could just go quietly door-to-door, you know! Or has the relocation begun already?”

“Just a minute!” His wife once again disappeared into the house. She then headed out, putting on her headscarf and quietly murmuring to herself, “But the relocation is already underway, isn’t it? It can’t be stopped: If everyone else moves and you’re the only one left, you too will have to go.”

After his wife had left, the house fell silent again and the fisherman closed his eyes. Ay-Bebek’s clear, pleasant voice soon rang from across the street.

“Baljan! Baljan, come here child, let me tell you something...” The boy’s screeches promptly ceased.

Soon after, the woman returned, swishing aside the door tapestry as she came through. She intended to pass her husband by, yet her footsteps betrayed her. Without opening his eyes, he reached out and grabbed his young wife by her slender waist, still as graceful and lithe as a young girl’s, though she was now the mother of two. Despite her resistance, he easily pulled her down towards him.

“Stop it Araz! Stop, please, you’ll wake up the baby!”

“I will not.”

The fisherman sprang up from his bed sheets and pressed his whole weight onto his delicate wife.

“Stop it, boy! What if the neighbours came by for a visit?” his wife scolded him, struggling to break free.

“Let ‘em come! What business do they have at this hour, is their grave being dug here?”

“Just what a man like you would say — ‘Neighbours?! Fine, let them come, if they want to come, why shouldn’t they?’” retorted his wife, attempting to slip out of his strong eagle strong claws, gasping and burning her husband’s chest with her hot breath.

“Ok, let ‘em not come! I don’t need them! They’ll get my answer in the end!”

His wife grew increasingly angry.

“Look, boy! What did they ever do to us, for you to talk like this?”

“If they haven’t done anything yet, they will, they just aren’t finished yet! When the time comes, you’ll see, just you wait. Lately they’ve been barely able to say hello to me, as if I’d stolen their catch or sunk their boats.”

“No, don’t slander people! They’re not against us. You just take it out on everyone near you and...”

“Ok, enough! I know what they’ve been thinking lately, it’s blatantly obvious. You know how they sniff around, waiting for the day I get caught poaching, that’s when they’ll be glad! However much you make excuses for their foolishness, they’ll find a reason.”

“You’ll wear yourself out worrying. Do you think they don’t want to go fishing? Who doesn’t want to go out to sea? But if it’s not allowed, what can simple folks do? The power’s in the government’s hands, what authority do we have? You’ll bow down to them too in the end— you’re the only one left in the village. I worry night and day for you, this whole thing is frightening me.”

Araz listened patiently for a moment, then continued:

“Why shouldn’t people have some power too, or greater power than them? They should, but to have power you need guts, and that means you need to open your mouth eventually. When you’re no longer afraid, then you’ll have the power, you see? If you just sit there and say, ‘Yes sir’ to any command from on high, who’ll ever know that you exist? Who’ll care about your situation, or listen to you? How can you be a man if you don’t demand your rights?”

Ay-Bebek, maintaining her wifely caution, tried to calm her husband down.

“If you open your mouth, who knows what’ll happen? What if they crack down on you? Before you know it you’re separated from your children, from your hearth and home, and you’ll wake up in Siberia! There’s no shortage of people who were taken from the village that way. The fire’s been taken out of folks’ eyes, so they stay silent now”.

Araz continued, paying no attention to her concerns,

“To begin the process, first people need to organize themselves. You need to learn how to think and speak as one, so that your words make an impact, otherwise it all amounts to empty threats. A lone rider raises no dust! All an individual can do is be a good example, but he can’t change everything by himself alone. Man was given speech and intelligence, so why shouldn’t people use these gifts when they ought to be used?”

By this point, his wife couldn’t keep from bringing up her old wounds.” Araz, if you hadn’t been so arrogant and dropped out of college, right now you’d be the manager of some bureau in the city, wear an expensive straw hat on your head, coming and going from an air-conditioned office. Then your children and I wouldn’t be baking in this terrible heat; instead we’d be living in a nice cool mansion.”

“Does us going back and forth from an air conditioned mansion really solve all the world’s problems?”

“No, but what are we doing here? It’s all meaningless. Now that fishing has been forbidden, what’s the point of staying? Wouldn’t it be better to go silently where they tell us to go?”

“It’s everyone’s weakness that got us into this in the first place,” he confirmed. “To defend your home you need both intelligence and confidence. If either of these is missing, what use is the other? Didn’t our ancestors defend this coast? They did, so why shouldn’t we? The legend of Aypi didn’t just fall out of the sky, and this isn’t the first time someone’s set eyes on our folk’s land and property. But in the past they defended it fearlessly. Now, we tremble.”

“These are different times,” said his wife sceptically.

Araz answered bitterly: “What’s the difference between these days and those? If you don’t defend your home, they’ll try to take it from you at any time – what does the era matter?”

“We’re no longer living in the ancient times,” pointed out Ay-Bebek with a woman’s wisdom. “Go ahead and conspire, plan, and do whatever you like, but now we’ve got the State, government and the laws – where can you escape from them? What’s more, it isn’t like people are afraid for themselves...”

Araz’s voice rose: “Then who are they afraid for? Of course they’re afraid for themselves; how could someone else make them into such cowards?”

