

Enterprising Women in Transition Economies

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Chapter 5

Djamila's Journey from Kolkhoz to Bazaar: Female Entrepreneurs in Kyrgyzstan¹

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Introduction

Chingiz Aitmatov's novel 'Djamila' portrays tribal, communal and profound personal changes taking place for Kyrgyz women at the outset of the Second World War. The consolidation of Soviet power in Central Asia changed the lives of many Kyrgyz families and marked the beginning of massive transformation towards a command economy and society under Soviet rule. Thousands were removed from their nomadic yurts to agricultural kolkhoz life and to urban settlements to perform jobs in industrial establishments. Djamila's journey took her from the strictly delineated yet spiritually rich tribal life to the collective destitution of the kolkhoz. During the war years, the Soviet regime not only mobilised men to fight in trenches but also harnessed the remaining population to work for the production of army supplies. Djamila represents the many women who took charge of kolkhoz production, although she later attempted to shape her own destiny by abandoning the kolkhoz life for a new future. Djamila represents the spirit and hardworking character of Kyrgyz woman with her rich inner world and her strong determination and independence.

Still today, no matter what their ethnic origin, the women of Kyrgyzstan are not passive to economic shocks. They work hard to preserve their dignity and to look after their families. Whether Kyrgyz, Uzbek, Uyghur or Russian (or one of the dozens of ethnic groups in Kyrgyzstan), women are all remarkably active and responsible in economic life. Thus, Djamila is an inspiration and a symbol for us as it is for them.²

Aitmatov leaves it to the reader to decide what ultimately happens to the hardworking and independent Djamila. This research exercises our imagination about women like Djamila as they respond to their social role in this and similar economies in transition. There is another story to be told about what happened to Djamila after she left her village. Before relating this we need to reflect on the