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Common Epic and Lyric Motifs in Dede Korkut, the Iliad and Odyssey and Shahnameh

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ABSTRACT

Background: Shahnameh, Dede Korkut, and the Iliad and Odyssey are among the greatest epics of all time. **Objective:** There are common elements in these works, and one reason for these similarities is the common origins of different mythologies and their influence on each other. In these epics, depictions of grand battles are accompanied by episodes of love and passion. Love is the dominant theme in at least two stories of Dede Korkut. **Results:** The most beautiful love story in this book is “Bamsi Beyrek and Banu Chichak”, which bears many similarities to the story of “Bijan and Manijeh” in Shahnameh and some stories in the Iliad and Odyssey. **Conclusion:** In this paper, we introduce Dede Korkut and provide insights into some common motifs in these epics.

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INTRODUCTION

Dede means *grandfather* in Turkish, and in ancient days it was used to refer to *Ashiks*. Korkut was a historical person, and he was also at times called *Ata*, meaning *father* (Seyyed Salamat, 1997).

The Book of Dede Korkut is the most famous epic of Azerbaijan. It is an ancient heritage and without doubt a literary masterpiece (Karimi, 2009). Dede Korkut is replete with sublime morals and values and reflects the ancient culture, ideas, wishes, beliefs, and customs of Turkish peoples.

This epic consists of a prologue and twelve stories. The stories long prose and verse ballads, each dealing with the chivalry, heroism, and adventures of one character. Yet, all the stories are interrelated, and they all eulogize such sublime notions as nationalism, hospitality, kindness, dignity of women, confidence, and valor (Mohammadina, 2009). The prose is simple, musical, and rhymed, and the ballads consist of about 2000 verses.

The prologue was written much later by the person who collected the legends, and its style is different from that of the stories. The author of this epic and its time of writing are not known. The stories have also been written at different times, as the mythological themes have been cited along with customs that have been prevalent at a specific period (Seyyed Salamat, 1997). The stories are probably related to pre-Islamic periods, but the book has been written afterwards with Islamic undertones (Rashedi, 2009). No specific location has been cited in these stories, but the incidents have probably occurred in Azerbaijan. V. V. Bartold, professor of Turkish language in Istanbul University, has the same opinion (Heyat, 2001). The epic has the linguistic features of both Azerbaijani and Anatolian languages, because it belongs to the period when Azeri and Anatolian Turkish had not been separated. In other words, the book is written with Oghuz dialect, but it has retained the linguistic features of Azerbaijani language (Ibid).

There are two manuscripts of Dede Korkut, one in the Royal Library of Dresden and the other in the Vatican Library. The Vatican version was found later and is incomplete. Moreover, both manuscripts have been written in Arabic (Ibid).

The English translation of Dede Korkut by G. L. Lewis was retranslated to Persian language by F. Azabdaftari and M. H. Akbari. This book has also been translated to several other languages, including French, German, Italian, and Russian. This book is comparable to the most lasting epics in terms of literary style, grandeur of the scenes, mythological beliefs.

H.F. Von Diez translated one of the stories of Dede Korkut—i.e. *Tepegoz*—to German in 1815. He compared Tepegoz (an ogre with only one eye on his forehead) to Homer's Odyssey and argued that, “Tepegoz in Dede Korkut epic is strikingly similar to Homer's Cyclops ... but the precise relationship of this folklore motif to the Homeric epic remains unclear” (Seyyed Salamat, 1997).

Dede Korkut has had a significant impact on the narrative tradition of Azerbaijan and is considered the origin of epic and lyrical stories in this region. Samad Behrangi believed that this book has influenced the Epic of Koroghlu (Darvishian, 2000).

For centuries, the stories of this book were passed on orally by *Ashiks* or troubadour who adorned them with music and made them endure in people's minds. Dede Korkut is present in all the stories as an *Ozan* (minstrel) and serves to link them together. He plays *komuz* (an ancient fretless string instrument), admires the bravery and gallantry of the heroes, prays for them, and solves problems. He usually enters the scene toward the end of each story and ends it with his wise words.

