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# The Book of Dede Korkut: the Villains within and out of Turks

*Dilek Tufekci Can, Metin Ekici*

## **Abstract**

*The Book of Dede Korkut*<sup>1</sup>, regarded as the *Iliad* of the Turks, is an epic of the Oghuz, one of the major branches of the Turkish Peoples, in other words Turkomans – a special name acquired after their conversion to Islam. *The Book of Dede Korkut* is not only one of the most significant literary documents but also one of the most important historical documents that lift the veil of secrecy on the Turks dating back to the Middle Ages. *The Book of Dede Korkut*, comprising a prologue and twelve epic stories, is narrated mostly in prose, but in some cases in verse. Although it seems as if *The Book of Dede Korkut* is arranged by independent stories, the literary elements and stylistic structure make the stories as dependent and unified in a sense. The epic story beginning in Central Asia between ninth and thirteenth centuries is narrated by a dramatis personae, in most cases Dede Korkut himself. He praises the Oghuz's nomadic way of life, their customs and values. However, the action-centred stories mainly based upon the themes of pursuit, captivity, escape and revenge, often revolve around two major villains; villains within society and villains out of society namely, *infidels*. Even though the principal enemies of the Oghuz during the eleventh century were Kipchak Turks who were practising a shamanistic type of religion common among many Turkish, Tatar and Mongol peoples, by the end of the eleventh century the enemies of Oghuz are no longer Kipchaks but the Georgians and other Christians settling along the Black Sea. These infidels fighting against Oghuz Turks had always been the real enemies of the Oghuz Turks. In this paper, the villain characters within society and villain characters as infidels and some supernatural villains will be searched in terms of their degree of villainy.

**Key Words:** The Book of Dede Korkut, Oghuz, narrator Dede Korkut, Islam, Moslem, infidel, epic, villain.

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## **1. The Introduction of the Book of Dede Korkut**

As known culture, being 'a part of a society which consists of material and moral values' spontaneously 'contains all kinds of information, relations, habits, customs, general attitudes, views and behaviour of a society'<sup>2</sup> rendering one society different from another. And, epics reporting

the culture's 'historical, literary, social and ethnological folkloric values,'<sup>3</sup> penetrate deeply into society and vice versa.

*BDK*, standing as an anonymous masterpiece of Turkish Literature and dating back to ninth century represents the superior structure of Turkish nation 'provid(ing) clues on the origin of social and cultural values in contemporary Turkish communities'<sup>4</sup> even though it contains some various 'archaic components.'<sup>5</sup> Additionally, it is not only the national literary heritage of Turkic people, but also the World's for UNESCO pronounced the year 1998 as *the year of Dede Korkut*.

Since *sine qua non* of creating an epic lies in great victories or defeats of the nations at the end of wars, it would not be objectionable to assert that *BDK* is recorded after having had glorious victories. Otherwise, convenient conditions for creating such an unusual epic would have never occurred. Although national epics, depending on historical realities, 'are not real history but it is also wrong to evaluate them as a story.'<sup>6</sup>

In *BDK* the intangible cultural heritage of Turkish nation such as its oral traditions, ethics, feasts, ritual practices, religious beliefs, art forms, ceremonies, handicrafts, eating and drinking habits and dressing styles are all presented. In other words, the epic story book is about 'the government and tribe organizations of the Oghuz, their friends and enemies, joys and sorrows, traditions, economic and social life styles.'<sup>7</sup> All of these cultural indicators 'date back into history and turn epic(s) into a special historical book and a national cultural encyclopaedia.'<sup>8</sup>

## 2. General Characteristics of *the Book of Dede Korkut*

Before identifying the general characteristic of *BDK*, it would be appropriate to define the messages that the epic stories convey. Firstly, there is only one *God*; God is the unique creator of the whole universe. Secondly, people's obedience to God is closely related to the moral values of the society. Thus, the *ethic*, which is based on religious sources and considered to be the traditions of a society, elevates the standards of the society. Thirdly, following in the *ancestors steps* is extremely emphasized in order to secure the sustainability of one's physical being and historical characteristics. Fourthly, *language*, a means of communication, is the assurance of the nation's sustainability and welfare. Fifthly, the *land*, where the spirits of the ancestors of the Turks roam, is emphasized throughout the epic stories.<sup>9</sup>

