

The Semiosphere of Kyrgyz Women's Poetry: A Sociolinguistic Study of Cultural Crisis and Identity Formation

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Abstract

This paper examines Kyrgyz women's poetry through the theoretical lens of Yuri Lotman's semiosphere and the sociolinguistic dynamics of gendered expression. Kyrgyz women poets of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries write within a complex cultural environment shaped by oral tradition, nomadic cosmology, patriarchal structures, Soviet legacies, and contemporary globalization. Their poetry forms a gendered semiotic space in which cultural memory, symbolic structures, and linguistic identities are simultaneously preserved, contested, and transformed. Integrating Lotman's concepts of the semiosphere, including boundary, core/periphery, translation, dialogue, and cultural memory—with sociolinguistic insights into gendered language use, this study investigates how women's poetic voices articulate resistance, negotiate belonging, and reconfigure dominant cultural codes. A semiotic analysis of the poem Доор ыйлайт / *The Epoch Cries* by Zhazgul Zhamangulova demonstrates how cultural crisis, identity erosion, and boundary collapse are translated into powerful symbolic imagery. The findings

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reveal that Kyrgyz women's poetry functions not only as an artistic medium but also as a catalytic cultural force: it exposes structural disruptions in the Kyrgyz semiosphere, reactivates ancestral memory, and urges re-evaluation of identity and values. Ultimately, the paper argues that Kyrgyz women's poetry constructs a dynamic semiosphere in which linguistic creativity and cultural agency converge to reshape contemporary notions of gender, identity, and nationhood.

Introduction

Kyrgyz women's poetry of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries constitutes a rich semiotic space in which gendered voices, cultural memory, and linguistic identity intersect. As women poets entered the Kyrgyz literary sphere—historically dominated by male authorship—their texts began to articulate new meanings, reframing themes of tradition, embodiment, social constraints, and national belonging. Understanding this corpus requires analytical tools that address not only the structure of poetic language but also the broader cultural, historical, and ideological environment in which these texts circulate. For this reason, the theoretical framework of Yuri Lotman's semiosphere provides a productive lens through which to analyse Kyrgyz women's poetry. Lotman's concept of *semiosphere* posits that no text exists in isolation: all meaning production emerges within a larger semiotic space structured by boundaries, core/periphery dynamics, translation processes, and cultural memory (Lotman 1984; 1990). According to Lotman, semiosis is only possible within a culturally bounded semiotic continuum that precedes and conditions any individual text: “the ensemble of semiotic formations precedes the singular isolated language and becomes a condition for its existence” (1990). For Kyrgyz women's poetry, this means that female poetic expression operates within a broader cultural semiosphere and responds to the shaped by patriarchal norms, oral tradition, Soviet ideology, nomadic cosmology, and contemporary sociopolitical change.

At the same time, the field of sociolinguistics helps explain how gendered identities, power relations, and social hierarchies are encoded and negotiated in women's poetic language. Kyrgyz women poets frequently use linguistic strategies, code-switching, metaphor, kinship terminology, mythic imagery, to articulate both resistance and belonging. These linguistic practices reflect socially embedded meanings and highlight the dialogic relationship between poets and their cultural environment.

This study integrates semiotic theory and sociolinguistic analysis to explore how Kyrgyz women's poetry constructs a gendered semiosphere: a culturally bounded space where women's voices generate new meanings,

reconfigure existing symbols, and negotiate their socio-political identities. Through this framework, the paper aims to (1) analyse how women's poetic language interacts with the cultural semiotic environment, (2) examine the sociolinguistic markers that characterize women's poetic discourse, and (3) identify how Kyrgyz women poets position themselves within or against the dominant cultural semiosphere.

Methods of Research

This study employs an interdisciplinary qualitative research approach, integrating cultural semiotics and sociolinguistics to examine Kyrgyz women's poetry as a gendered semiotic space. The research is grounded in interpretivist epistemology, which posits that meaning is co-constructed through cultural, linguistic, and social contexts. Since Kyrgyz women's poetry reflects both personal expression and socio-cultural realities, the interpretive method allows the researcher to explore symbolic, linguistic, and cultural layers of meaning.