Although this work is an epic, it contains at least two lyrical ballads. Depictions of grand battles are accompanied by episodes of love and passion, but these stories are still characteristic of epics. From aesthetic and literary perspective, the Book of Dede Korkut is comparable to such great masterpieces as Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* and Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh*.

Iliad and Odyssey:

The *Iliad* is the greatest epic of Western civilization and one of the first instances of epic in Greek language. *Iliad* is often paired with something of a sequel—the *Odyssey*. Many researchers and scholars attribute *Iliad* and *Odyssey* to Homer who is believed to have lived in the 8th century BC. The linguistic features of these works suggest that they have not been written before this period (Rosenberg, 2001).

Iliad is about the war between the Greeks and the Trojans. Paris, the Trojan prince, steals the beautiful Helen from her husband, Menelaus, thus precipitating the ten-year war. In the end, the Greeks succeed in infiltrating into Troy and returning Helen.

Odyssey is another masterpiece by Homer. This book centers on Odysseus, one of the heroes of the *Iliad*, his journey home after the fall of Troy, and his attempt to reassert his place as the rightful king of Ithaca. However, the god of wind, Poseidon, who sided with the Trojans in the war and was furious at Odysseus for blinding his son, Polyphemus, is against his return. In Ithaca, it is assumed that he has died, and his wife Penelope and his son Telemachus are pestered by unruly suitors. Finally, Odysseus sacrifices to the gods to appease their anger, succeeds, and returns anonymously to his birthplace to slay the suitors of his wife.

Shahnameh:

Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh* is one of the greatest and most beautiful epics of Iran and the world. The stories center on the battle between good and evil, light and darkness, and justice and tyranny. Ferdowsi, a sagacious man whose wisdom and discretion flows in the mythical and historical stories of *Shahnameh*, eulogizes the good and attacks the evil.

The same mode of thinking prevails the other epics discussed in this paper. There are many similarities in these epics, which is mainly due to the common origins of myths and their influence on each other. One similarity between these works is their mixture of epic and lyrical stories. They all narrate stories of love and loss along with grand battles, thus adding to the attraction and variety of the works.

These stories which reflect the delicate feelings of the heroes, suggesting that love and various expressions of personal feelings are as important as defending society's ideals in battles. Therefore, these stories depict the sacrifices the heroes make in the field of battle as well as their personal values and endeavors (Mirhashemi, 2008).

Love Stories in Dede Korkut Epic:

The love stories in Dede Korkut are not primarily romantic, but include the characteristics of epics as well. Attraction, passion, and peaks of desire happen concurrently with battle, heroes of unbelievable stature, vast settings, and supernatural forces. Fighting with evil and darkness is as important to epic heroes as the pleasant melodies of love and devotion.

The love portrayed in this book is the most tangible type, and the only ideal aspect of this love is commitment and devotion of the lover to their beloved. Eventually the end up together without any fear of unseen forces stopping them (Mokhtari, 1999).

Among the loves stories of Dede Korkut, "Kan Turali and Saljan" and "Bamsi Beyrek and Banu Chichak" include more varied events and end in the marriage of the heroes. The heroes display such sublime characteristics as loyalty, rectitude, innocence, sacrifice, and enduring pains and discomforts in their journey to reach their beloved. Kan Turali, for instance, accepts the king's condition for marriage—to kill three wild beasts in the battlefield; a condition that had taken the lives of many a great warrior. However, Kan Turali, stirred by his love for Saljan, wins this battle and marries her.

This love is mutual—not only does *Kan Turali* go a long and perilous way to get to his beloved, but also *Saljan* is deeply in love with him. When the lover accepts the king's condition and enters the battle with the beast, Saljan becomes distraught and prays that his father would show him mercy. When she finally leaves with

Kan Turali to Oghuz, she takes Turali's horse, dresses for battle, takes up his spear and fights with the warriors sent by her father. Turali is amazed by her bravery and prowess.

