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SEMANTİC LAYERS, POETİC STRUCTURE, AND IDEOLOGİCAL-PSYCHOLOGİCAL DİALECTİCS İN ISMAİL SHİKHLY'S NOVEL DALİ KUR

GUNEL HUMMATOVA (PANIYEVA) SALEH
Azerbaijan State Pedagogical University,
PhD in Philology, Senior Lecturer
gunelpeniyeva@mail.ru
Orcid ID:0000-0002-8916-3484
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Abstract: This article offers an artistic interpretation of Ismail Shikhly's novel Dali Kur (The Mad Kura), examining how historical memory, character conflicts, narrative techniques, and semantic layers interact across the text. Rather than treating the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century rural setting as a static historical backdrop, the study approaches the novel as a dynamic literary structure that captures social transition, cultural tension, and psychological complexity in Azerbaijani prose.At the center of the analysis is the symbolic and philosophical weight of the Kura River. Functioning both as a natural force and as a metaphor for fate, the river's shifting currents mirror human temperament, collective memory, and periods of upheaval. In the semantic field of the novel, "madness" does not signify mere pathology; instead, it points to overflowing passion, uncontained energy, and the destabilization of established order during a transitional era. Landscape elements—floodplains, reeds, mud, fog, and seasonal shifts—operate beyond mere scenery to externalize inner turmoil and foreshadow impending crisis.The article also explores the dialectics of the character system without reducing figures to rigid ideological labels. Cahandar Agha emerges as a deeply contradictory figure whose patriarchal pride, sense of honor, and resistance to change generate both authority and internal isolation. Alongside him, female characters such as Malak and Shahnigar reveal how endurance, silence, and emotional restraint can function as forms of quiet resilience within restrictive social norms. Meanwhile, enlightenment figures and younger characters, including Ahmad and Ashraf, embody aspirations for education and renewal while confronting entrenched habits, fear, and social friction.Stylistically, the study highlights Shikhly's synthesis of literary Azerbaijani with colloquial speech, regional expressions, proverbs, and psychological details, alongside shifts between objective narration, free indirect discourse, and interior monologue. Interpreted through this lens, Dali Kur remains relevant to contemporary readers by illuminating how human vulnerabilities and historical transitions continually reshape individual and collective identity.

Keywords: artistic interpretation, Ismail Shikhly, Dali Kur, historical memory, character system, river symbolism, enlightenment, narrative discourse, Azerbaijani prose, cultural transition

The interpretation of a literary text is not merely a retelling of the plot or a list of character traits; it is the process of uncovering the text's internal structure of meaning, symbolic system, discursive strategies, and historical-cultural codes. In this respect, Ismail Shikhly's novel Dali Kur (The Mad Kura) possesses a rich semantic polyphony. In the work, the socio-political and cultural transformations taking place in the Azerbaijani village at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries are interpreted not only as historical events, but also as an internal drama of human consciousness, moral values, and collective memory (Qarayev, 2002; Shikhly, 2025).An interpretive approach reveals the

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tension between the "visible" layer of events and the "invisible" layer of meaning in the work. The driving force of the plot in the novel is not solely external conflicts—such as landlord-peasant clashes, enlightenment efforts, or family contradictions; at the same time, it comprises semantic shifts in the inner world of the protagonists, crises of values, and semiotic signs at the level of language and narration (Mammadov, 2011; Shikhly, 2025). During the interpretation of a literary text, the work is examined not as a closed, single-meaning structure, but as a dynamic system open to various reading codes. In Dali Kur, these codes intersect on several levels.

On the mythopoetic and archetypal level, the Kura River and the natural landscape around it carry archetypal symbolism. The water element acts both as a source of life and as a destructive, chaotic force. This duality models the eternal struggle between cosmos and chaos, order and turbulence, in the deep structure of the text (Shikhly, 2025, p. 5). On the socio-historical and ideological level, we see the weakening of patriarchal-feudal relations at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries, as well as the penetration of capitalist elements and enlightenment ideas into the village, presented on the plane of historical realism. However, the writer does not squeeze this process into a schematic class-struggle framework; instead, he brings to the fore the complex psychological consequences of the transitional period (Habibbayli, 2019). When approaching the work through the psychological and discursive layer, we witness how the characters' interior monologues, silences, gestures, and speech behaviors express their hidden motives, fears, pride, and internal fragmentation. Here, language is not only a means of communication, but also a bearer of discourses of power, honor, and identity (Valiyev, 2008).

