



The Evolution of Female Characters in Central Asian Cinema: From Femininity to Resistance

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Abstract

This article explores the transformation of female representations in Central Asian cinema against the backdrop of post-Soviet sociocultural shifts. Drawing on a qualitative content analysis of both Soviet-era and contemporary films, feminist theoretical frameworks, and empirical data on the status of women in society, the study traces key stages in the evolution of gender portrayal. The analysis identifies a trajectory that moves from the traditional image of the kelin—a daughter-in-law figure emblematic of patriarchal norms—towards models of female agency and resistance that reflect broader processes of individualization and the diversification of women's social roles. Special attention is given to the contributions of women directors, who have played a pivotal role in reshaping gender narratives and developing visual strategies aimed at dismantling conventional ideals of femininity. The study also considers how grassroots activism, economic change, and transnational influences have shaped cinematic representations and audience perceptions of women. The article argues that contemporary Central Asian cinema is increasingly becoming a site of critical discourse, identity negotiation, and public dialogue. It suggests that the shift from traditional to agentive portrayals marks not only a redefinition of gender roles on screen but also signals a more layered and nuanced interpretation of women's lived experiences in a rapidly changing world. This work will be of interest to gender scholars, film critics, sociologists, and those studying cultural transitions in post-Soviet Central Asia.

Keywords: Central Asian Cinema, Female Representation, Gender Stereotypes, Kelin, Female Agency, Post-Soviet Period, Social Transformation, Feminist Critique, Women Directors, Visual Practices.

INTRODUCTION

Historically, Central Asian cinema has reinforced an image of women rooted in femininity and patriarchal tradition, portraying them primarily through roles that emphasized obedience, family loyalty, and social conformity [3], [4]. Visual culture in both Soviet and early post-Soviet films often relied on the archetype of the *kelin*—a figure that functioned as a cultural anchor, sustaining traditional values and symbolizing the continuity of national identity.

However, since the 1990s, amidst broader social and cultural upheaval, new trends have emerged in the cinematic portrayal of women. Contemporary filmmakers are increasingly turning to narratives that foreground female agency, actively challenging entrenched gender stereotypes and offering alternative perspectives on women's experiences [1]. These films center on characters who exhibit resilience, self-determination, and social engagement.

Despite the growing presence of such themes, the evolution of female characters in Central Asian cinema remains an

underexplored subject. Existing research tends to focus either on specific cultural practices or on sociological and demographic aspects of women's lives, often overlooking the complexity of their representation in film.

The aim of this study is to trace the major stages in the transformation of female representation in Central Asian cinema and to examine the shift from passive, domesticated figures toward those that embody resistance and redefine the boundaries of gendered expectations.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study is grounded in a comprehensive analysis of scholarly and expert sources addressing the representation of women in Central Asian cinema. The core empirical material includes peer-reviewed publications from Taylor & Francis journals, which examine the impact of gender stereotypes on the perception of female characters in the film industry, with particular focus on the image of the *kelin* in both Soviet and post-Soviet Central Asian cinema [3]. Complementing these are interviews and analytical reviews from the Voices on

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Central Asia platform, offering insights into emerging trends in female authorship and visual strategies of resistance in the region [2]. Also central to the research are findings from sociological studies published in the Bulletin of Karaganda University, which explore the status of mothers with multiple children in contemporary Kazakhstan and the influence of state policies on women's agency [4].

The methodological foundation of the research is qualitative content analysis aimed at identifying key patterns in the evolution of female representation in Central Asian film. This method was applied to both academic texts documenting shifts in gender representation [1], [3], [8] and to interviews with women directors and regional experts. The analysis was situated within the broader context of meaning-making in cultural production and the transformation of gender roles in the post-Soviet period.

A gender-centered analytical framework guided the study, drawing on theories of social gender construction developed by Laura Mulvey, Nira Yuval-Davis, and Betty Friedan. Mulvey's concept of visual pleasure and the "male gaze" was instrumental in examining how women were portrayed as objects within the patriarchal discourse of Soviet cinema [1]. Yuval-Davis's theories on the positioning of women in national ideologies helped uncover how female figures came to embody cultural and social boundaries. Friedan's ideas on the "feminine mystique" were used to investigate the tension between traditional femininity and the pursuit of subjectivity in post-Soviet women's cinema [4].

Through comparative analysis, the research maps out the distinct characteristics of female portrayals across historical periods. The Soviet era is marked by representations centered on self-sacrifice and loyalty to family and state, while the post-Soviet phase shows a growing emphasis on individual agency, independence, and a redefinition of female identity.

