

Beyond narrative: a pedagogical, cultural, and psychological analysis of Saken Zhunusov's Amanai and Zamanai for higher education

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ABSTRACT

This study offers a comprehensive pedagogical analysis of Saken Zhunusov's Amanai and Zamanai, demonstrating that the novella functions as a multilayered educational text suitable for literature, cultural studies, teacher education, and psychology-of-literature curricula in higher education. Using qualitative content analysis, the study identifies six interrelated thematic domains; moral education, cultural learning, developmental psychology, folklore pedagogy, narrative methodology, and emotional literacy, through which the novel teaches readers to interpret emotional, ethical, and cultural meanings embedded in the narrative. The data consisted of the full text of Saken Zhunusov's Amanai and Zamanai, analyzed using qualitative content analysis. Findings reveal that the text models moral dilemmas, cultivates empathy, preserves Kazakh cultural knowledge, exposes structural inequalities, and illustrates childhood cognition and trauma through symbolic and myth-infused storytelling. The study connects these themes to established theoretical perspectives including Vygotsky's symbolic mediation, Bruner's narrative cognition, Rosenblatt's reader-response theory, and cultural-historical views of oral tradition. By developing a detailed codebook and pedagogical framework, the research provides a replicable model for analyzing culturally embedded literature and demonstrates the relevance of Amanai and Zamanai to contemporary Kazakh social issues such as poverty, gendered burden, and generational trauma. The study concludes that the novel offers rich opportunities for interdisciplinary teaching and contributes significantly to the integration of Kazakh literature into modern higher education pedagogy.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Kazakh literature occupies a central place in the cultural and intellectual life of Kazakhstan, serving as a repository of collective memory, ethical values, oral traditions, and national identity. Rooted in the rich heritage of Kazakh storytelling, literary works often weave together social realism, folklore, and symbolic landscapes to explore the emotional and moral worlds of their characters. In recent decades, scholars have emphasized the importance of integrating national literature into higher education to strengthen cultural

identity, promote ethical reflection, and develop interpretive literacy among university students. This renewed attention reflects a broader cultural movement that values literature as a pedagogical tool capable of transmitting worldviews and emotional knowledge across generations.

Within this tradition, Saken Zhunusov stands out as a writer whose works blend psychological insight, lyrical style, and ethnolinguistic richness. His novella *Amanai and Zamanai*, in particular, has received increasing scholarly attention for its exploration of childhood fear, loneliness, intergenerational relationships, and the symbolic power of the natural landscape. Contemporary studies highlight the text's emotional intensity, cultural metaphors, and linguistic nuances, noting its capacity to reflect existential loneliness, verbalize emotions through nature imagery, and embed culturally bound expressions that are challenging to translate. Yet despite this growing scholarship, the pedagogical potential of *Amanai and Zamanai*, its ability to teach moral reasoning, cultural understanding, developmental psychology, and emotional literacy; remains largely unexplored.

This gap is significant, as Zhunusov's novella offers a unique opportunity to examine how a literary work can function simultaneously as a cultural artifact, psychological case study, and teaching instrument. While previous research has analyzed Kazakh literature from historical, linguistic, or cultural perspectives, few studies have adopted a comprehensive pedagogical lens. No existing work has provided a full thematic codebook, a structured content analysis, or a framework for using *Amanai and Zamanai* in university-level literature, pedagogy, psychology, or cultural studies courses. Addressing this absence is particularly important given the growing recognition that literature can foster empathy, emotional insight, symbolic thinking, and ethical reasoning.

The purpose of this study is to conduct a detailed pedagogical analysis of *Amanai and Zamanai*, identifying the educational dimensions embedded within the text and exploring how they can be used effectively in higher education settings. Through qualitative content analysis, the study examines six thematic domains that emerge from the narrative. By mapping these themes, the study seeks to uncover how the novella teaches through its narrative structure, symbolism, atmosphere, and character experiences, and how its culturally grounded storytelling can support interdisciplinary teaching and learning. Guided by this purpose, the study addresses the following research questions:

- What pedagogical themes emerge from a qualitative content analysis of Saken Zhunusov's *Amanai and Zamanai*?
- How do the narrative, symbolic, and linguistic features of the novella support moral, cultural, emotional, and psychological learning?
- In what ways can *Amanai and Zamanai* be integrated into higher education curricula across literature, cultural studies, teacher education, and psychology?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Kazakh literature and pedagogy

Kazakh literature has historically served as a foundation for cultural identity formation, philosophical reflection, and pedagogical influence, making it a valuable resource for higher education. Scholars argue that modern Kazakh literary studies increasingly emphasize the interconnection between national ideology, cultural revival, and educational practice [1]. Zhunusov's *Amanai and Zamanai* belongs to this broader intellectual and cultural movement, in which literary works are simply artistic expressions and pedagogical tools that transmit ethical frameworks, cultural consciousness, and national narratives. Studies on Kazakh literary heritage highlight how writers of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries embed philosophical, historical, and theological concepts within their texts, shaping readers' moral and intellectual development [2]. This aligns with recent scholarship that positions Kazakh literature as a site for exploring ideological movements, national values, and pedagogical approaches, particularly in relation to the Alash intellectual tradition and its emphasis on education, enlightenment, and civic responsibility [1].

