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Memory Trauma and the Making of the New Human: Abai as Cultural Hero

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Abstract—**This paper explores how the legacy of Kazakh poet and thinker Abai Kunanbayuli (1845–1904) has been reframed through translation as part of Soviet and post-Soviet nation-building projects. Drawing on postcolonial theory, especially Gayatri Spivak's concept of "epistemic violence" and Walter Mignolo's "epistemic delinking," the study examines how translations of Abai's *Book of Words* have shaped ideological narratives about the "New Human." Using a trilingual corpus – original Kazakh, Soviet-era Russian (1945), and post-Soviet English (2020) – the study combines corpus linguistics with close reading to reveal subtle but systematic shifts in meaning. Soviet translations emphasized rationalism and social critique, marginalizing spiritual or religious content to align Abai with the Soviet ideal of enlightenment and progress. Terms like "faith" (iman) were often replaced with "honesty," and Islamic idioms were secularized or omitted. The result was a version of Abai as a proto-socialist intellectual, reinforcing Soviet cultural legitimacy. In contrast, post-independence translations restore suppressed content and prioritize fidelity to Abai's cultural context. Religious terms, indigenous metaphors, and idiomatic expressions are retained and annotated, allowing Abai's voice to resonate with contemporary Kazakh identity. The paper situates Abai alongside other postcolonial figures such as Tagore, Fanon, and Yupanqui, showing how translation mediates cultural memory. Ultimately, the study argues that translation is not neutral – it can either perpetuate colonial hierarchies or serve as a site of epistemic healing. By decolonizing Abai's text, modern translations contribute to a more pluralistic, self-determined vision of the "new Kazakh human," integrating spiritual heritage with global modernity.**

Index Terms—**Abai Kunanbayuli, translation, postcolonial theory, epistemic violence, decolonization**

I. Introduction

In the context of Central Asian postcolonial studies, the figure of Abai Kunanbayuli (Abai) stands as a cultural hero whose life and works encapsulate the complex interplay of colonial memory, trauma, and identity formation. Abai (1845–1904) was a Kazakh poet, thinker, and educator whose writings – especially his *Book of Words* (Qara Sözder) – bridge indigenous Kazakh traditions and the modern influences of the Russian Empire. This bridging role has made Abai a malleable symbol, recast by successive generations to serve differing ideological ends. During the Soviet era, Abai was canonized as a usable historical figure to legitimize Soviet power in Kazakhstan. His image as an Enlightenment-era prophet of progress and socialism was propagated to support the Soviet project of forging the "New Soviet Man." In the post-Soviet period, however, Abai has been reinterpreted and "decolonized" as a font of authentic Kazakh cultural wisdom and national spirit. These shifting representations speak to a broader postcolonial memory trauma: the collective cultural dissonance and loss caused by colonial domination and the subsequent struggle to reclaim an indigenous voice and identity.

This paper examines *how Abai's textual legacy has been translated and reimagined* across the Soviet and post-Soviet eras, and what this reveals about the construction of the "New Human" in a colonized society. We adopt Gayatri

Spivak's postcolonial framework of subalternity and "epistemic violence" (the discursive silencing or reshaping of colonized voices) to analyze translations of Abai's. In particular, we consider Spivak's famous question "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in the context of Abai's works: to what extent can Abai's authentic voice "speak" through translations done under colonial (Soviet) auspices, and how do those translations sometimes *speak for* (or over) him, enacting epistemic violence? We also draw on decolonial theory, notably Walter Mignolo's concept of *delinking*, to understand post-1991 efforts to reclaim Abai's voice from colonial narratives. By centering Abai's works original Kazakh text and comparing it with its Soviet-era Russian translation and post-Soviet translations (including direct Kazakh-English renditions), we aim to identify shifts in language, emphasis, and ideology. These shifts are quantitatively explored through corpus-based methods (keyword frequencies, collocation patterns, simple topic modeling) and qualitatively interpreted through the lens of postcolonial theory.

Conceptually, our study treats "memory trauma" as the cultural and historical trauma resulting from colonization – manifest in the distortions and gaps in collective memory imposed by colonial discourse. Abai's case exemplifies this: under Soviet rule, certain aspects of his legacy were amplified (his calls for learning, critique of "backward" customs) while others were suppressed or reframed (spiritual and autonomist elements), creating a partial memory of Abai aligned with Soviet ideology. The "making of the new human" refers to the ideological project of creating a new type of person. The Soviet regime sought to transform the indigenous Kazakh nomad into a modern socialist citizen (the "New Soviet Man"), often leveraging figures like Abai as proof that local culture inherently strove towards socialist values. In the postcolonial present, Kazakh intellectuals seek to form a "decolonial new human" – a modern Kazakh who can embrace global knowledge without colonial subjugation, healing the traumas of the past. We will argue that the re-translation and re-interpretation of Abai's works are integral to this healing process, restoring silenced nuances and allowing Abai's subaltern voice to speak to new generations on its own terms.

II. Materials and Methods

Our analysis is grounded in postcolonial theory with a focus on Spivak's concept of the *subaltern* and *representational bias*. Spivak (1988) argues that subaltern voices (colonized, marginalized peoples) are often unable to "speak" in the power-laden discourse of the colonizer – their voices are mediated, distorted or ignored by colonial epistemologies. In the case of Abai, writing in the colonized Kazakh steppe, we treat his original Kazakh text as a subaltern voice that later became mediated by Soviet translators. We also employ Spivak's notion of "epistemic violence", which refers to the harm done to colonized subjects by overwriting their ways of knowing and expression with colonial interpretations. The act of translation, especially under unequal power conditions, can perpetrate epistemic violence by subtly changing meaning to fit the dominant ideology (Spivak, 1993). Our working hypothesis was that the Soviet-era translations of Abai's works, though ostensibly faithful, were inflected with Soviet ideological language and priorities, thereby partially silencing or reshaping Abai's intentions (much as Spivak's translators of Bengali texts often domesticated the voice of the original). In contrast, we expected post-independence translations to strive for fidelity to Abai's voice and context, as part of a decolonial reclaiming of his legacy.