Table 1. Characteristics of *Kelin* Representations in Central Asian Cinema (1960s–1990s) (Compiled by the author based on source [3])

Characteristic	Description
Obedience	Unquestioning compliance with the will of senior family members
Silence	Suppression of personal opinion and expression
Dependence	Financial, social, and emotional reliance on the husband's family
Custodian of tradition	Responsibility for transmitting customs and norms to future generations
Rejection of agency	Subordination of personal aspirations to familial interests

This analysis illustrates how cinema of that era functioned as a powerful medium for legitimizing and disseminating retraditionalist values, embedding the image of the ideal woman as a passive figure within the domestic realm. Female characters rarely demonstrated personal agency; instead, they served as markers of social stability and traditional morality [3]. This kind of representation reinforced entrenched gender expectations and contributed to the shaping of national self-perception during a time of political transition following the collapse of the USSR. These

This methodological approach made it possible to examine the evolution of female characters in Central Asian cinema not only as a reflection of changing societal norms but also as an active force in reshaping social and gender relations.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In Soviet and early post-Soviet Central Asian cinema, female characters were predominantly portrayed within a feminine behavioral model deeply rooted in traditional understandings of gender roles. One of the most enduring symbols of womanhood during this period was the figure of the *kelin*—a young daughter-in-law embodying moral rectitude, patriarchal order, and familial hierarchy [3]. Films from the 1960s through the 1990s commonly depicted the *kelin* as a bearer of enduring values such as obedience, silence, and dependency on her husband's family. These traits were not only culturally prescribed but also reinforced by ideological imperatives aimed at maintaining social order through family structures. Despite the official rhetoric of gender equality, cinematic practice often reinstated traditional behavior patterns, presenting them as natural and desirable.

This retraditionalization of the female image was marked by the glorification of women's roles within the household and a shift in focus from rights to duties [7]. On screen, women were framed as guardians of tradition, mediators between generations, and agents responsible for transmitting cultural norms through submission and self-effacement. The symbolic weight of female characters increased further in narratives tied to national identity, positioning women as the boundary between "us" and "them," and as the keepers of familial and communal honor. Table 1 outlines the defining characteristics of *kelin* representations in Central Asian cinema between the 1960s and 1990s.

dynamics underscore the importance of further examining the mechanisms by which cinematic portrayals shifted from passive archetypes to expressions of resistance and female agency—a transition that will be explored in the next sections [6].

In the post-Soviet period, Central Asian cinema has undergone a marked transformation in how it represents female characters. This shift is evident in the emergence of protagonists who act with agency, independence, and a capacity to challenge patriarchal norms. A pivotal factor in

this change has been the rise of women filmmakers who engage directly with female experience through the lens of regional cultural and social contexts [2].

The films of Saodat Ismailova (Uzbekistan) and Sharipa Urazbaeva (Kazakhstan) vividly illustrate this redefinition of traditional gender roles and the rejection of imposed stereotypes. In Ismailova's *40 Days of Silence*, the narrative centers on a woman's inner world and her struggle for autonomy within the bounds of rigid cultural expectations [2]. Urazbaeva's work departs from the conventional portrayal of women solely as family figures, instead presenting them as socially embedded individuals capable of resistance under pressure.

Feminist themes have become an essential strand of contemporary auteur cinema in the region. Representations

of women are increasingly informed by a critical engagement with patriarchal narratives, often through stories of protest, migration, self-determination, and the right to voice. In this way, women's cinema in Central Asia functions not only as an artistic expression but also as a form of social action—an arena where gender, inequality, and justice can be confronted and reimagined. Particular attention is given to forms of resistance enacted through individual choice. Heroines in recent films refuse to follow traditional scripts, reject the role of victim, and assert identities beyond the confines of familial or ethnic expectation [5].

The growing presence of female leads and female-directed films signals a significant shift in the cinematic landscape of Central Asia since the 1990s. A comparative overview is provided in Table 2.

Table 2. Comparative Analysis of Female Representation in Soviet and Post-Soviet Central Asian Cinema (Compiled by the author based on sources [2], [3])

Period	Representative Female Image	Core Characteristics	Visual Strategies	Social Function
1960s–1990s (Soviet)	<i>Kelin</i> (daughter-in-law)	Obedience, silence, dependence	Symbolic framing, ornamental mise-en-scène	Guardian of lineage, stability, and moral values
1990s–2000s (Transitional)	Wife/mother in crisis	Torn between tradition and the desire for freedom	Partial deconstruction	Passive figure of transformation
2010s–present	Active protagonist	Agency, resistance, autonomy	Intimate angles, fragmentation, symbolic layering	Agent of change, participant in public discourse

One of the central forces behind the transformation of female representation in Central Asian cinema has been the socio-economic and gender shifts of the post-Soviet era. Among the most emblematic moments of this change were the protest movements led by mothers of large families in Kazakhstan, which intensified in the aftermath of the tragic events of 2019 and 2021 [4]. These protests marked a growing civic engagement among women and exposed the shortcomings in state support for families with children.