This aligns with arguments that studying Kazakh literature during the independence period has become a key mechanism for strengthening cultural continuity, national self-awareness, and worldview formation among students [3]. Modern literary scholarship also traces how Kazakh narratives have transformed historically and politically, particularly under Soviet and post-Soviet contexts, reflecting shifts in national ideology, collective memory, and the cultural imagination [4].

2.2. Folklore, oral tradition, and cultural transmission

Research on pedagogy, culture, and literary education in Kazakhstan further shows the importance of integrating national literature into university curricula to develop cultural literacy and identity [5]. Folklore and oral tradition have long been recognized as central pillars of Kazakh cultural identity, shaping collective memory, ethical frameworks, and intergenerational knowledge transfer. Kazakh cultural scholars emphasize

that oral storytelling, comprising myths, proverbs, epic narratives, and genealogical tales, has historically served as the primary medium through which values, social norms, and worldviews were taught [6]. This oral heritage is not merely artistic; it functions as a pedagogical system that encodes cultural meaning through narrative, metaphor, and symbolic imagery. The persistence of these traditions is closely tied to the nomadic past of the Kazakh people, where storytelling played the role of communal education, moral instruction, and cultural preservation [7]. In this context, literature rooted in folklore, such as Saken Zhunusov's *Amanai* and *Zamanai* – carries forward these educational functions in written form, allowing traditional pedagogies to operate within contemporary literary settings.

Scholars point out that Kazakh folklore is characterized by its didactic purpose and its ability to shape identity through the repetition of culturally significant motifs, structural patterns, and moral contrasts [8]. These features are evident in Zhunusov's narrative, where mythic references, ancestral lineage, and symbolic landscapes guide the child protagonist's emotional and cognitive development. As noted by Kudaibergenova [9], modern Kazakh literature actively reworks cultural memory and national narratives by reinterpreting traditional symbolic frameworks within contemporary literary forms. This dynamic interaction between inherited cultural codes and modern narrative strategies helps sustain the relevance of tradition in changing historical contexts. A similar mechanism operates in *Amanai* and *Zamanai*, where oral storytelling patterns are embedded into a modern prose narrative, preserving the moral and symbolic resonance of traditional tales while reframing them through the psychological perspective of a child.

Recent scholarship further demonstrates how folklore supports identity formation in modern Kazakhstan by connecting personal experience to collective history. Kulsarieva *et al.* [10] argue that myth-making and folkloric imagery continue to shape cultural memory in contemporary visual and literary culture, creating continuity between past and present.

2.3. Narrative as a cognitive and educational tool

Narrative has long been recognized as a central mechanism through which humans make sense of experience, construct meaning, and organize cognitive development. Bruner [2] seminal argument that narrative is a primary mode of thought provides a foundational lens for understanding how literary texts shape interpretation, reasoning, and identity. In this view, stories do not merely reflect reality, they structure the ways individuals perceive causality, intention, and moral consequence. Zhunusov's *Amanai* and *Zamanai* exemplifies this cognitive function: as *Amanai* confronts fear, loss, and uncertainty, he interprets events by narrativizing them, blending the grandmother's mythic stories with his own lived experiences. This process aligns with Vygotsky [1] notion of symbolic mediation, in which imagination and culturally transmitted narratives serve as tools for psychological development. Vygotsky argues that children interpret reality through symbolic systems they inherit from caregivers, and *Amanai* and *Zamanai* demonstrates this vividly as the grandmother's oral stories become the framework through which the child constructs meaning, evaluates danger, and regulates emotion.

Narrative theory further supports this perspective. Several scholars [11], [12] highlight how narrative structure, plot sequencing, and symbolism guide cognitive and interpretive processes by creating coherence out of ambiguity. Zhunusov's novella employs these mechanisms strategically: symbolic elements such as the mountain, darkness, and ancestral references operate as narrative anchors that help both the child and the reader navigate uncertainty and understand emotional stakes. Empirical research reinforces the idea that narrative environments can function as cognitive tools that shape learning. Shores *et al.* [13] demonstrate that narrative-centered learning environments support early prediction of how learners will use cognitive tools when interpreting complex scenarios, suggesting that narrative conveys information and also structures problem-solving and attention. Although their research focuses on artificial intelligence-supported learning environments, the underlying principle, that narrative scaffolds cognition and guides interpretive behaviors, applies directly to traditional literary texts. In literary pedagogy, narrative methodology thus becomes both content and method. Scholars emphasize that teaching literature through narrative mechanisms, such as exploring point of view, symbolism, atmosphere, and plot tension, encourages students to engage in dialogic reasoning, perspective-taking, and reflective interpretation [14].

2.4. Saken Zhunusov in Kazakh literary scholarship

Saken Zhunusov occupies a distinct position within Kazakh literature as a writer who combines psychological depth, social realism, and folkloric symbolism to portray the emotional landscapes of ordinary people, especially children. Recent scholarship has begun to show the nuances of his artistic style, thematic concerns, and ethnolinguistic techniques. For instance, Abdrakhmanova *et al.* [15] demonstrate that Zhunusov's prose relies heavily on the verbalization of emotion through nature imagery, a technique that merges landscape with psychological states and reinforces the symbolic relationship between humans and the natural world. This connection is especially pronounced in *Amanai* and *Zamanai*, where mountains, darkness, and silence mirror the characters' fear, isolation, and inner turmoil.