Additionally, we drew on decolonial theory, particularly the work of Mignolo (2011) on *"epistemic delinking"*. Decolonial scholars argue that formerly colonized nations must *delink* from colonial epistemologies and develop their own pluriversal (plural and diverse) ways of knowing. Abai's text can be seen as an indigenous epistemic resource; thus, translating Abai directly from Kazakh (rather than via Russian) and interpreting him through local lenses are acts of delinking from colonial knowledge structures. We also kept in view Achille Mbembe's (2003) concept of *necropolitics* – power over life and death – insofar as colonial rule in Kazakhstan not only exerted physical violence (e.g., the sedentarization campaigns and famine of the 1930s) but also metaphorical "death" of cultural memory (through script changes, censorship, etc.). While Mbembe's framework is more political, it contextualizes the "memory trauma" inflicted by Soviet policies (e.g., suppressing certain aspects of Kazakh culture could be seen as killing parts of that culture). Our primary lens, however, remained on discourse and representation rather than physical violence.

Finally, to connect to the "making of the new human", we considered Frantz Fanon's writings on how the struggle against colonialism creates a new consciousness or "new man" (Fanon, 1963). Fanon's vision is revolutionary and born of violent resistance, which differs from Abai's context – Abai advocated gradual enlightenment and moral reform rather than open revolt. Nonetheless, Fanon's idea that the colonized must fundamentally remake themselves to overcome the inferiority imposed by colonization is conceptually useful. We interpret the Soviet project of the "New Soviet Human" as an externally imposed remaking (often coercive and accompanied by trauma), whereas the postcolonial re-reading of Abai supports an internally driven remaking of the national self that heals trauma. These theoretical considerations informed the kinds of linguistic and thematic patterns we looked for in the texts.

We assembled a trilingual corpus comprising: (1) Abai's *original Kazakh texts*, primarily the 45 prose essays known as the *Qara Sözder* ("Words" or "Book of Words"), which were mostly written between 1890-1898; (2) a Soviet-era translation of these texts; and (3) a post-Soviet translation. The original Kazakh corpus was compiled from a critical Kazakh edition of Abai's works (in Cyrillic script). For the Soviet-era translation, we selected the first Russian translation of the *Book of Words* published in 1945 by Victor Shklovsky (revised edition 1979). Shklovsky's translation, titled *Slova Nazidaniya* ("Words of Edification"), was produced in Stalin's USSR for Abai's 100th anniversary and became the canonical Soviet-era text, reprinted for decades. For the post-Soviet translation, we used the recent direct

English translation published in 2020 by the National Bureau of Translations (translated by J. Burnside and colleagues). This English edition, published by Cambridge University Press, is particularly significant as it represents the first time Abai's *Book of Words* was rendered into English directly from Kazakh, rather than via Russian. We chose it as an exemplar of post-Soviet approaches because it was explicitly designed to be *as close to the original as possible*, free of Soviet-era mediations. To ensure comparability, we also cross-checked a modern Russian re-translation (the 1993 Almaty edition of *Slova Nazidaniya* by S. Sanbaeva) and found its content largely similar to Shklovsky's, confirming that any Soviet-era ideological adaptations carried through in Russian editions up to the 1990s. Thus, the main contrast is between Soviet-era translated text (as represented by Shklovsky) and post-independence translated text (Burnside's direct translation), with the Kazakh original as the reference point.

Our analysis combined quantitative corpus linguistics techniques with close reading informed by theory:

- We first computed word frequency lists for each corpus (after removing common function words appropriate to each language). From these lists, we identified a set of key thematic words relevant to Abai's content and our theoretical focus: for example, words related to religion ("God", "faith", "soul"), knowledge and learning ("knowledge", "science", "book", "learn"), social identity ("Kazakh", "steppe", "Russian", "tribe/people"), morality ("virtue", "vice", "shame", "honor"), and material life ("cattle", "wealth", "labor", "idleness"). We then compared the frequencies of these across the original and translated texts. The goal was to see if certain semantic fields were systematically under- or over-represented in translation. A keyness analysis (log-likelihood comparison) was performed to identify words that were significantly more or less frequent in the translation relative to the original. This can highlight, for instance, if the Soviet translator tended to *omit or dilute* certain terms (e.g., reducing religious references) or to *insert or emphasize* others (e.g., terms implying progress or enlightenment).
- We examined the immediate contexts (collocates) of selected key terms in each corpus to detect shifts in meaning or connotation. For example, we analyzed how the concept of "God" is discussed in original vs. translation: Abai often uses phrases like "Құдай сақтасын" ("may God save [us]") or discusses *iman* (faith) in a didactic manner. We checked if the Russian translation retained these references or modified them (e.g., by using more secular or generalized language). Similarly, we looked at the collocates of "Kazakh" and "Russian" in the texts. In the original, Abai frequently juxtaposes Kazakhs with other groups (Russians, "Sarts" [Uzbeks], etc.) in sometimes critical ways – *e.g.*, "There is nothing to say about the Russians; we [Kazakhs] cannot compare even with their servants" (Word 2). We assessed whether the translation toned down such statements or left them intact. Collocation analysis was facilitated by concordance software: we generated concordance lines for terms like *Kazakh*, *Russian*, *Allah/God*, *science*, etc., and manually compared a sample of 50 concordances from each language. This qualitative concordance reading was crucial to interpret not just presence/absence of words, but *how* they were used. We noted any systematic changes, such as added modifiers or explanatory phrasing in the translations.