Contemporary Kazakhstani women often bear a dual burden: on one hand, they are expected to fulfill traditional reproductive roles, while on the other, they are pushed to succeed professionally in a competitive market economy. According to recent sociological findings, over 90% of mothers with four or more children are engaged in the workforce, yet very few have access to continuing education [4]. This highlights the existence of structural barriers that limit full social and professional realization for many women.

Gender discourse in Kazakhstan is gradually shifting. The traditional model of “woman as mother and homemaker” is increasingly giving way to narratives that center on women as economic contributors and civic participants. Still, the symbolic construction of womanhood as a marker of ethnic and national identity remains deeply embedded in both political and cultural discourse. As Nira Yuval-Davis has argued, women act as biological and cultural carriers of

national identity—through childrearing and the preservation of traditional values [4].

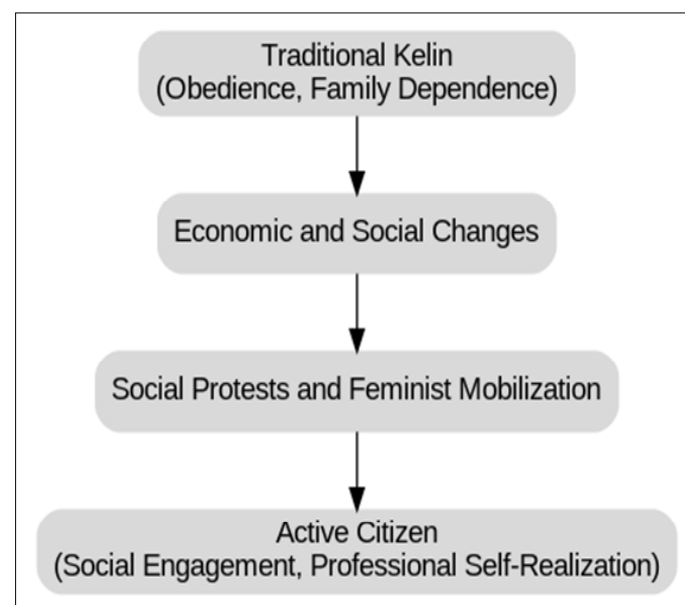


Figure 1. Gender Roles of Women in Contemporary Central Asia: From Traditional *Kelin* to Active Citizen (compiled by the author based on source [4])

What emerges is a new archetype of womanhood in Central Asia: the active citizen—someone who combines the responsibilities of motherhood with professional engagement and public participation. These shifts are not only visible in everyday life but are increasingly reflected on

screen, where female characters are portrayed as agents of social change, resistance, and transformation. Rather than being confined to the home, they now appear as protagonists of broader societal dynamics.

CONCLUSION

This study has mapped the key stages in the evolution of female representation in Central Asian cinema and underscored their close alignment with the broader sociocultural transformations of the post-Soviet era. Drawing on a comprehensive analysis of artistic practices, expert interviews, and sociological data, it became clear that Soviet and early post-Soviet cinema consistently reproduced portrayals of women rooted in traditional patriarchal frameworks, in which the female character functioned as a symbol of familial loyalty, cultural continuity, and social stability.

The findings confirm that the *kelin*—the young daughter-in-law figure—was a central icon in films from the 1960s through the 1990s, embodying a set of idealized attributes: obedience, silence, and dependency. Despite the official discourse of gender equality, cinematic practices of the time often reinforced these conventional roles, legitimizing them through repetition and normalization on screen. Beginning in the 1990s, however, a sustained shift toward deconstructing these established gender narratives became increasingly visible. This shift was strongly influenced by the emergence of women filmmakers who, drawing from their own experiences and reflections on women's place in society, introduced alternative representational models.

In the works of directors like Saodat Ismailova and Sharipa Urazbayeva, this transformation becomes particularly evident. Their films move away from depictions of women as passive keepers of tradition and instead portray protagonists with interior autonomy, subjectivity, and the capacity to resist patriarchal expectations. Moreover, the study highlighted the impact of larger sociopolitical developments—most notably the rise of women's protest movements in Kazakhstan—which contributed to a growing number of films in which female characters are framed as active participants in public discourse.

These changes point to a broader cultural shift in how gender roles are conceptualized across the region. Contemporary Central Asian cinema has undergone a significant transformation in its portrayal of women, now increasingly functioning not only as a mirror of social realities but as a site of critical reflection and cultural reimagination. The findings open new pathways for future research into how visual practices intersect with the shaping of gender identities in the evolving post-Soviet landscape.

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