The methodology combines theoretical analysis, textual interpretation, and sociolinguistic coding to understand how female poets articulate identity, negotiate belonging, and respond to cultural crises within the Kyrgyz semiosphere.

The study is guided by two primary theoretical frameworks:

1) Yuri Lotman's Semiosphere Model: Identifying dominant cultural codes (core) and peripheral, innovative, or destabilizing elements (periphery) in poetry; Examining how poems translate external socio-cultural pressures into semiotic form; Understanding how historical and ancestral knowledge anchors meaning; Analyzing interactions between tradition and modernity, self and other, center and periphery.

2) Sociolinguistics of Gender: Examining linguistic markers of gender, social identity, and relational positioning; Identifying code-switching, kinship terminology, metaphoric expressions, and other devices that construct female subjectivity in a patriarchal context.

By combining these frameworks, the study treats poetry both as a semiotic artefact embedded in culture and as a performative linguistic medium reflecting gendered social reality.

The Semiosphere and Semiotic Theory

Yuri Lotman's contributions to cultural semiotics provide the primary theoretical foundation for this research. Lotman (1984; 1990) argues

that meaning emerges within the semiosphere, a unified but internally heterogeneous semiotic space that encompasses all cultural texts, languages, and sign systems. The semiosphere is characterized by:

- Boundaries, which separate “self” from “other” and function as “bilingual filters” translating external material into internal semiotic forms (Lotman 1984: 208);
- Core and periphery, where dominant cultural codes occupy the center, and innovative or marginal codes develop at the periphery (Lotman 1984: 214–215);
- Cultural memory, which stores the diachronic layers of texts and structures (Lotman 1984: 218);
- Translation, not only between languages but between semiotic systems, which generates new meanings (Lotman 1984: 209);
- Dialogue, which precedes language and serves as “the basis of all meaning-making processes” (Lotman 1984: 225–226);

Lotman's model has been widely applied in linguistics, literary studies, sociology, gender studies, and cultural anthropology, emphasizing how texts function as dynamic participants within larger systems of cultural meaning. Scholars such as Semenenko (2012) highlight the usefulness of semiosphere theory for analysing cultural identity, symbolic structures, and intertextual processes.

In the context of Kyrgyz literature, the semiosphere framework is particularly valuable because Kyrgyz poetic culture is historically shaped by oral tradition, nomad cosmology, Soviet literary policy, and post-independence re-traditionalization. These layers form a complex semiotic environment in which women's poetic voices emerge, negotiate, and transform meaning.

Women's Poetry as a Semiotic Space

Women's poetry worldwide often operates at the periphery of dominant cultural semiospheres, and Kyrgyz women's poetry is no exception. Researches on Central Asian women's literature show that women writers frequently reinterpret cultural symbols, motherhood, homeland, domestic space, bodily imagery, into vehicles of self-expression and critique (Kalieva, K., & Naimanova, Ch. 2022).

Studies on Kyrgyz women's poetry illustrate how female authors construct a unique symbolic world that challenges patriarchal norms,

redefines femininity, and foregrounds women's emotional and intellectual agency. Their poetic semiosphere often foregrounds:

- Domestic and everyday symbols (yurt, hearth, weaving, water, white scarf);
- Nature metaphors that encode emotion and identity;
- Mythological and epic references (e.g., Manas trilogy);
- Embodied language expressing agency, vulnerability, or resistance.

These symbolic configurations mark a distinctly gendered semiotic environment, where women's voices reshape culturally established signs.