Another love story in this book is "Bamsi Beyrek and Banu Chichak". Following Oghuz tradition, Bamsi Beyrak is betrothed to his niece Chichak in the cradle. As they get ready for the wedding ceremony, enemies attack them and take Beyrek as prisoner. Banu Chichak's brother Karchar tells people that whoever brings news proving that Beyrek was dead may marry his sister. Yaltajuk dips one of Beyrek's shirts in blood as evidence of Beyrek's death. Since he proves it, he achieves his goal and begins to prepare to marry Lady Chichak. A merchant informs Beyrek about this shocking news. Beyrek manages to escape the prison, attends the wedding ceremony in minstrel's clothes, reveals Yaltajuk's lie, and takes Chichak away with him.

Similarities in "Bamsi Beyrek and Banu Chichak" and "Bijan and Manijeh":

Some parts of the story of "Bamsi Beyrek and Banu Chichak" are reminiscent of similar events in Ferdowsi's "Bijan and Manijeh". In the former, Bamsi Beyrek goes hunting with the chiefs of the tribe, and on their way they see a herd of goats. As he follows the prey, Beyrek sees a beautiful tent and as he gets close he sees a beautiful girl (Chichak) being tended to by several maids. In *Shahnameh*, Bijan goes to the land of Arman to hunt boars. One day, he is tempted to cross the border to the mythical land of Turan, where he sees the beautiful tent of Manijeh, the daughter of Afrasiab, from afar and approaches the tent.

The rest of the stories, however, differ due to the mentality of their creators. In "Bamsi Beyrek and Banu Chichak", the beautiful girl in the tent, i.e. Chichak, introduces herself as one of Chichak's companions and challenges Beyrek to a competition. They compete in equestrianism, shooting, and wrestling, and as Chichak realizes the competence of her opponent, she introduces herself. Bamsi gives her his golden ring and marries her, since one of the conditions of selecting a spouse in the Book of Dede Korkut is that the boy and the girl must be competitors. However, in "Bijan and Manijeh", the described scenes are about festivity and joy, not fighting. Manijeh falls in love with the Persian prince, and knowing her father's possible rejection of Bijan, she drugs him and hides him in the castle.

Another similar event in these two stories is the imprisonment of the heroes (Bamsi Beyrek and Bijan) by their enemies. In Dede Korkut, Bamsi Beyrek is imprisoned by the enemy and spends many a year away from his family in the Bayburt Castle, until one day a merchant travels to the castle to find out about the destiny of Beyrek. Beyrek recognizes the merchant and asks about his land and Chichak. When he hears about Yaltajuk, he escapes from the prison with the help of the daughter of the lord of Bayburt Castle. In *Shahnameh*, Bijan is imprisoned in a well by Afrasiab. Rostam disguises himself as a merchant, travels to Turan, saves Bijan with the help of Manijeh, and brings him back to Iran.

Other similarities in these two stories are:

1. Integrity, dedication, loyalty, and long waiting of the lovers are admirable. In Dede Korkut, Chichak cries for years in the absence of her beloved and her fiery sorrow never eased. In *Shahnameh*, Manijeh is deprived of her luxurious life in the castle due to her love for Bijan, and she ends up homeless and impoverished without faltering.
2. In both stories, those who help the heroes escape are close to the enemy. Beyrek escapes the castle with the help of the lord's daughter, and Bijan escapes with the help of Manijeh, daughter of Afrasiab.
3. In both stories, the lovers end up together and live a happy life.

Like other epics, the theme of love flows through the works of Homer. This love is consistent with the epic world and is similar to romantic events in Dede Korkut. The pure love of Penelope for her husband Odysseus has close resemblance to Chichak's love and prolonged waiting for Beyrek. In Homer's works, gods and goddesses also fall in love. One instance is the love of Calypso, the Greek goddess, for Odysseus. So she kept Odysseus on her island to make him her immortal husband. She keeps her in Ogygia for seven years. Though Calypso enchants Odysseus with her singing and has an affair with him, Odysseus soon wishes to go back to his wife and son. Finally, Zeus orders Hermes to tell Calypso to release Odysseus. This infuriated Calypso and she called them cruel, but she finally concedes and lets Odysseus go free (Odyssey, 1991). Also Demeter, the goddess of the harvest, fell in love with the mortal Iasion, but as Zeus found out about their affair, he killed Iasion with a thunderbolt (Ibid). In Odyssey, Homer also narrates the love of Antiope, daughter of Asopus, and Zeus, and the love of Aphrodite, goddess of beauty, and Poseidon, god of the sea, also called the Earth-Shaker.