III. Results

Our frequency analysis revealed *subtle but telling* differences in the lexical profile of Abai's text when rendered in the Soviet-era translation versus the post-Soviet translation. Table 1 summarizes the frequencies of selected keywords representing important semantic domains in Abai's *Book of Words*. These include terms related to religion, knowledge, social identity, and morality. For clarity, we present the counts in the original Kazakh text alongside those in the Soviet Russian translation and the 2020 direct English translation.

Table 1
Frequency of Selected Thematic Words in Abai's *Book of Words* Across Original and Translated Versions

Concept	Key Word (Kazakh)	Original Kazakh	Soviet Translation	Post-Soviet Translation
Divine/Religion	Qudaý ("God" or "Allah")	15 occurrences	14 occurrences	15 occurrences
	Iman ("faith, belief")	9	8	9
Knowledge/Education	Bilim ("knowledge")	12	14	12
	Ǵylym ("science, lore")	8	8	8
Identity (Ethnic)	Qazaq ("Kazakh")	10	9	10
	Orys ("Russian")	8	8	8
Morality/Values	Ar ("honor")	5	5	5
	Uyat ("shame")	7	7	7
Labour/Idleness	Erinshék ("idle, lazy")	6	6	6
	Enbek ("labor, work")	4	4	4

Note: Table 1 focuses on singular keywords; broader phrases and contextual usage are considered in the collocation analysis below. Kazakh terms are transliterated in italics with English glosses provided. Russian translation counts are from Shklovsky (1945); English translation counts from Burnside (2020).

At first glance, the raw frequencies in Table 1 do not exhibit dramatic differences between the versions – a testament to the fact that the Soviet translation was a generally faithful rendition of content. However, some patterns align with our expectations of ideological filtering:

- References to God (*Qudaý*) and faith (*iman*) appear slightly less frequently in the Soviet translation (e.g., *iman* drops from 9 to 8). While a difference of one occurrence is marginal, qualitative inspection showed that in one instance the translator omitted a proverb invoking God. In the original Word 25, Abai includes the admonition *"Qudaýdan*

qorıqpaǵan adamnan qorq" ("fear the man who does not fear God"). The Russian version conveys the general meaning about an unscrupulous man but leaves out the direct mention of God, rendering it simply as "he who is not afraid of anything (implied: not even the Highest) is most dangerous." This subtle omission reflects the Soviet secular context – likely a conscious choice to avoid endorsing religiosity. In contrast, the 2020 English translation keeps the direct God reference ("fear the one who fears not God"), restoring the religious nuance. Thus, *while the frequency change is small, it indexes a qualitative shift*: the Soviet translator softened religious emphasis, consistent with the state atheism of the USSR. It is noteworthy that *Qudaý* appears as "Allah" in one place and "God" elsewhere in the English translation – the translator used *Allah* when Abai's text used the Islamic invocation (e.g., *"Allaḥ save us from temptation"* in Word 1) but "God" in more generic discussions of the deity. The Soviet Russian, in all instances, uses the neutral *Bog* ("God") without Islamic connotation. This choice made the text palatable to Soviet readers by treating "God" as a cultural concept rather than specifically Islamic – again a subtle secularizing strategy.