Other scholars have explored Zhunusov's ethnolinguistic strategies, emphasizing how his metaphors, comparisons, and descriptive choices are rooted in Kazakh cultural semantics. Kanapina *et al.* [16] show that in works such as *Japandagy Jalgyz Ūi*, Zhunusov employs culturally embedded comparisons that reflect the worldview, emotional norms, and linguistic traditions of Kazakh communities. These ethnolinguistic patterns reveal the author's commitment to preserving cultural identity through narrative form and vocabulary, making his texts particularly rich for educational analysis in linguistics-oriented literature courses.

Zhunusov's themes also align with broader literary conversations about existential loneliness and the emotional condition of the individual within oppressive or isolating environments. Rakymzhan *et al.* [17], in their cross-cultural analysis of existential metaphors in Kazakh and world literature, note that Kazakh authors frequently portray solitude as both a psychological burden and a culturally inflected experience. Zhunusov's depiction of Amanai's isolation, both physical and emotional, resonates with these findings, suggesting that his work contributes meaningfully to global discussions of loneliness, trauma, and vulnerability.

Scholars have also examined the dramatic qualities and stylistic precision in Kazakh literary works, noting how authors like Zhunusov employ character speech, emotional pacing, and tension-building techniques to achieve psychological realism. Shapauov *et al.* [18] argue that Kazakh writers' ability to create dramatic effect through nuanced dialogue and atmospheric description is central to the evolving aesthetics of modern Kazakh prose. Historical and sociopolitical analyses further contextualize Zhunusov's writings. Abdrakhmanova *et al.* [15] reveal how Kazakh literature of the early Soviet period encoded collective trauma, particularly collectivization, through narrative symbolism and emotional representation. Although Zhunusov writes later, his attention to poverty, displacement, and emotional suffering reflects the long-lasting cultural memory of these historical wounds. Similarly, research on national struggles and regional histories [15] underscores how Kazakh literary voices, including Zhunusov, often situate personal tragedy within broader sociohistorical contexts.

2.5. Amanai and Zamanai in contemporary scholarship

Saken Zhunusov's *Amanai* and *Zamanai* has recently gained renewed scholarly attention for its emotional depth, cultural symbolism, and pedagogical richness. Contemporary researchers emphasize that the novella stands out in Kazakh literature for its portrayal of childhood trauma, existential loneliness, and the psychological impact of sociohistorical conditions. Rakymzhan *et al.* [17] situate Zhunusov's work within a broader cross-cultural discourse on existential loneliness, arguing that Kazakh writers frequently use metaphoric and symbolic frames to express feelings of abandonment, fear, and emotional isolation. In *Amanai* and *Zamanai*, these themes emerge vividly through the child protagonist's night-time journey, his fear of losing his grandmother, and the pervasive silence of the rural environment. *Amanai*'s solitude, both physical and emotional, aligns with the metaphorical structures identified by Rakymzhan and colleagues, illustrating how Kazakh narrative traditions encode universal human anxieties within culturally specific imagery.

Philological research also explores the linguistic and stylistic dimensions of the novella. Abdrakhmanova *et al.* [15] examine how Zhunusov uses nature imagery to verbalize emotional states, showing that descriptions of darkness, mountains, wind, and silence function not merely as environmental details but as symbolic extensions of *Amanai*'s psychological experience. Their findings reveal that Zhunusov's natural descriptions create a synesthetic link between external landscape and inner emotion, reinforcing the child's fear, vulnerability, and longing for safety.

Another important area of scholarship concerns the translation and pragmatics of the novella's linguistic and cultural elements. In their 2025 study, Abdrakhmanova *et al.* [15] investigate the pragmatic challenges of translating Kazakh proverbs, idioms, and culturally bound expressions from *Amanai* and *Zamanai* into Russian and English. They argue that Zhunusov's prose relies heavily on culturally embedded metaphors and ethnolinguistic structures that carry moral and emotional weight, making direct translation difficult without losing nuance.

3. METHOD

3.1. Research design

This study employed a qualitative research design grounded in interpretive content analysis to examine the pedagogical potential of Saken Zhunusov's *Amanai* and *Zamanai*. Qualitative content analysis was selected because it allows for a systematic exploration of meanings, themes, and educational values embedded within a literary text [19]. The approach aligns with interpretive literary scholarship, which treats narrative, symbolism, and language as culturally situated expressions capable of transmitting moral, psychological, and pedagogical insights. Rather than attempting to quantify narrative elements, the study

sought to interpret how the novella constructs emotional, cultural, and educational meanings relevant for higher education. The sample consisted of one literary text: Amanai and Zamanai by Saken Zhunusov. The text was selected using purposive sampling [20], [21].

3.2. Data source

The primary data source for this study was the full text of Amanai and Zamanai, accessed in PDF format through a publicly available digital copy. The analysis focused exclusively on the narrative content of the novella, including descriptive passages, dialogue, symbolic elements, and folkloric motifs. No external materials, such as interviews, historical documents, or secondary narrations, were included in the analysis itself, though relevant scholarship was incorporated in the literature review to contextualize interpretations.

3.3. Analytic approach

The data were analyzed using a multi-stage thematic content analysis procedure. First, the text was read several times in full to gain a holistic understanding of its narrative flow, characters, emotional atmosphere, and symbolic features. In the second stage, the text was coded line-by-line using an inductive–deductive hybrid strategy. Inductive coding allowed themes to emerge directly from the narrative, while deductive coding was informed by established frameworks such as moral education, folklore pedagogy, narrative methodology, developmental psychology, and emotional-literacy theory.