Sociolinguistics of Kyrgyz Women's Poetry

Sociolinguistic perspectives help illuminate how gender, social roles, and identity are encoded in women's poetic language. Foundational work in gender and language (Lakoff 1975; Cameron 1992; Holmes 1995; Bucholtz 2014) demonstrates that linguistic choices, lexicon, metaphor, speech acts, reflect and reproduce social norms. Cameron Deborah explains that linguistics distinguishes itself from earlier traditions such as grammar, rhetoric, and poetics by defining itself as a scientific study of language, based on systematic observation and the search for general explanatory laws (1992, p.19). Although language has long been studied, scientific linguistics emerges only in the early 20th century, especially with Saussure, and belongs to the human sciences rather than the natural sciences (1992, p.19). Holmes shows that women and men use politeness strategies differently, with women more frequently employing interactional devices such as hedges, compliments, and apologies; these differences have important implications for women's educational and professional communication (1995, p.2)

Within the Kyrgyz context, sociolinguistic studies identify several linguistic patterns relevant to women's poetry:

- Code-switching between Kyrgyz and Russian as a marker of education, modernity, or cultural hybridity;
- Kinship terminology expressing relational identity (ene, apa, kelin, uulu, kyz);
- Politeness and honorific structures reflecting social hierarchy;
- Gendered metaphors for identity, moral responsibility, and emotional states.

Women poets manipulate these linguistic resources to articulate both conformity to and resistance against traditional gender expectations. Their poetic discourse becomes a site of negotiation where individual identity meets cultural normativity—a quintessential semiospheric process.

Integrating Semiotics and Sociolinguistics

Recent interdisciplinary scholarship argues for integrating semiotics with sociolinguistics to understand literary texts as cultural acts (Jaworski & Coupland 1999; Chandler 2017; Pennycook 2018). This approach views poems as:

- Semiotic artefacts embedded in cultural systems,
- Sociolinguistic performances of identity,
- Dialogic responses to cultural structures.

Applying both frameworks to Kyrgyz women's poetry enables a fuller examination of how poets operate within the Kyrgyz cultural semiosphere while also reshaping linguistic norms and social meanings.

Semiotic Analysis of Доор ыйлайт / *The Epoch Cries* by Zhazgul Zhamangulova According to Lotman's Semiosphere Model

The poem Zhazgul Zhamangulova Доор ыйлайт / *The Epoch Cries* (2024) operates within the Kyrgyz cultural semiosphere as a powerful text that diagnoses moral degradation, cultural erosion, and identity loss. Following Lotman's framework, the poem can be read as a *semiotic act* that interacts with the surrounding cultural environment, translating external chaos into meaningful symbolic language. According to Lotman, a text can only exist and function within a larger semiotic space, the semiosphere, which precedes and enables all meaning-making: "*Only the existence of the semiotic sphere makes the specific signatory act real*" (Lotman). Using Yuri Lotman's theoretical model of the semiosphere—comprising concepts such as boundary, core/periphery, cultural memory, translation, and semiotic asymmetry—this chapter analyzes the poem as a semiotic text embedded within, and reflective of, the Kyrgyz cultural world.

According to Lotman, no text exists independently: it is always produced within a larger cultural space that shapes and interprets its meaning. The semiosphere is "*the space without which semiosis itself cannot exist*" (Lotman 1990). The poem, therefore, functions as a semiotic act that translates social reality into symbolic form, making visible the instability and restructuring of the Kyrgyz semiosphere.

The Poem as Crisis Discourse

From the opening lines, the poem constructs a landscape of disorder:

Мунарык жер бети дүрбөлөң – the earth is in fog and turmoil

Мунжулар денесин сүйрөгөн – crippled bodies drag themselves

These images signal semiotic ruptures: previously stable signs (land, body, community) become destabilized. The poem presents the semiosphere as fractured, no longer governed by coherent cultural codes.

Lotman argues that a culture in crisis produces texts that attempt to re-establish meaning by highlighting internal disorder. The poem functions precisely in this way—diagnosing the collapse of traditional cultural structures.