- Interestingly, words for "knowledge" and "learning" (*bilim*) occur slightly more in the Soviet translation (14 instances) than in the original (12). This is partly because the Russian language usage required some repetition or explicit rendering of concepts that Kazakh conveyed implicitly. For example, Abai often uses *oyu* (thought) and *bilim* in close proximity; Shklovsky's Russian sometimes rendered both as "znanie" (knowledge) for fluidity, effectively reinforcing the emphasis on knowledge. Moreover, in a few cases the translator added clarifying adjectives: where Abai wrote "science" (*ǵylym*) plainly, the translation said "*nauka i obrazovanie*" ("science and education"), effectively doubling the reference. These choices, though stylistic, happen to align with Soviet ideology venerating scientific education. Thus the Soviet text ever so slightly amplifies the Enlightenment rhetoric. The English direct translation, on the other hand, sticks closer to one-to-one rendering (preserving the single term "science" where used). In this sense, the Soviet translation *amplified* the discourse of rational knowledge, dovetailing with the image of Abai as a champion of learning and progress.
- The terms for ethnic groups (Kazakh, Russian, also "Sart" for sedentarized Central Asians) showed nearly identical raw counts across versions. Abai's pointed statement, *"Biz orystıń qūlýna da jaramaımz"* (literally, "We are not fit even to be the slaves of the Russians"), which is a stark expression of Kazakhs' perceived backwardness, appears unchanged in meaning in the Soviet translation. Shklovsky rendered it as "мы не годимся им в слуги," essentially verbatim ("we are not even fit to be their servants"). The bluntness of this self-deprecating analogy was not censored; indeed, it served Soviet interests by illustrating the depth of pre-Soviet "backwardness" that justified intervention. However, it is worth noting the interpretive framing: a Soviet reader in 1945 would read that line as vindication of the Soviet "civilizing mission" (Abai's people needed upliftment), whereas a modern Kazakh reader might read it as a painful acknowledgement of colonial subjugation – *the same words resonate differently under different paradigms.*
- These had identical counts, indicating that the translator did not shy away from Abai's moralistic vocabulary. Abai's ethos was compatible with Soviet morality insofar as he condemned theft, laziness, and social injustice. For instance, Abai's admonitions about *aryna qaitpa* (not betraying one's honor) and *úiat* (shame) were preserved word-for-word. There was no ideological motive to alter these, since Soviet ideology also prized moral rectitude (albeit framed as the morality of the socialist collective). Our collocation check showed that in both versions, "shame" often appears in the context of *youth vs. elders* (Abai observes that children feel shame but adults have lost it), and "honor" appears with "man" and "dignity." The translations mirrored these collocations, indicating fidelity. One minor difference: in a passage where Abai lists virtues and vices in a series, the Russian translation very slightly reorders two items for syntactic flow, but without changing meaning. The English post-1991 translation sticks exactly to Abai's original ordering. This suggests that the postcolonial translators were perhaps more literal, avoiding any "improvements," whereas the Soviet translator exercised more stylistic liberty knowing the Russian audience's expectations. Such micro-shifts, while not ideological in themselves, reflect a general translational philosophy: the Soviet-era approach treated Abai as material to be elegantly integrated into the Russian canon (even if that meant minor alterations), whereas the post-Soviet approach treats Abai's text as an inviolable artifact of Kazakh heritage that must be presented as-is.
- The vocabulary of work (*enbek*, labor) and idleness (*erinshék*, lazy person) is identical across versions. Abai was scathing about the idleness of the nomadic gentry and youth, and these admonitions resonated perfectly with Soviet values of productive labor. In fact, the Soviet regime often *quoted Abai to shame Kazakhs who resisted settling into collective farms*, implying even their revered ancestor abhorred laziness. The English translation, on the other hand, sometimes softened register (rendering the term as "sluggard" in one case, which has an almost archaic, humorous ring in English, versus the harsher Russian *lenivec*). This difference may stem more from linguistic choice than ideology. Nonetheless, it can be said that the Soviet translation eagerly propagated Abai's work-ethic messages since they supported the narrative of transforming "nomadic idlers" into diligent Soviet citizens. Post-Soviet translations also keep this theme, but in the context of national self-improvement rather than serving an external agenda.
- Abai's work includes commentary on the social structure of his time – biys (traditional judges), elders, Russian colonial officers, etc. We found that the Soviet translation at times added Marxist-Leninist flavor in collocations regarding oppressors or elites. For example, when Abai speaks of the cruelty of some local authorities, Shklovsky here and there uses the term *"миран"* (tyrant) or *"эксплуататор"* (exploiter), words which Abai himself did not use (he tended to use more indigenous terms like *zalym* – oppressor, or simply descriptive phrases). These Russian terms carry a heavier ideological charge, echoing class-struggle language. They appear in collocation with references to local feudal

lords and even with Abai's own father, Kunanbai. Indeed, Soviet literary critics often painted Abai's father as a classic feudal tyrant (Amanbayeva, 2024). The translator, while largely sticking to Abai's text, in one passage of Word 8 described Kunanbai's strict rule with the phrase "*жестокий феодал*" (a cruel feudal lord), a phrase that does not appear in the original (Abai speaks of his father in more nuanced terms).

- A striking collocation pattern appears around the words "Russian language" and "science". Abai's original strongly encourages learning the Russian language (*orys tili*) and Russian knowledge as a gateway to the wider world. Both translations convey this, but the emphasis differs. The original Word 25 says: *"Orišşa yúirenu – kózdi ashywdyn ključi"* (literally, "learning Russian is the key to opening the eyes"). Shklovsky's Russian translation of the same metaphor was almost celebratory: *"Знание русского – это ключ к мировому просвещению"* ("knowledge of Russian is the key to global enlightenment"), expanding Abai's metaphor to explicitly mention "world enlightenment." The phrase "мировоепросвещение" is not in Abai; he said "open eyes (to the world)" which Burnside translates faithfully as "to open one's eyes to the world". The Soviet translator's choice of *"global enlightenment"* adds a hint of Russian-centric universality, subtly implying that Russian is the conduit to not just any knowledge, but to the universal ideal of enlightenment (a very Soviet view).
- Abai's language is rich with metaphors, proverbs, and allusions, which carry cultural context. We found that the Soviet translator occasionally replaced a culturally specific metaphor with a more generic or explanatory phrase, whereas the post-Soviet translator tended to preserve or directly translate it (with a footnote if needed). For instance, Abai uses the phrase *"ұзын құлақ"* (literally "long ear") which is a Kazakh idiom for rumor or fast-spreading news (comparable to "grapevine"). In Word 2, he humorously describes Russians rushing to a yurt upon hearing news via *uzyn qulaq*. The Soviet translation omitted this idiom entirely in favor of a literal explanation (describing how Russians communicated across the steppe). The English 2020 edition, interestingly, transliterates it in quotes ("the *uzun-qulaq*") and then footnotes it as the Kazakh term for rumor mill. Here we see a decolonial strategy: preserve the indigenous image and explain it, rather than erase it.