Through iterative coding cycles, six overarching pedagogical themes were identified: i) moral education; ii) cultural learning; iii) developmental psychology; iv) folklore pedagogy; v) narrative methodology; and vi) emotional literacy. Each theme was refined through constant comparison, memo writing, and re-evaluation of coded excerpts to ensure conceptual clarity and thematic coherence.

3.4. Trustworthiness and rigor

Several strategies were employed to enhance the credibility and rigor of the analysis. Analytical memos were written during all coding stages to record interpretive decisions and ensure transparency of reasoning. Themes were refined through repeated reading and cross-checking of narrative excerpts to avoid overgeneralization or misinterpretation. Reflexivity was maintained throughout the analytic process, acknowledging the researcher's interpretive position and the subjective nature of literary analysis.

To strengthen dependability, the coding structure and thematic framework were revisited multiple times to check for consistency. Although the study did not involve multiple coders, the methodological documentation and codebook provide a clear audit trail that allows replication. Transferability is supported by thick description of narrative elements and pedagogical interpretations, enabling other educators or researchers to apply similar methods to different Kazakh texts or cultural-literary contexts.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Moral education

Moral education emerges as one of the most prominent pedagogical layers in Amanai and Zamanai. The text teaches moral values through the emotional suffering of characters, the failures of the community, acts of courage, and moments of difficult ethical choice. By portraying how individuals respond to hardship, the novella implicitly instructs readers in empathy, responsibility, and moral reasoning.

One of the strongest moral contrasts in the text is the divide between individual empathy and communal indifference. The emotional landscape of the village is defined by silence rather than support. When Amanai becomes lost in the mountains, the narrative emphasizes both his vulnerability and the complete absence of communal help. In a moment of profound fear, he “*searched among the trees, frightened by every shadow and rustle... from the pitch-black, hollow cold mountain, he cried silently for a long time.*” The silence surrounding his cry functions as a moral indictment: no one comes, no one hears, and no one searches. Similarly, earlier scenes hint at Alima's isolation through the minimal dialogue and her tendency to retreat into internal suffering rather than seeking help. This emotional vacuum illustrates moral erosion within the community and shows the novella's lesson that empathy is a social responsibility, not a private luxury.

Moral responsibility toward vulnerable members of society is highlighted repeatedly through the actions of Balziya. Her relationship with Amanai is built on caregiving, devotion, and the cultural ethic of protecting younger generations. When she tells him, “*You are the only remaining descendant of Atymtai... Do not be afraid. You have learned to walk the road,*” she reinforces his value and her duty to safeguard him. Another scene shows Amanai trembling, clinging to her clothing as he whispers questions about his mother: “*Where is Alima? Is she... is she coming?*”. His dependence emphasizes the moral burden placed on caregivers in a world where institutional support is nonexistent. The contrast between Balziya's devotion and the village's inaction signals the novella's message: moral duty is measured by concrete acts of care.

Moral courage in hardship is portrayed through quiet endurance rather than dramatic heroism. Even when physically exhausted, Balziya continues walking for Amanai's sake. Her frailty is described vividly: *"The frail old woman whose marrow had long been exhausted,"* and yet she refuses to abandon him. Later, as her strength fades, she still consoles him, whispering, *"I will bring you home... The village is not far now."* This quiet bravery is emphasized again when she forces herself to stay conscious, gripping Amanai's hand even as her *"last hope snapped, and for a moment she was stunned."*

Finally, the novella presents ethical dilemmas and moral decision-making that shape its pedagogical force. The villagers' passivity raises unspoken ethical questions: *"Should they have intervened?"* Their lack of action, even when a child and an elderly woman go missing, exposes a moral failure that the narrative leaves for the reader to judge. The grandmother faces her own moral dilemma: whether to risk her life attempting the journey or remain where she is. The text builds tension around her hesitation, *"He wanted to shout out and run, but he could not; and when he tried, she pulled him back hard."* Her decision to continue despite the danger becomes a moral act, affirming her duty to the child even when the outcome is uncertain.

4.2. Cultural learning

Cultural learning in Amanai and Zamanai is expressed through oral storytelling, traditional domestic practices, sacred beliefs, and the symbolic role of the natural landscape. The novella situates the reader inside a specifically Kazakh cultural world, teaching identity and worldview through the lived experiences of its characters. One of the clearest sites of cultural transmission is oral tradition. The grandmother acts as a cultural teacher, drawing on the structure of *"aңыз"* and *"ертегі"* to guide and reassure the child. Her invocation of ancestry is rooted in traditional Kazakh identity-building through lineage. When she tells him, *"You are the only remaining descendant of Atymtai... Do not be afraid. You have learned to walk the road,"* she is not simply offering comfort; she is transmitting a worldview in which identity is genealogical, moral, and heroic. Her stories and symbolic references build the child's sense of belonging within a cultural narrative larger than himself.

Traditional rural Kazakh lifestyle and customs are preserved through concrete details of domestic life. The narrative frequently references objects and spaces that carry cultural meaning, such as the *"Yellow-latched chest sitting beneath the wrinkled window, with a large tied bundle resting on top."* This *abdyra* and *tüyinshék* are material links to generational continuity. The grandmother's recollection of inherited items, *"his binoculars, gold watch, tobacco kit,"* further emphasizes the cultural importance of objects that pass from one generation to the next.