In literary interpretation, the unity of space and time—the chronotope—is one of the key factors generating meaning in a text. In Dali Kur, the village of Girag Salahli and the river basin surrounding it cease to be merely a concrete geographical point and become a symbolic-philosophical space (Shikhly, 2025, pp. 12–18). The river's shifting of its channel, overflowing, and calming down synchronizes with the temporal rhythm of the novel: the transition from the calm flow of historical time to sharp turning points is carried out in parallel with the dynamics of natural phenomena (Shikhly, 2025, pp. 5, 312).

The interpretation of the epithet "mad" (dəli) is one of the primary keys to the text. As a metaphor of nature, the turbulence of the river shows its uncontrollable character and its power that recognizes neither human plans nor boundaries (Shikhly, 2025, p. 5). Viewed as a metaphor of character, the emotional outbursts, sharpness in decisions, and uncompromising nature of Cahandar Agha and certain other personages transfer the semantics of "madness" into human psychology (Mammadov, 2011; Shikhly, 2025, p. 74). When analyzed from the aspect of a metaphor for a historical era, the era in which old customs and social order are shaken itself resembles a current that has "broken out of its banks"; in this current, both destruction and the possibility of new shores emerging exist (Qarayev, 2002).

Nature descriptions do not serve a mere background function in the novel; they operate as an externalization—an outward projection—of the characters' inner states. Scenes of fog, mud, flood, or stagnation make the uncertainty in the characters' souls and the approaching tragedy felt by the reader in advance (Shikhly, 2025, pp. 41, 189).

In Dali Kur, the character system is not a collection of static types, but a network of dynamic characters in contradictory and complementary relationships with one another. Interpretation shows not only what these characters do, but why they behave that way and of which internal contradictions they are captive. The interpretation of the character of Cahandar Agha rests on the contradiction between his mask of "mighty master" and his essence as a "human being experiencing inner turmoil." Although he

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sees himself as a pillar of order and dignity in the village, for the sake of personal passion and pride he violates the rights of others and family harmony (Shikhly, 2025, pp. 27, 49). His tragedy stems not only from the historical defeat of old patriarchal values, but also from the rigidity of his individual character and his being closed to change (Habibbayli, 2019; Shikhly, 2025, pp. 298–305).

The female characters of the novel—especially Malak and Shahnigar—open up the complex situation of female subjectivity in a patriarchal society. The scarcity of speech and inner endurance in Malak can be read not as passivity, but as a silent bearing of emotional burden and moral dignity (Ahmadov, 2014; Shikhly, 2025, pp. 31, 142). In the fate of female personages, the contradiction between the protective function and the restrictive pressure of tradition is clearly visible (Shikhly, 2025, pp. 167, 214; Valiyev, 2008). In Dali Kur, female figures are one of the main anchor points maintaining the moral-psychological balance of the novel (Ahmadov, 2014). Against the aggressive, turbulent, and sometimes destructive energy of the male characters, female characters appear more as bearers of endurance, delicacy, inner dignity, and emotional memory (Shikhly, 2025, p. 83). Yet this endurance is not passivity at all; in many cases, it takes the form of a quiet yet unshakeable inner resistance. The figure of Malak reveals a type of woman bearing the moral burden of the family and village on her shoulders (Shikhly, 2025, p. 31). In her life, love, devotion, hurt, and maternal feeling intermingle. The shocks Malak experiences show the difficulties a woman faces in openly expressing her feelings in a patriarchal environment (Shikhly, 2025, p. 142). Often, she speaks more through her glances, behavior, and silence than through words; yet behind this silence lies a great emotional tension. In the fate of other female characters—for instance, Shahnigar or representatives of the younger generation—different life strategies also appear (Shikhly, 2025, pp. 167, 214). One tries to preserve her position within the traditional family order, while another finds herself caught between the desire for freedom and self-expression brought by the new era and old prohibitions. When depicting female destinies, the writer does not fall into melodramatic pathos; instead, he illuminates events with realistic composure and inner empathy (Valiyev, 2008). The injustices suffered by women complete the overall picture of the village environment while deepening the humanist tone of the work.