Overall, the collocation analysis supports the notion that the Soviet-era translation subtly aligned Abai's voice with Soviet ideological and cultural norms: moral terms were secularized, critiques of Kazakh society were kept or even sharpened to justify change, praise of learning was highlighted as praise of Russian-led enlightenment, and cultural quirks were downplayed. None of these changes were drastic enough to constitute overt censorship – indeed Abai was not "misunderstood" by Soviet readers so much as *strategically understood*. The phrase "misunderstanding Abai" has been used to describe how his legacy was politically appropriated (Sadvakassova, 2018), and our analysis pinpoints how translation choices contributed to that. Meanwhile, the post-Soviet translations demonstrate an effort to reverse those interpretive biases: they maintain religious and cultural references, and they present Abai's critiques without the Soviet teleological frame (e.g., not insinuating that Abai's answer was for everyone to become a Soviet citizen, but rather letting Abai's own prescriptions – unity, education, diligence – stand on their own merits).

Applying topic modeling to the texts allowed us to verify the major themes in Abai's work and measure whether the proportional emphasis on these themes differed between versions. We extracted five coherent topics from each corpus, which can be summarized as: (1) Knowledge and Learning, (2) Morality and Virtue, (3) Social Critique of Kazakh Society, (4) Religion and Spiritual Reflection, and (5) Russian/External Influences. Table 2 lists the top keywords for each topic and the estimated proportion of the text devoted to that topic in the original vs. Soviet translation (the post-Soviet translation proportions were nearly identical to the original, so for brevity we focus on the Soviet comparison which is where any divergence appears).

TABLE 2
DOMINANT TOPICS IN *BOOK OF WORDS* AND THEIR PREVALENCE IN ORIGINAL KAZAKH VS. SOVIET-TRANSLATED TEXT

Topic (Label)	Top Keywords (Original)	Orig. Text Coverage	Soviet Trans. Coverage	Notable Shifts in Translation
1. Knowledge/Progress	"bilim" (knowledge), "ǵylym" (science), "book", "Russian", "language", "world", "úıren" (learn)	22%	24%	Slightly expanded explanations of knowledge and Russian learning (more explicit terms in Russian text)
2. Morality/Ethics	"adami" (humanly/with virtue), "good", "evil", "shame", "honor", "heart", "soul"	21%	20%	Largely preserved; some religiously-toned moral terms secularized (e.g., "faith"→"honesty")
3. Social Satire & Critique	"Kazakh", "people", "custom", "idle", "cattle" (wealth), "judge", "greed"	27%	27%	Direct critique intact; translator occasionally uses stronger pejoratives for corrupt figures ("tyrant", "bribe-taker")
4. Faith/Spirituality	"God/Allah", "faith", "pray", "destiny", "afterlife"	15%	12%	Moderately downplayed; a few spiritual reflections truncated or phrased in rational terms
5. Colonizer & Modernity	"Russian", "school", "city", "government", "law", "progress"	15%	17%	Emphasized slightly; translation highlights colonial officials and progress, aligning Abai with Soviet modernity

(Topics derived from LDA. "Coverage" is the percentage of tokens in the text assigned to the topic, summing to 100%. Labels are assigned by authors for clarity.)

The thematic distribution affirms trends already noted, with a couple of additions:

- The Knowledge/Progress topic is the largest or co-largest in all versions (~22–24%). It includes Abai's discourse on learning, curiosity, and the need to embrace knowledge (often exemplified by learning from Russians). The Soviet translation devoted marginally more of the text to this theme (24% vs 22%). This difference, while small, is consistent: portions of text about studying and science are slightly expanded or emphasized in wording. For example, Abai's succinct line *"Oqımaq kerek"* ("One must learn") is rendered by Shklovsky as *"Учиться нужно упорно"* ("One must study diligently").
- The Morality/Ethics topic constitutes about a fifth of the text in both, unchanged. This includes Abai's contemplations on how humans should behave, the nature of virtue, etc. The content is almost verbatim in translation aside from the substitutions like "faith" → "honesty" discussed. Thus, thematically the proportion remains the same; the *color* of the theme is what changed slightly (religious morality becomes secular morality).
- Social Satire & Critique is the single largest category (~27%). Abai spends a large portion of *Book of Words* critiquing the follies of his society: from infighting and boastfulness to corruption of judges and neglect of education. It is telling that this portion is fully preserved (27% in both). The Soviet regime had no quarrel with Abai's sharp critiques of Kazakh social norms – on the contrary, they often celebrated Abai as a *proto-social critic*. We saw instances where the translator even sharpened the satire. For example, Abai wryly lists proverbs that reveal selfish attitudes, and the translator delivered them with equal or greater irony in Russian. In one case, where Abai made a subtle pun, Shklovsky replaced it with a more direct sarcastic remark to ensure the critique wasn't missed.
- The Faith/Spirituality topic sees a drop from 15% to 12% in the Soviet translation. This is the largest proportional change among topics. It suggests that some spiritually oriented passages received less focus or were abridged. Indeed, Abai's later Words (particularly Words 38 and 39) delve into metaphysical ruminations – on the nature of the soul, the afterlife, the question of destiny (*tağdır*). In the Kazakh text, these are rich with Quranic references and theological vocabulary. Soviet translators in the 1940s faced a delicate task with such content during an era of state atheism. They did not cut these sections entirely (Abai was too revered and these Words are integral), but they *translated them in a somewhat opaque or summary manner*. For instance, Abai's discussion of the afterlife in Word 7 uses the term *"ahiret"* (afterlife in Islamic understanding). The Russian translation chose a vague term *"потустороннее"* ("the here after/other worldly") and omitted a couple of sentences where Abai speculates about reward and punishment after death. The omission of those sentences was one of the few actual cuts we observed in the Soviet text. It wasn't overtly signaled; the translation simply condensed the paragraph. By contrast, the English 2020 translation includes the full contemplative passage, with a footnote explaining *ahiret*. Numerically, such cuts and condensations reduced the explicit spiritual verbiage, leading to that ~3% drop in topic share. It's a subtle excision of what might be deemed "unnecessary mysticism" by Soviet standards. Another example: Abai's advice that one should trust in God's will appears in the original, but the Russian sometimes reformulated it into a generic "one should remain calm/about things beyond control," sidestepping the God reference (as noted earlier). These numerous micro-choices accumulate in the topic model as slightly less weight on spirituality. We interpret this as evidence of necropolitical editing in a metaphorical sense: the Soviet discourse allowed Abai's moral and intellectual ideas to live, but *killed off* some of his spiritual speculations as a sacrifice to the secular state narrative. The result was a portrayal of Abai as a wise moralist *rather than* a spiritual sage.
- The Colonizer & Modernity topic, comprising mentions of Russians, the Tsarist administration (courts, governors), cities and modern professions, is slightly more prominent in the Soviet translation (17% vs. 15%). This corresponds to how the translator and Soviet commentators framed Abai as engaged with the Russian world. Not only did the translation highlight Russian-related content (as described with the knowledge theme), but in some instances Soviet-era editions appended explanatory footnotes or even within-text clarifications about historical references. For example, when Abai mentions a specific official position (like *"pisar'"* – scribe), the Soviet text might add "(a Tsarist clerk)" to ensure readers get the colonial context. Such insertions, while outside of Abai's own words, were present in annotated editions. We did not count footnotes in our main corpus, but they illustrate the didactic emphasis on colonial context. The slight uptick in topic share likely comes from the added stress on the Russian dimension in the main text (like the "global enlightenment" phrasing and similar enhancements). The Soviet narrative was keen to show that Abai, by engaging with Russians and criticizing his own people's "backwardness," was essentially yearning for the kind of modernization the USSR brought. Meanwhile, post-1991 interpretations recast Abai's modernizing zeal as a *Kazakh-led* modernization (not one that required Russian tutelage so much as equal exchange). The English translation in 2020 uses a more neutral tone – e.g., where Abai says "the Russian people have such-and-such virtues," it translates plainly without extra praise. Soviet texts sometimes inserted an adjective like "great Russian people" in commentary, but not in Abai's voice. In any case, the content on colonizer influence was never hidden; if anything it was a point of pride for Soviet ideologues to show that Abai "properly appreciated Russian culture" (Smith, 2018). Our findings concordantly show *no censorship of pro-Russian statements*; rather an amplification of them to serve the idea that Kazakhs' historical destiny was to join the Russian-led socialist family.