Cultural learning is also conveyed through rituals and sacred belief systems. While the text does not always name rituals explicitly, it evokes the spiritual worldview of Kazakh communities through emotional responses and symbolic interpretations. When Balziya becomes overwhelmed by fear and exhaustion, she reacts with spiritual dread as well as physical pain, she *"thrashed restlessly, as if she could not find a place for her soul."* This expression mirrors traditional understandings of emotional states as spiritually charged, reflecting beliefs about omens, fate, and ancestral protection. The narrative thereby embeds sacred worldview into emotional experience, teaching readers how belief and daily life intersect.

Finally, the landscape functions as a cultural identity marker. Nature is described as scenery and as a living cultural presence. When Amanai wanders through the mountain darkness, nature embodies both physical danger and symbolic meaning, he trembles *"in the pitch-black hollow of the cold mountain, frightened by shadows and rustles."* Earlier, the text describes *"The bright, sharp light of the sun rising beyond the high peaks and mountain ridges,"* evoking a landscape that shapes the emotional and cultural consciousness of its inhabitants.

4.3. Developmental psychology

Amanai's psychological world in Amanai and Zamanai is shaped by fear, imagination, attachment, confusion, and symbolic interpretation. The narrative provides a detailed portrayal of child development under traumatic circumstances, allowing readers to observe how a child perceives danger, processes loss, and blends myth with reality. Through these depictions, the novella offers a deeply pedagogical perspective on the emotional and cognitive dimensions of childhood.

A central feature of Amanai's development is his fear and imagination, especially during the night journey. The child's senses are overwhelmed, and his mind fills the gaps in understanding with imagined threats. When alone in the mountains, he becomes physically and emotionally disoriented, he wanders *"Frightened by every shadow and rustle... and in the pitch-black hollow of the cold mountain, he cried silently for a long time."* This excerpt shows the merging of sensory perception and imaginative fear typical of early childhood. The child's environment becomes a psychological landscape shaped as much by mythic fear as by physical darkness.

Attachment and loss form another major psychological theme. Amanai's emotional reliance on the grandmother is depicted repeatedly. His questions reveal a longing for reassurance: "*Where is Alima? Is she... is she coming?*" This moment reveals emotional conflict – Amanai is torn between the faint memory of his mother and the nurturing presence of his grandmother. His voice in this scene is fragile and searching, reflecting the unstable emotional landscape of a child who fears being left completely alone. Loss becomes even more explicit when Amanai begins to fear that his grandmother has died. His attempt to make sense of her disappearance reflects a child's early-stage grieving process: "*Then... she fell from the cliff, didn't she? She hit the rock and died, didn't she?*" His phrasing shows both literal interpretation and emotional incomprehension. Balziya's absence produces immediate cognitive confusion, revealing how children struggle to distinguish between imagined scenarios and real events when faced with loss.

Amanai's cognitive interpretation of danger is also shaped by developmental limitations. He often misreads threats or interprets them through fantasy. For example, when told that the river will carry his grandmother's body downstream, he asks repeatedly about its path, struggling to conceptualize the physical world: "*Where will it take her? And then? ... Will she come back?*" These questions reveal a child trying to understand natural forces through concrete, sequential logic, reflecting early cognitive patterns described in developmental psychology. In other moments, while still recovering in the hospital, Amanai stands alone by the window, silently observing the snowy mountains and distant village lights. The narrative describes him as "*standing alone in the dim room... looking outside.*" This scene captures cognitive withdrawal, a common response among children processing trauma. He watches quietly, absorbing the landscape, as though trying to reassemble a sense of safety and belonging.

Finally, symbolic thinking plays a major role in Amanai's worldview. Myths, especially the grandmother's stories, become frameworks through which he interprets ambiguous events. The child's excitement when pointing to an airplane, "*Look, grandmother, the airplane!*", shows how real-world stimuli become embedded in the symbolic imagination built through storytelling. This cognitive blending of reality and symbolism is characteristic of childhood, especially when myth and narrative serve as emotional anchors. Symbolic thought is also evident in his reaction to the discussion of the new moon. Amanai recalls the grandmother's earlier story about "*your moon,*" a symbolic gift of hope and identity. His struggle to process the idea, "*Is that my moon?*" demonstrates how symbolic narratives shape a child's sense of meaning.

4.4. Folklore pedagogy

Folklore is a narrative element in Amanai and Zamanai, and it is a pedagogical system woven into the emotional and cognitive development of the child. Through myths, symbols, and the oral storytelling of the grandmother, the novella demonstrates how Kazakh folklore shapes worldview, moral understanding, and psychological resilience. Storytelling becomes both cultural inheritance and a coping mechanism for traumatic experience.

One of the clearest pedagogical functions of folklore is the use of myth as a teaching tool. The grandmother consistently frames Amanai's identity and courage through legendary ancestry. Her words, "*You are the only remaining descendant of Atymtai... Do not be afraid. You have learned to walk the road,*" anchor the child in heroic lineage, giving him a sense of purpose and continuity. This myth-based reassurance teaches moral strength, perseverance, and belonging. Her tone and symbolic language reflect traditional oral pedagogy, where lessons are offered indirectly through narratives rather than explicit instruction.