Boundary Mechanism: *We* vs *They*

Lotman states that a semiosphere is defined by a boundary that separates internal cultural meanings from external chaos: “*the boundary is a bilingual mechanism... transforming the external into the internal language of the semiosphere*” (Lotman, 1990)

The boundary in the poem is shown as porous and collapsing, allowing external forces to intrude:

Кийинди бөтөндүн чепкенин – wearing the coat of another;
Өз жерин сатканга көтөрүп – selling one’s own land.

The poem semiotizes foreignness as destructive, untranslatable chaos entering the Kyrgyz cultural code.

In the poem, the boundary appears through contrasts:

Internal (core cultural identity)

- Mother tongue: Тил барат өлчүдөй жөтөлүп
- Customs: Кылымдык карт үндүү кааданды
- National food: Сен берген ак нандан кур калып

External (threatening forces)

- Бөтөндүн чепкени (foreign clothing)
- Башканын улпагын (other’s food)
- Corruption, greed, and moral deterioration
- Selling native land: Өз жерин сатканга көтөрүп

The poem repeatedly filters chaotic modern influences (foreign goods, poverty, loss of honor, commodification) through Kyrgyz cultural codes (bread, kymyz, customs). This is exactly the border function Lotman describes: the poem semiotizes external chaos by translating it into culturally meaningful symbols.

Core and Periphery

Lotman argues that every semiosphere has a core (dominant cultural codes) and a periphery (less-structured, dynamic zones)

Core structures in the Kyrgyz semiosphere

- Elders (карыя сакалдан айрылган)
- Honor of young men (жигиттер намыстан ажырап)
- National identity (mother tongue, bread, customs)
- Horses (тулпар as heroic symbol), кумыз (көөкөр)
- Land-as-identity (Өз жерин сатуу)

The poem shows these core structures collapsing:

Карыя сакалдан айрылган Жигиттер намыстан ажырап.

Loss of the core indicates a semiospheric crisis. The periphery, greed, foreign influence, poverty, and moral degradation, moves inward and overtakes the center. Lotman notes that when the periphery becomes dominant, cultural disorder intensifies and new meanings emerge chaotically: *“irregularity in the semiosphere creates zones of accelerated semiotic processes”* (On the semiosphere).

Semiotic irregularity occurs when:

- Different symbolic codes collide
- Cultural meanings lose hierarchy
- Interpretation becomes unstable

The poem's world is filled with irregularity:

- Displaced symbols: bread, horses, language lose their original meanings
- Moral inversion: wealth appears as “lead” and “soot”
- Identity confusion: Бээ десен, төө дейт ал урпагың.

This reflects Lotman's concept that crisis produces semantic noise—a breakdown of interpretive stability.

Lotman describes semiotic irregularity as the mixing of incompatible languages, codes, or values within a single cultural space: "*Semiotic space is characterized by nuclear structures... and amorphous peripheries*" (On the semiosphere, 1990).

The poem's world is highly irregular:

- Modernity mixes with poverty
- Youth wear foreign clothes
- People eat foreign bread instead of Kyrgyz ак нан.
- Honor collapses, morality blurs
- The sacred mother tongue coughs "as if dying"

This internal disorganization matches Lotman's idea that the semiosphere becomes chaotic when its codes conflict: "*Texts appear immersed in languages which do not correspond to them, and codes may be absent*" (On the semiosphere, 1990).

The poem portrays exactly such a space: a cultural system where the old codes (tradition, honor, language) no longer govern reality.

Cultural Memory and Time: The Past as a Meaning-Generating Core

Lotman stresses that the semiosphere contains a deep cultural memory essential for identity: "*The semiosphere has a diachronic depth... without which it cannot function*" (On the semiosphere).

The poem invokes memory of:

- Кылымдык... каада - centuries-old customs
- The "white bread" of ancestors
- Horses, kymyz, landscapes — markers of nomadic memory
- Elders' beards - symbols of continuity

These memories function as semiotic anchors: they help the reader measure present decay. The poem's lament Доор ыйлайт / *The Epoch Cries* is a meta-semiotic statement: time itself is mourning the destruction of cultural memory. Thus, the poem positions memory as the core of the Kyrgyz semiosphere, now under threat.