Other Common Themes in the Odyssey, Dede Korkut, and Shahnameh:

Bamsi Beyrek, Odysseus, and Bijan:

The story of Bamsi Beyrek bears similarities to the final adventures of Odysseus. Both heroes spend a long period of time away from their native land, and they both have virtuous wives who are impatiently waiting for their return. Both heroes return to their native land anonymously—Odysseus disguised as a beggar, and Beyrek disguised as a minstrel (Ashik). They both participate in a shooting contest to marry their wives, and they both

defeat and humiliate their evil enemies. Similar to the Turkish and Greek heroes, Bijan is deeply loved by Manijeh and it is she who sacrifices herself to save him.

Tepegoz and Cyclops:

The story of Tepegoz in Dede Korkut is somehow similar to the story of Cyclopes in book 9 of the Odyssey. Tepegoz and Cyclops both have a single eye in the middle of their forehead, no weapon can harm their bodies, and they both live in a cave on top a mountain. Their only weakness is their eyes—Tepegoz is blinded by a red hot spear and Cyclops is blinded by a wooden stake. The way the heroes escape the monsters is also similar. Basat slays and skins Tepegoz, wears his skin, and escapes. Odysseus blinds and escapes Cyclops by clinging to the underbellies of his sheep.

Penelope and Chichek:

Both of these characters are virtuous and are madly in love with their husbands. They both wait for a long time yearning to see their lovers and remain faithful to them.

Mother of Telemachus (Penelope) and mother of Bogac:

The kindness and compassion of Penelope toward her son, Telemachus, and her devotion and commitment for her husband, Odysseus, bears close resemblance to the kindness and devotion of the mother of *Bogac* (or *Boghach*) and the wife of *Dirse Khan* in Dede Korkut.

In Dede Korkut, Dirse Khan's forty warriors are jealous and resentful. They tell tales to Dirse Khan, falsely saying Bogac plans to commit patricide. Dirse Khan strikes first, and as the boy lies there bleeding, his mother comes upon him, heals his wounds, and tends to him. As the warriors attempt to kill Dirse Khan, Bogac's mother convinces him to rescue his father and Bogac succeeds in doing so by following his mother's guidance (Behzadi, 2002). Bogac's mother is wise, kind, foresighted, faithful, and truthful. She is not easily deceived by the enemy and acts as a good counselor to her husband.

Invincibility:

Heroes sometimes become invincible as a result of magic. "The idea of being invincible which is rooted in human beings' desire for immortality has a special place in epics. An instance is the Persian Esfandiyar (or Siegfried in German literature) who turns invincible by swimming in mysterious springs. However, he closed his eyes when swimming in invincibility pool and that becomes his only weakness" (Razmjoo, 2002).

In Greek epic, Thetis, a sea goddess, bathes her son Achilles in the waters of the Styx, thus rendering him invulnerable. However, the heel by which she held him was not touched by the waters and failed to be protected (Iliad, 1991). In the Trojan War, Achilles is shot in the heel and killed.

In the Book of Dede Korkut, the mother of Tepegoz gives him a ring and says: Son, arrows will not harm you; sword will not cut you (Behzadi, 2002). But like the Persian Esfandiyar, Tepegoz was vulnerable in the eyes and was slayed due to this weakness.

Conclusion:

Dede Korkut is the most famous epic of Azerbaijan and reflects the culture, ideas, beliefs, and customs of Turkish peoples. This book is comparable to the greatest epics of the world due to its literary beauty, wonderful imagery, and its portrayal of the mythological beliefs of the people of Azerbaijan.

In this book, grand battles are accompanied by episodes of love and passion. Love and devotion is the dominant theme in at least two stories of Dede Korkut. Perhaps the most beautiful story is "Bamsi Beyrek and Banu Chichek", which bears resemblance to "Bijan and Manijeh" in Ferdowsi's Shahnameh and some stories in Homer's Iliad and Odyssey. These common motifs and themes suggest that the epics of different nations have a common origin and influence each other.

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