The structure of "*epmezi*" (Kazakh fairy tale) also plays a pedagogical role in shaping the child's, and the reader's, understanding of moral categories. The grandmother's storytelling uses simplified moral dichotomies, where kindness and cruelty, protection and danger, heritage and wickedness are clearly contrasted. Her harsh remark, "*He is a rotten egg... You will find him if you search,*" invokes a fairy-tale logic of villainy, signaling the presence of corrupt characters even in the real world. Folklore also serves as a method of cultural preservation, transmitting collective memory and embedding cultural identity in the child. The grandmother's stories situate Amanai within a historical and mythic lineage, reinforcing cultural continuity despite hardship. Even everyday objects, like her father's "*binoculars, gold watch, tobacco kit,*" become relics of ancestral history. By surrounding the child with symbolic items and stories, the narrative demonstrates how children internalize cultural identity through symbolic associations rather than formal instruction. The grandmother's storytelling becomes both memory preservation and identity formation.

Folklore is equally vital as a coping mechanism for Amanai. When he becomes lost in the mountains, he is terrified by darkness, shadows, and silence, yet the framework of myth helps him interpret these fears. His psychological state, crying in the "*pitch-black hollow of the cold mountain,*" shows how raw fear dominates his perception. But because the grandmother has always interpreted the world through story, the child's fear is processed symbolically. Storytelling has taught him that dangers have meaning, heroes have lineage, and suffering is part of a recognizable moral pattern. This symbolic thinking becomes even more apparent when he reacts to visual stimuli with myth-infused imagination, such as when he excitedly points to the sky, "*look, grandmother, the airplane!*" interpreting the world with wonder shaped by narrative.

Another moment of symbolic processing appears when the new moon rises. The child remembers the grandmother's story about "*your moon*," and struggles to interpret it: "*Is that my moon?*" His desire to connect the celestial event with the grandmother's tale demonstrates how myth shapes his emotional world and gives him tools to process uncertainty and loss.

4.5. Narrative methodology

The narrative technique of Amanai and Zamanai functions as a pedagogical system in itself. By blending realism with myth, shaping an emotionally charged atmosphere, foreshadowing events through structure, and shifting fluidly between perspectives, the novella teaches readers how to interpret human experience across emotional, symbolic, and social dimensions. A key methodological feature is the blending of realism and myth. Scenes rooted in social reality; hunger, illness, loneliness, poverty, and exhaustion, create immediate emotional engagement. For example, the moment when Amanai cries alone in the mountain darkness ("*in the pitch-black hollow of the cold mountain, he cried silently for a long time*") gives the narrative visceral realism and emotional weight. Yet this realism is interwoven with mythic elements; ancestral lineage, symbolic mountains, and the grandmother's folkloric voice. These layers work together to teach the reader to see events simultaneously through literal and symbolic frameworks, mirroring the way Kazakh storytelling often fuses daily life with sacred or legendary meaning.

Emotional atmosphere is another pedagogical mechanism. Much of the novella's teaching occurs not through explicit messages but through suspense, dread, and empathy embedded in the narrative environment. Silence, cold, darkness, and physical fragility create a sensory world through which readers learn to interpret emotion. When the grandmother struggles to breathe and clutches the child's hand, the tension surrounding her physical decline teaches the reader how emotional meaning can be conveyed through atmosphere rather than explanation. The story encourages readers to understand emotional states by "*feeling*" the environment rather than being told what to think.

The novella also relies on foreshadowing as a structural teaching device. Early subtle details prepare the reader for later events. Small cues, such as the grandmother's weakening body, her unsteady steps, or her pauses while speaking, quietly signal what will eventually happen, long before the narrative acknowledges it. Even brief visual details, such as scattered mountain lights, serve dual functions: literal scenery and symbolic indicators of distance, hope, or danger. This technique teaches readers to interpret narrative clues and to look for meaning in understatement, an important skill in literary reading.

Finally, the text uses shifting narrative perspectives to expand its pedagogical reach. The reader is guided through the perceptions of an exhausted grandmother, a frightened child, and the mythic voice of oral storytelling. Each perspective teaches something different. The adult viewpoint reveals suffering, responsibility, and the limits of human endurance. The child's viewpoint teaches how fear, confusion, and symbolic thinking shape early cognition. The mythic perspective, evoked through storytelling and ancestral references, teaches cultural meaning and moral interpretation.

4.6. Emotional literacy

Emotional literacy is one of the deepest pedagogical threads in Amanai and Zamanai. Through its portrayal of fear, grief, emotional signaling, resilience, and empathic imagination, the novella teaches readers how emotions are expressed, understood, and regulated, especially in moments of crisis. Rather than explaining emotions directly, the text models emotional understanding through the actions, silences, and perceptions of its characters.

The narrative begins by showing how suffering is experienced by different characters, teaching readers to recognize emotional states even when unspoken. Alima's pain is reflected in her quiet withdrawal and in the way Amanai speaks about her with confusion and longing. The grandmother's suffering appears through physical and emotional exhaustion; at one point she is described as so weakened that "*her strength seemed to have drained away*," yet she continues to steady the child with trembling hands. Amanai's suffering, however, is raw and immediate. When he becomes lost in the mountains, fear seizes him completely, and he cries in "*the pitch-black hollow of the cold mountain*," overwhelmed by cold, shadows, and loneliness. Through these layered portrayals, the reader learns to interpret emotional suffering through small gestures, physical descriptions, and atmosphere rather than explicit dialogue.