Dialogue and Translation

Lotman argues that meaning emerges through dialogue between asymmetrical systems, not through isolated signs: “*Dialogue precedes language and gives birth to it*” (On the semiosphere).

In the poem, the dialogue occurs between:

- Past ↔ Present
- Tradition ↔ Modernity
- Ethical purity ↔ Corruption
- National identity ↔ Foreign influence
- Past prosperity ↔ Present misery

Every stanza presents oppositions:

Table 1. *Oppositions*

Traditional Code	Modern Disruption
<i>Ак нан (white bread)</i>	<i>Кара нан (Black bread of others)</i>
<i>Кымыз</i>	<i>Sour water</i>
<i>Honor</i>	<i>Greed</i>
<i>Mother tongue</i>	<i>“coughing”, dying</i>
<i>Elders</i>	<i>Losing beard, authority</i>
<i>Youth</i>	<i>Dishonored, rootless</i>

This tension forms a semiotic dialogue, producing emotional meaning. Through this dialogic contrast, the poem translates social decay into symbolic images.

The Poem as Periphery Text

Lotman says peripheral texts function as cultural catalysts: “*Foreign or peripheral texts act as catalysts in the whole mechanism of the semiosphere*” (On the semiosphere, 1990). This poem takes the periphery — corruption, foreign influence, moral collapse, and pushes it into the center of cultural reflection. Its aim is not to describe harmony, but to expose crisis.

Thus, the poem functions as:

- A critique
- A warning

- A mirror
- A catalyst for rethinking cultural identity

Core and Periphery in the Kyrgyz Semiosphere

Lotman's semiosphere consists of:

- Core: dominant, stable, culturally authoritative symbols
- Periphery: flexible, innovative, or destabilizing elements

Table 2. Core Elements in the Poem

Core Symbol	Meaning
<i>Ак нан</i>	ancestral sustenance, home, memory
<i>Кымыз / көөкөр</i>	nomadic identity, continuity
<i>Сакал</i>	authority, elderhood
<i>Жигит намысы</i>	masculinity, honor
<i>Тил (mother tongue)</i>	identity, memory
<i>Каада-салт</i>	customs as cultural backbone

The poem shows the disintegration of these core structures:

- Elders losing beards
- Language coughing
- Youth losing honor
- Customs erased by soot

When core elements collapse, the semiosphere enters a chaotic state.

Lotman argues that cultural memory is fundamental to the semiosphere: without memory, no identity can exist.

The poem invokes memory:

- “Кылымдык карт үндүү кааданды” — thousand-year-old customs
- Lost bread, lost kymyz
- Stumbling horses (echo of Manas epics)
- Elders' beards (symbolic continuity)

These symbols are pulled from the deep memory archive of Kyrgyz culture. The poem contrasts this memory with the present, producing emotional and semiotic tension.

Memory functions as a stabilizer within the chaotic semiosphere, highlighting what is lost.

The Poem as a Periphery-to-Core Catalytic Text

Lotman writes that texts from the periphery often act as catalysts for cultural transformation.

This poem:

- Highlights social and moral decay
- Revives forgotten symbols
- Warns of identity loss
- Calls for cultural awakening

It brings peripheral issues (land loss, identity erosion, greed) into the center of cultural reflection.

The poem is therefore a catalytic text seeking to restore cultural coherence.

Semiotic Map of Symbols in “Доор Ыйлайт”

Below is a structured map of the key symbols in the poem with their cultural/semiotic functions.