One of the important artistic-philosophical layers of the novel is the line of enlightenment and new social thought (Habibbayli, 2019). The process of cultural awakening taking place in Azerbaijan at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries is shown in Dali Kur not in a descriptive-abstract manner, but through concrete human destinies and clashes in the village environment (Shikhly, 2025, pp. 95–104). Figures such as Ahmad and graduates of the Gori Seminary, who bring new knowledge, teaching, and worldview to the village, come face to face with a layer of old superstition and ignorance (Shikhly, 2025, p. 128). This confrontation does not fit into a simple "knowledge versus ignorance" scheme. In Teacher Ahmad’s thoughts, the difficulty of this struggle is expressed thus: to open the eyes of these people, reading books alone is not enough; one must find a way into their hearts and share their sorrows (Shikhly, 2025, p. 156). The arrival of new thought in the village is not easy, because habits, fears, and interests formed over centuries do not immediately embrace novelty (Qarayev, 2002). The difficulties encountered by teacher and intellectual figures demonstrate how uneven the path of enlightenment is. On the one hand, they want to enlighten the people of the village and give them a new perspective; on the other hand, they themselves must reckon with the realities of this environment (Shikhly, 2025, p. 203). In the figure of the younger generation—especially Ashraf—the changing of time is felt more clearly (Shikhly, 2025, p. 230). They no longer want to repeat the lives their parents lived in the exact same way. However strong the old ties still are, a new breath is sensed in the thinking

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and behavior of the youth. This holds together feelings of hope and anxiety directed toward the future as the work nears its end: the past is left behind, yet what the future will be like is not yet fully clear (Shikhly, 2025, p. 318). Ahmad and other representatives of the younger generation act in the novel as bearers of a new worldview, knowledge, and the impulse for change (Shikhly, 2025, pp. 95–104, 230). Yet the text does not present enlightenment as an easy and linear triumph. New ideas clash with the resistance of old beliefs, fears, and social habits; enlightenment figures also confront their own inner hesitations and the realities of their environment (Qarayev, 2002; Shikhly, 2025, pp. 156, 203).

The artistic impact of Dali Kur is closely tied to the subtleties of its narrative technique. Authorial narration alternates objective epic observation with subjective psychological entry. Through free indirect discourse and interior monologue, the reader does not merely watch the characters' thought process from the outside, but "lives" inside it (Mammadov, 2011; Shikhly, 2025, p. 192).

On the linguistic level, the synthesis of the literary norm with living colloquial speech, regional lexicon, and paremiological units (proverbs, sayings, idioms) gives the text both historical-ethnographic credibility and aesthetic richness (Valiyev, 2008; Shikhly, 2025, pp. 54, 179). Artistic details—shifts in glances, a sentence left unfinished, the arrangement of household objects, or moments of silence—carry stronger psychological meaning than explicit statements and open up the underlying layers of the text to the reader (Ahmadov, 2014; Shikhly, 2025, p. 261).When reading Ismail Shikhly's novel Dali Kur, one of the main features that draws attention is the naturalness of the language and the smoothness of the narration (Valiyev, 2008). The writer organically combines the rich lexical possibilities of literary Azerbaijani with living colloquial speech, local expressions, proverbs, and sayings (Shikhly, 2025, pp. 54, 179). This synthesis lends the text both a high artistic-aesthetic level and local color. Narration shifts from time to time from the objective observation of the third person to a character's interior monologue or free indirect discourse (Mammadov, 2011). Thanks to this method, the reader is not content with observing events from afar, but enters the stream of thought of the protagonists (Shikhly, 2025, p. 192). Dialogues are lively, concise, and characteristic: each character differs in speech, intonation, and word choice. Long, tiring descriptions are cut short where appropriate and replaced by dynamic scenes.The role of artistic detail in the work must also be specially noted. A small object, a gesture, a change in weather, or an ordinary everyday scene of village life can carry a heavy psychological load (Ahmadov, 2014). For example, tension inside a house, clashing glances, or the subsiding or rising of voices conveys the inner drama of events even without words (Shikhly, 2025, p. 261). Ismail Shikhly avoids pathetic rhetoric and succeeds in creating deep emotional impact with simple, precise words.When re-reading Dali Kur today, the work addresses to us not only a memory of the past, but also questions relevant for today (Ahmadov, 2014). The bridge between historical memory and contemporaneity is very strong here. Human weaknesses lying at the root of past clashes—pride, devotion, unwillingness to compromise, and the struggle between the new and the old—continue in different forms in present-day life as well. The artistic wholeness of the novel lifts it beyond being merely an object of literary-critical analysis. It is also among those texts that shape a person's perspective on oneself, one's roots, and one's past (Habibbayli, 2019). In the waters of the Kura flow both traces of the past and tidings of the future; as the reader listens to the sound of this current, they realize once again how complex and rich both history and the human heart are (Shikhly, 2025, p. 320).

Conclusion

The interpretation of the literary text shows that Ismail Shikhly's novel Dali Kur is not merely an artistic depiction of the past, but a profound philosophical-psychological text about historical transition,

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antinomies of human character, and the transformation of cultural memory. The semantic layers of the work move the reader away from ready-made judgments and prompt a rethinking of the text's internal contradictions, symbolic signs, and the complexity of human destinies (Habibbayli, 2019; Shikhly, 2025, pp. 318–320).

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