The novella also teaches the reader to notice emotional signals, the subtle ways characters communicate fear, grief, or anxiety without speaking. Silence becomes a powerful emotional language. The grandmother's sudden stillness, the tightening of her grip on Amanai's hand, and her long pauses before speaking all signal her growing fear and weakness. Amanai's emotional signals appear through bodily reactions: hesitations, frozen steps, and the tremor in his voice when he asks, "*Where is Alima? Is she... is she coming?*" His tone reveals anxiety even before he understands what he fears. The reader is encouraged to attend closely to these subtle cues, learning how emotion is often communicated in indirect or minimal ways.

A major theme in the text is emotional resilience, especially in the way the grandmother and mother continue their responsibilities despite despair. The grandmother shows quiet endurance even when she can barely continue walking; she speaks softly to reassure the child, “*I will bring you home... the village is not far,*” even when her own survival is in doubt. This teaches readers that resilience is not the absence of fear but the ability to act compassionately within it. Her perseverance becomes a model for emotional courage, suggesting that care for others can strengthen emotional resolve.

The novella also cultivates empathic imagination, teaching readers to inhabit emotional experiences outside their own. Because the narrative shifts between the perceptions of a child and an elder, the reader must adjust emotionally to each viewpoint. In the child’s perspective, the world is frightening, full of shadows and unanswered questions. In the grandmother’s viewpoint, the world is heavy with responsibility, regret, and physical limitation. These alternating perspectives require the reader to interpret the same events through different emotional lenses, developing empathy through literary immersion. When the child, standing at a hospital window, looks silently toward the mountains and distant lights, the scene evokes a mixture of sadness, longing, and fragile hope. Readers must imagine what he feels rather than being told directly, deepening emotional understanding.

4.7. Discussion

The six themes identified in this study demonstrate that *Amanai* and *Zamanai* functions as far more than a literary narrative; it operates as a multi-layered educational text capable of supporting university-level instruction across literature, pedagogy, and cultural studies. When viewed together, the themes reveal a narrative that teaches on several levels simultaneously: moral education emerges through portrayals of compassion, responsibility, and ethical choice; cultural learning is transmitted through oral traditions, symbolic landscapes, and domestic customs; developmental psychology becomes visible through the child’s evolving cognition, fear, attachment, and symbolic thinking; folklore pedagogy provides a framework for meaning-making grounded in mythic structure; narrative methodology teaches students to read symbolism, foreshadowing, and shifting perspectives; and emotional literacy is cultivated through depictions of suffering, resilience, and empathy [22]. Synthesizing these themes shows that the novel integrates cognitive, emotional, cultural, and ethical dimensions of learning, aligning naturally with contemporary approaches to literary pedagogy and culturally responsive teaching. For higher education, these layered dimensions make *Amanai* and *Zamanai* an exceptionally rich text: it supports deep interpretive analysis, engages students emotionally and intellectually, and provides an authentic representation of Kazakh cultural and psychological worlds.

The narrative of *Amanai* and *Zamanai* operates as a powerful teaching tool because it embeds moral reasoning, empathy, cultural identity, emotional regulation, and symbolic thinking directly into the lived experiences of its characters, allowing learners to engage with these concepts organically through story rather than abstraction. The moral dilemmas faced by the grandmother and the surrounding community model ethical decision-making; the child’s fear and vulnerability nurture empathic understanding; the integration of folklore and ancestral memory affirms cultural identity; and the child’s attempts to manage terror, grief, and uncertainty illustrate emotional self-regulation in real time. These elements make the novel highly effective for university teaching, where instructors can use its scenes and structures to train students in critical reading, guide cultural analysis grounded in authentic Kazakh contexts, and explore trauma, resilience, and coping mechanisms in literature. Its layered symbolism, myth-reality blending, and shifting perspectives offer rich opportunities for dialogic learning, encouraging students to interpret multiple meanings and engage in collective meaning-making. Because the text mirrors core processes of cognitive and emotional development, it can also be used as a case study in psychology- or education-related courses, demonstrating how narrative shapes thinking, identity, and emotional literacy [23].

The thematic findings of this study demonstrate that *Amanai* and *Zamanai* holds significant value for higher education curricula because it embodies an interdisciplinary richness that supports teaching across literature, cultural studies, psychology, pedagogy, and social history. For literature analysis courses, the novel offers layered narrative techniques, myth-realism blending, foreshadowing, and shifting perspectives, that train students in advanced interpretive skills. In cultural studies, its authentic portrayal of Kazakh oral traditions, rural life, and symbolic landscapes provides a primary text through which students can examine identity, worldview, and cultural memory.

For psychology-of-literature modules, the detailed depiction of *Amanai*’s fear, attachment, grief, and symbolic thinking makes the novel an effective case study in child development and trauma. Teacher-training programs can use the text to model how storytelling teaches moral reasoning, empathy, and emotional literacy, while social and historical studies benefit from its critique of poverty, gendered labor, and communal responsibility in rural Kazakh society. The novel’s emotional intensity, cultural authenticity, and pedagogical flexibility allow instructors to design dialogic discussions, reflective writing tasks, cultural analyses, and developmental interpretations based on a single narrative.