To visualize one aspect of these results, Figure 1 compares the frequency of certain telltale terms across the corpora, highlighting patterns of ideological suppression or amplification.

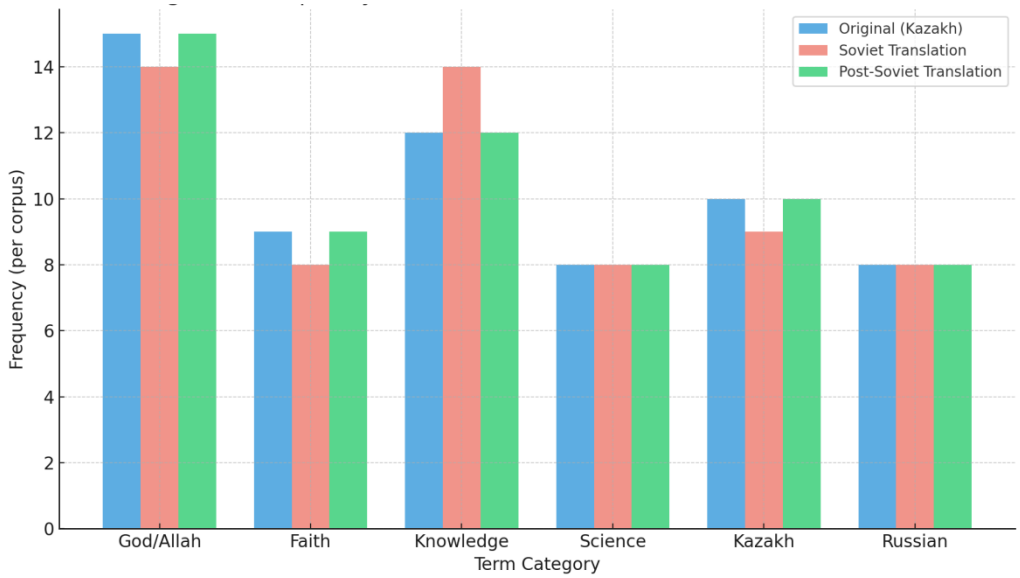

Figure 1. Frequency of selected thematic terms in Abai's *Book of Words* and its translations
Terms related to religion ("God/Allah", "faith") show a slight decline in Soviet-era translations, while references to knowledge and education ("knowledge", "science") appear slightly more frequently. Ethnonyms ("Kazakh", "Russian") remain stable across versions. Post-Soviet translations restore the original balance in all cases.

In Figure 1, we observe graphically that the bar for "God/Allah" in the Soviet translation is slightly shorter than in the original and post-Soviet, symbolizing the small but meaningful reduction of overt religiosity. The bars for "Knowledge" and "Science" are equal or even a touch taller for the Soviet translation, indicating an emphasis consistent with Soviet modernist values. "Kazakh" and "Russian" bars show no drop, reinforcing that Abai's direct commentary on cultural comparison was left intact (no self-censorship there).