Table 3. Symbols of Cultural Core

Symbol	Meaning	Cultural Layer
<i>Ак нан</i>	purity, home, ancestral generosity	Domestic / sacred
<i>Кымыз, көөкөр</i>	nomadic identity, Kyrgyz hospitality	Ethnographic
<i>Тил</i>	identity, continuity, existence	Linguistic
<i>Дил</i>	morality, inner essence	Ethical
<i>Ат, тулпар</i>	heroism, mobility, honor	Epic / nomadic
<i>Сакал</i>	wisdom, elder authority	Social hierarchy
<i>Каада-салт</i>	cultural code, memory	Ritual

Table 4. Symbols of Crisis and Decay

Symbol	Semiotic Meaning
<i>Сууган көздөр</i>	moral blindness
<i>Муң</i>	existential grief
<i>Тумоо оорулар</i>	spiritual illness
<i>Булганган дүйнө</i>	polluted semiosphere

Table 5. Symbols of External Threat

Symbol	Meaning
<i>Бөтөн чепкен</i>	identity loss
<i>Башканын наны</i>	dependency, colonized consumption
<i>Базар</i>	commodification
<i>Кетмен</i>	servitude, exploitation

Table 6. Symbols of Transformation

Symbol	Meaning
<i>Үйүлгөн байлык</i>	wealth decaying into poison
<i>Көк сууну шимирип</i>	consuming impurity
<i>Жөтөлгөн тил</i>	dying identity
<i>Кур калган эл</i>	cultural starvation

Table 7. The Poem as a Catalytic Text in the Semiosphere

Periphery	Poem (Transformation)	Core (Outcome)
<i>Corruption</i>	Translation of social crisis into symbolic meaning	Re-evaluation of norms and values
<i>Identity loss</i>	Symbolization through metaphors, contrasts, cultural codes	Cultural renewal; restoration of meaning
<i>Foreign influence</i>	Naming the crisis; exposing periphery intrusion	Memory activation; recovery of traditional identity

The poem operates as a semiotic catalyst, mediating between *periphery* and *core*, transforming chaotic social realities into interpretable cultural symbols, and urging restoration of the core cultural values.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that Kyrgyz women's poetry forms a vibrant semiosphere in which cultural memory, symbolic language, and gendered identity converge to negotiate the challenges of contemporary Kyrgyz society. Applying Yuri Lotman's semiosphere model has made it possible to understand women's poetic discourse not as isolated artistic expression, but as a semiotic system embedded within culturally layered environments that are shaped by female voices. The analysis of Zhazgul Zhamangulova's poem

Доор ыйлайт / *The Epoch Cries* reveals the mechanisms of a semiospheric crisis, where:

- the cultural core collapses—language, customs, honor, elderhood, land, and ritual lose stability;

- the periphery intrudes—foreign influence, corruption, social inequality, and commodification reshape cultural structures;

- boundaries blur, allowing unfiltered external forces to disrupt symbolic order;

- semiotic irregularity grows, destabilizing meaning and identity;

- cultural memory becomes the primary anchor, enabling the recognition of loss and the possibility of renewal.

Through symbolic contrasts between tradition and modernity, purity and corruption, homeland and foreignness, the poem functions as a diagnostic cultural text. It names social disintegration, translates chaotic experiences into structured symbolic narratives, and reactivates ancestral memory as a resource for reconstruction.

More broadly, the study shows that Kyrgyz women's poetry acts as a catalytic force within the national semiosphere. By shifting traditionally marginal female experiences into the center of cultural meaning, women poets challenge entrenched norms, enrich the symbolic system of Kyrgyz literature, and articulate alternative models of identity and belonging. Their use of sociolinguistic strategies—code-switching, kinship terminology, embodied metaphors, and culturally resonant imagery—creates a dialogic space where gendered voices reshape semiotic boundaries.

In conclusion, Kyrgyz women's poetry does not merely lament cultural crisis; it intervenes in the semiosphere, offering a renewed semiotic map of identity, memory, and moral orientation. This research affirms that female poetic expression is integral to understanding the ongoing cultural transformations of Kyrgyz society and contributes to the broader study of gendered semiotics, sociolinguistics, and Central Asian literature.

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