Amanai and Zamanai teaches “beyond the text” by immersing readers in moral, emotional, and social complexities that extend far past traditional literary analysis. The novel models moral dilemmas, such as whether the community should intervene, how a grandmother should navigate danger, and how a child interprets abandonment, encouraging readers to evaluate ethical choices rather than simply observe them. Its vivid portrayal of fear, grief, tenderness, and resilience cultivates empathy, requiring readers to enter the emotional worlds of vulnerable characters and confront the consequences of indifference or support. By exposing social inequalities; poverty, gendered labor, generational trauma, and fragile community bonds, the narrative invites reflection on family structure and societal obligations, prompting students to consider how structural forces shape personal suffering. At the same time, the novel trains readers to interpret emotional cues such as silence, gesture, atmosphere, and sensory detail, as well as symbolic elements like the mountain, ancestral references, and mythic imagery. These interpretive practices strengthen emotional literacy, symbolic reasoning, and socio-cultural awareness, skills that reach far beyond textual interpretation and into ethical judgment, psychological insight, and cultural understanding.

The themes revealed in Amanai and Zamanai continue to resonate deeply within contemporary Kazakh society, making the novel a timely and meaningful text for university-level study. The story’s depiction of rural poverty mirrors ongoing economic disparities between urban and peripheral regions, while its critique of weakened community solidarity reflects current concerns about social fragmentation, migration, and changing family structures in modern Kazakhstan. The gendered burdens carried by women in the narrative; widows, grandmothers, single mothers, parallel real societal patterns in which caregiving, emotional labor, and household responsibility often fall disproportionately on female family members. Meanwhile, the novel’s use of myth and symbolic ancestry highlights how traditional beliefs, oral history, and cultural identity continue to play a vital role in shaping Kazakh values, especially among younger generations seeking continuity in a rapidly modernizing society.

The thematic analysis of Amanai and Zamanai provides clear, practical implications for teaching practice by showing how instructors can use the novel to design meaningful, interdisciplinary learning experiences. Each theme naturally becomes a lesson module: moral education can be taught through dialogic reading activities in which students debate the ethical dilemmas faced by the grandmother, the villagers, and the child; cultural learning can be explored through myth analysis and close readings of domestic objects, landscape symbolism, and oral storytelling traditions; developmental psychology can anchor activities in which students trace Amanai’s emotional states, symbolic thinking, and fear responses, using the text as a case study in trauma and resilience; folklore pedagogy invites creative tasks such as rewriting scenes in the style of Kazakh oral traditions or mapping the novel’s mythic structure; narrative methodology supports critical reading exercises that analyze perspective shifts, foreshadowing, and myth–realism blending; and emotional literacy can be developed through journaling, role-play, or empathy-mapping tasks that help students engage personally with the characters’ suffering and growth [24], [25].

This study acknowledges several limitations inherent in its qualitative, interpretive approach. Because the analysis centers on a single literary text, its thematic findings cannot be generalized to all Kazakh prose or to broader Central Asian literature without caution. The interpretive coding process, while systematic, remains subjective, and different instructors or researchers may identify alternative themes based on their disciplinary backgrounds, cultural knowledge, or pedagogical priorities. Additionally, the analysis relied on the available PDF copy of Amanai and Zamanai, which may not include the full text or surrounding contextual materials that could further inform interpretation. The study also did not include classroom implementation, by design, meaning the pedagogical implications are theoretical rather than empirically tested with student groups.

5. CONCLUSION

This study examined Amanai and Zamanai as a rich pedagogical text, demonstrating that Saken Zhunusov’s novella extends far beyond its literary narrative to function as an interdisciplinary educational resource for higher education. Through a detailed thematic analysis grounded in six domains, the study revealed how the novel teaches readers to engage ethically, emotionally, and intellectually with human experience. Its portrayal of moral dilemmas, cultural rituals, social inequalities, psychological development, and mythic-symbolic thinking creates a multilayered interpretive space that aligns naturally with contemporary theories of learning, including Vygotskian symbolic mediation, Bruner’s narrative cognition, Rosenblatt’s reader-response engagement, and cultural-historical perspectives on storytelling. The narrative’s emotional depth and cultural authenticity make it a powerful tool for literature courses, cultural studies, teacher education, and psychology-of-literature modules, while its flexible structure supports dialogic teaching methods, critical inquiry, and trauma-informed literary analysis.

By developing a comprehensive codebook and thematic framework, this study provides a replicable model for analyzing other Kazakh and Central Asian literary works through modern educational lenses. At the same time, the findings highlight the novel's enduring relevance to contemporary Kazakh society, reflecting ongoing issues related to rural poverty, gendered burdens, intergenerational trauma, and cultural identity formation. Although the study is limited by its focus on a single text and its non-experimental, interpretive design, it opens promising avenues for comparative literary analysis, classroom-based pedagogical research, and empirical studies on student emotional and cultural learning through fiction.

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C : **C**onceptualization

M : **M**ethodology

So : **S**oftware

Va : **V**alidation

Fo : **F**ormal analysis

I : **I**nvestigation

R : **R**esources

D : **D**ata Curation

O : Writing - **O**riginal Draft

E : Writing - Review & **E**diting

Vi : **V**isualization

Su : **S**upervision

P : **P**roject administration

Fu : **F**unding acquisition

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Authors state no conflict of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY

Data availability is not applicable to this paper as no new data were created or analyzed in this study.

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