Ay-Bebek attempted once more, without result, to free herself from her husband’s captivity, then looked down.

“People fear for their wives and children, that’s why they’re cautious. But you, on the other hand, don’t care about us at all.”

Her husband, obviously irritated, turned over and rested his hand on his temple.

“Does someone who really cares about their family throw away their own village? Is that what you’re saying? These people are just floating along on the currents, like dead fish! Their fears – it’s just them wanting to save their own hides, the cowards.”

Ay-Bebek, recalling that she had one or two distant relatives in the village, replied in an insulted tone, “There are no cowards here, who can you point your finger at and say ‘You, coward!’ Who here is a stranger to you?”

“If you fish for a living, but you won’t go out to sea – then you’re a coward! All these people threw away the trade passed down to them by their fathers. If you’re a fisherman, go out to sea! What is there for you to do on dry land?”

Ay-Bebek didn’t want to anger her husband by carrying the argument farther, so she quietly responded,

“We’re all helpless...”

“Of course you’re helpless: if you’re afraid to organize yourself together with others, and remain in fear to speak your own mind.”

“Who knows,” said his wife softly, “but none of these people wish you ill.”

The fisherman took a deep breath.

“You’re wrong, they don’t like me and won’t forgive me, because I do what they can’t. How could they like me? The day I’m caught, you’ll see. I’m already up to my neck in fines; if they catch me again, this time it will be a metal cage. Do you think anyone will defend me? They’ll forget that red sturgeon pilaf they cook at every wedding, just you wait. Why should they remember something that reflects poorly on them?”

Though she had realized she couldn’t keep her husband from going out to sea, she still wouldn’t stop trying to convince him at every opportunity. “I’m not saying you’re wrong, but

when you go out alone, the neighbours do fear that you've drowned. Do you recall that night of the big storm? I guess you spent it on Aypi's bluff, as you may remember."

"So what if I did?" her husband answered noncommittally.

"Aha! Gutly had guessed right away and came over to help us. Otherwise, would Baljan and I have been strong enough to go up on the roof and secure those heavy tarpaulins, if it had been just the two of us? No we certainly wouldn't have been! You can see what a state this household's in."

"So what if you hadn't been able to put them up? Hardship doesn't break a person – only cowardice does. Hardship makes a man's body tougher and clothes his heart with armour. I know what hardship is better than you."

"What, you think I'm saying you don't know?" she replied with hurt in her voice. "I'm just saying that our neighbours don't mean you any harm; they aren't condemning you. Their only fault is not being able to go out fishing, but don't turn that into a crime. Everyone is so tired; they've had to give up their livelihoods, and all their expectations from previous life have been shot down. Can't you understand that?"

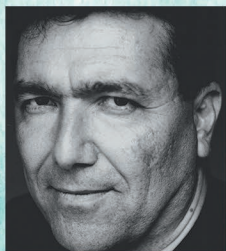
Araz sighed, "Who isn't tired? Yet you don't see me saying I'm tired and abandoning the ways of my fathers."

"Oh Araz, Araz! You'll buckle too, like everyone else. Won't you stop doing this impossible thing, and finally give up fishing, so I can rest peacefully here at home? Will this ever happen? Can't you just be content with what makes other people happy, so we can be like everyone else? The weight of your blind courage is getting heavier and heavier, and you are failing to understand that I'm the one bearing it all!"

Araz glared at his wife. "I know you are, but whenever I take a stand, you need to stand with me. To go out to sea you need strength. Do these incompetent people have any left?"

The Tale of Aypi follows the fate of a group of Turkmen fishermen dwelling on the coast of the Caspian Sea. The fear of losing their ancestral home looms over the entire village. This injustice is being made to look like a voluntary initiative on the part of the fishermen themselves, whilst the ruling powers cynically attempt to confiscate their land. One brave fisherman from the village rises up to confront them and fights for his native shore, as a response to an act of cruelty inflicted on a defenceless young woman centuries ago. This unjustly executed soul returns as a ghost during this troubled time to exact a terrible revenge on the men of the village.

The relationships among the characters mirror the eternal opposition between the forces of nature, with the intervention of mystical forces ratcheting up the tension.



Ak Welsapar was born in 1956 in the former Soviet Republic of Turkmenistan. He received his Master's degree in Journalism from Lomonosov Moscow State University in 1979. In 1987, Ak Welsapar became a member of the Soviet Writers' Association and received his second Master's degree in Literary Theory in 1989.

In 1993, after spending a year under house arrest, he was excluded from the Writers' Association following the publication of some investigative articles about colossal ecological problems in Central Asia. The regime in Turkmenistan declared Ak Welsapar a "public enemy", and the persecution that he faced began again, with redoubled force. To avoid unjust imprisonment and the persecution of his family, Ak Welsapar eventually left Turkmenistan in 1993.

Most of his novels are banned in Turkmenistan, including, to name but a few: *A Long Journey to Nearby* (1988), *Mulli Tahir* (1992), *The Cobra* (2003), *The Tale of Aypi* (2012). Ak Welsapar is still a proscribed writer in Turkmenistan and his name has been in the list of black-listed writers since 1990.

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