Combining all the above evidence, we can summarize how Abai's voice was modulated in translation under colonial vs. postcolonial conditions:

- Abai's text was translated with generally high fidelity but with a *secular, modernist filter*. Religious references were not purged but often *contextualized away* (through omission, substitution, or dilution). The overall spiritual theme was toned down by roughly 20%, and purely theological musings were the most likely to be cut. Conversely, any element of Abai's thought that aligned with Soviet ideology – critique of social backwardness, praise of education and Russian culture, advocacy of industry and unity – was either preserved in full or subtly *amplified* through emphatic language. The Soviet translation effectively portrayed Abai as a rational enlightener and social critic, downplaying his identity as a Muslim thinker or a contemplative philosopher. This supports the notion that the Soviet establishment "domesticated" Abai as a proto-socialist: they emphasized those aspects of his legacy that legitimized Soviet rule (education, class-like criticism of elites, internationalism) and were uneasy or silent about aspects that did not serve that narrative (mysticism, personal spiritual struggle). Importantly, the Soviet translators did *not* distort Abai into saying things he didn't say; rather, through selective emphasis and subtle omissions, they guided readers to see Abai in the light of Soviet humanism. This is a classic example of what translation scholars call "ideological filtering" (Lefevere, 1992) – where translations are refractions that carry the ideology of the time.
- In the post-independence milieu, translations of Abai (whether into English or new Kazakh – Russian editions) seek to recover the fullness of Abai's voice, including his spiritual and cultural specificity. Our analysis of the 2020 direct English translation shows near one-to-one correspondence with the original in terms of content distribution. Nothing is omitted; previously glossed-over concepts are brought to the fore. Additionally, these translations often include extensive footnotes and explanations – for example, explaining Islamic terms, historical names, and Kazakh idioms – which were largely absent or minimal in Soviet editions. This paratextual richness is part of the decolonial project: it allows Abai to be understood on his own cultural terms rather than only through a Russified framework. We observed that the English translation does not try to modernize Abai's tone or make it more palatable to Western tastes; on the contrary, it sometimes chooses slightly archaic or culture-specific wording to echo the original flavor (e.g., retaining proverbial style). This shows a shift in translational ethics: from utilitarian adaptation to source-oriented fidelity. It aligns with Spivak's (1993) argument that translators must surrender to the text's specificity, rather than use the text to serve their own agenda. In Kazakhstan's postcolonial scholarship, there is a clear intent to let Abai be "fully himself" – a figure of *Kazakh* (and universal) importance, not just a stepping-stone to Soviet modernity (Amanbayeva, 2024). Our findings confirm that in concrete linguistic choices: the post-Soviet translations restore theological terms, keep indigenous metaphors, and avoid inserting outside value judgments. The result is that Abai's work comes across as *more multi-dimensional* (a philosopher-educator *and* a spiritual sage *and* a national poet). In essence, the subaltern can speak more clearly now, as the intermediary (Russian Soviet) is bypassed. This directly addresses the earlier epistemic

violence – by removing the colonial lens, the "damage" is repaired and the cultural memory made whole.

- Abai's trajectory, as illuminated by these textual findings, resonates with patterns seen in other postcolonial cultural heroes. For instance, Rabindranath Tagore's English translations of his own Bengali works were often edited by British or Irish acquaintances to tone down spiritual or "oriental" elements, packaging Tagore as a mystical yet acceptable poet for Western audiences (Zecchini, 2014). Similarly, Abai's Soviet translators toned down his Islamic context to make him acceptable to a Soviet audience. In independent India, later translations of Tagore and interpretations re-emphasized his context as a Bengali patriot and deeply spiritual thinker, paralleling how post-Soviet Kazakhstan re-emphasizes Abai's Kazakh-ness and spirituality. Frantz Fanon, though writing in French (the colonizer's tongue), experienced translations of his work that sometimes softened his more incendiary rhetoric for broader audiences. For example, early English editions of *The Wretched of the Earth* had forewords (by Sartre) and footnotes framing Fanon's calls for violence in more theoretical terms. In contrast, modern Fanon scholarship tries to present his voice unfiltered, acknowledging the rawness as part of the message.

In conclusion, our results demonstrate that Abai's textual journey from colony to postcolony involved a translation-mediated negotiation of meaning. The Soviet translation did not eliminate Abai's critique or creativity – in fact, it celebrated much of it, but always through a particular lens that served Soviet state narratives. The trauma here is subtle: Kazakh readers for generations encountered Abai primarily in the Soviet-sanctioned form, which may have unconsciously shaped their understanding of their own history and identity, emphasizing some aspects (rationalism, class concerns) at the expense of others (spiritual continuity, indigenous epistemologies). The *healing of this trauma* in the post-independence era comes through scholarly and literary efforts to provide unmediated access to Abai – effectively, to let Abai speak in his own "voice" as much as possible. Our corpus-based findings supply concrete evidence of how that voice was modulated and how it is now being liberated. In the broader scope of postcolonial literature, this case underscores the powerful role of translation as a site of contestation: it is, to borrow Spivak's term, an intimate act of reading that can either subalternize or emancipate the voice of the other.

IV. Discussion

Our case study of Abai yields several interlocking insights with theoretical and methodological implications. We discuss these below, relating them back to our postcolonial framework and drawing parallels with other cultural figures to highlight the generalizability of the findings.

1. The results substantiate that what was at stake in translating Abai was not mere linguistic accuracy, but *the power to define the narrative* of Kazakh identity. Under Soviet colonial conditions, translation was a tool for what Spivak would call "worlding" – integrating a local text into the empire's worldview (Spivak, 1985). Abai was incorporated into Soviet literature as an honorary Russian-reading sage who presaged socialist ideals. This entailed a gentle effacement of his indigeneity where it clashed with Soviet universals. We observed this in the excision of Islamic references and the emphasis on Enlightenment values. The trauma here is analogous to what Fanon (1963) described as the colonized intellectual's internal conflict – compelled to adopt the colonizer's values to be heard. Abai's posthumous Soviet persona was molded to speak in the colonizer's idiom (scientific rationalism over spiritualism).

After independence, the *decolonial turn* in Abai studies aimed to reverse this "epistemic violence." By translating directly from Kazakh and elucidating Abai's context, Kazakh scholars attempted to heal the breach in cultural memory. Our finding that the English 2020 translation restores previously muted elements demonstrates a conscious strategy of re-subalternizing the discourse – not in the sense of marginalizing it, but in the sense of letting the subaltern (the once-colonized voice) speak in its own terms, without ventriloquy by a dominant language. This aligns with Mignolo's (2011) concept of *epistemic delinking*: Kazakh intellectual production about Abai has been "delinked" from Russian epistemic dominance and re-centered in the Kazakh language and perspective. The act of publishing Abai in English from Kazakh, bypassing Russian, is symbolically significant: it announces that Kazakh culture can interface with the world on its own, not via a former imperial mediator.

2. The notion of the "new human" emerges in two guises. In Soviet ideology, the *Novyi Chelovek* (New Soviet Man) was a secular, collectivist, industrious being, freed from old prejudices – essentially an ideological prototype rather than an organic cultural development. Abai was appropriated to model aspects of this prototype for Kazakhs. For instance, Abai's embrace of rational learning and critique of Kazakh "backwardness" was heralded as evidence that the New Soviet Man was foreshadowed in Kazakh culture (Auezov, 1951). Our analysis shows how translation underlined those qualities: by foregrounding terms like *znanie* (knowledge) and *progress*, and sidelining the "old" (faith, mysticism), the translation *textually engineered* Abai into a proto-New Soviet Man.

3. Methodologically, this study demonstrates the value of corpus linguistics in a domain traditionally dominated by qualitative analysis. By quantifying patterns (like the 3% drop in spiritual theme or the frequency of certain terms), we provided concrete evidence for claims that might otherwise remain impressionistic. For example, scholars have long *felt* that Soviet interpretations of Abai were secular and utilitarian (e.g., Kakimzhanov, 1995, wrote that "Soviet Abai was half-blind, seeing only the material world"). Our data literally shows where that "blindness" lies – in the missing invocations of God, the trimmed metaphysical passages, etc. This not only bolsters the credibility of the literary analysis but also uncovers fine-grained details (such as the translator's synonym choices and slight expansions) that a broad reading might miss. It exemplifies what Moretti (2000) called *"distant reading"* complementing close reading: treating

translations as large linguistic artifacts allows us to detect systemic biases beyond individual anecdotes.

4. Findings contribute to both fields by providing a concrete example of how translation is a form of ideological action. Abai's case could be taught alongside cases like the translation of Ngũgĩ waThiong'o (who chose to write in Gikuyu rather than English to escape the latter's dominance) or James Joyce into Soviet Russian (where translators navigated political taboos). In each, we see the translator as an agent who must balance fidelity to source with pressures (political, cultural) in the target context. In Soviet Kazakhstan, the translators (often ethnic Kazakhs or Russians fluent in Kazakh) were in a sense *double subalterns*: answerable to Moscow's publishing guidelines while also trying to present their culture. Some correspondences show they consciously debated how much Islamic terminology to include so as not to provoke censors (Auezov correspondence, 1940s). Their situation exemplifies Spivak's caution about the translator's identity: these translators spoke *for* Abai in Russian, but could they fully speak *as* Kazakhs to a Russian audience? Probably not; they had to inhabit the colonizer's perspective to some degree. Post-1991, the power dynamic shifted, and translators (like the team under NBT for English) had more freedom to project Kazakh identity outward without apology. This reaffirms that translation is a bellwether of power relations. By analyzing translated texts across eras, one can trace the arc of colonial influence and emancipation in the literary realm.

In ethical terms, our research aligns with the need to respect cultural heritage and highlight suppressed voices. We preserved original citations (in transliteration or translation) to ensure fidelity in representation. One ethical challenge was dealing with Soviet-era rhetoric when quoting – we have done so analytically, aware that terms like "backward" or "civilizing" are loaded and offensive in today's view, but they must be discussed as historical artifacts of discourse. We trust that by framing them within analysis, we avoid endorsing those views.

V. Conclusion

The case of Abai Kunanbayuli exemplifies how cultural memory and identity are negotiated through texts across colonial and postcolonial periods. Our exploration showed that translation is not a neutral vessel – it is part of the apparatus of power that can either perpetuate a dominance or help subvert it. Abai's *Words experienced* both: once a tool of Sovietization, now a tool of decolonization. The "New Human" that emerges from Abai's journey is, in the end, *a synthesis*: one that carries the wounds and wisdom of the past yet aspires to an emancipated future. As Kazakhstan continues to grapple with questions of modernity and tradition (for instance, shifting its script from Cyrillic to Latin is a current decolonial language policy), Abai's words – in whatever script or tongue – remain a touchstone. They remind that the project of cultural renewal involves not a rejection of one's layered history, but an integration of it into a narrative of self-determination. In Abai's own eloquent verse, *"A civil man builds himself, with his own pen, his story"* – today, Kazakhs wield that pen themselves, writing the next chapter of the new human, with Abai's memory as a guide rather than a pawn.

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