After having stated about the messages it conveys, we would arrive at the point of scrutinizing the characteristics of *BDK*. Kerime Üstünova delineates some common qualities of the twelve stories as: Dede Korkut names all the texts the same name: Oghuz-nâme; every story has the same introduction; the Khan of the Khans, Bayindir Khan is mentioned generally in the introduction part, he never takes any parts and always remains passive; in each texts in the introduction part, the heroes are subjected to much or less the

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same cruelty, their enemy is usually the infidels; they struggle with the infidels, infidels capture them, at the end they are saved by some of the Oghuz warriors; some of the characters have various extraordinary qualities which necessitate to be in the supernatural powers rather than ordinary human beings; for instance Tepegöz, the one-eyed monster which is undefeated by all the Oghuz beys is defeated by Basat himself; the heroes never get ill, they are either wounded or captured; the Oghuz beys are usually taken prisoner by the infidels, and after years a companion goes and rescues them; the infidels are always regarded as bad characters; on the contrary the daughters of the infidels are rather beautiful and the marriages of the Oghuz beys with those girls are highly acceptable; in each text, blood is shed, heads are cut off and great battles are broken out; the respect attributed to women are exalted; all the stories have happy endings, Dede Korkut makes good wishes.<sup>10</sup>

Since we can not assess the villains or their degree of villainy on its own, we shall have to scrutinise the term within the concept of social structure. At first glance there exist relatively multiple motives which prevent the villainous deeds if one pays heed to the social order. The effective motives attempting to prevent the villainous deeds of the villains are sequentially; rulers, Dede Korkut, religion, woman, unity and lastly, family.

Firstly, the rulers both Bayindir Khan and Kazan Bey have a crucial role on the unity of Oghuz. Even though 'Bayindir Khan, the ruler of the whole Oghuz appears none of the stories as a hero,'<sup>11</sup> he has a role of unifying the society. The second important man hierarchically is Kazan Bey on whom 'the whole Inner and Outer Oghuz are dependent... He is the greatest warrior of the Oghuz beys and he is the frightening enemy of the infidels.'<sup>12</sup> Secondly, the importance is attached to Dede Korkut himself, who knows the ethics of the community well, not given to the administrators or law-makers. Dede Korkut, being the mentor of the Oghuz and solving all the conflicts and dilemmas in the society, stands as a protective force against the villains both spiritually and mentally. Thirdly, religious doctrines and norms which are based on love, status and respect make possible to gather people. Owing to the rapid spread of Islam among the Turks, the Islamic doctrines themselves already facilitate standing against villains morally and collectively. Needless to say, at that time the Oghuz are Moslems and the era in which they are living is the period of the saints. On the one hand Moslems are practising their religious performances by taking ablution, putting their head to the ground, performing two rekats<sup>13</sup>, glorifying the name of Mohammed and praying for God, on the other hand, they do battle; they capture the villains namely *infidels*, demolish the churches, kill the monks and have the azan to be called. However, '...the struggles of the Oghuz are not for the sake of their religion. Although they call the enemy as *infidels*, their struggle with them is completely worldly and none of the heroes in the epics is the hero of religion.'<sup>14</sup>

Fourthly, the women as the bearers of the tradition are another motives preventing the villainous deeds of the infidels. In Arabian, Iranian, and Indian epics and myths and particularly in Greek epics, 'women are nothing other than a means of eroticism.'<sup>15</sup> But in *BDK*, the women, as the symbol of love, virtue, devotion, loyalty, courage and determination have the strength of gathering and saving the family members against any villainous deeds. Fifthly, the people in these communities have a national unity in their sorrows, joys and particularly in their moral values. Even though the communities are scattered through the land, they have common identity which is strengthened more than ever during war and peace. Sixthly, the notion of family guaranteeing the continuation of generations is exalted; the protection of the unity of family for survival and defence against the villains within the social system is regarded as one of the most significant issues.

Our intention is not to skirt around the issue of the characteristics of the epic but to describe the villainous deeds of the characters. The purpose of this study is limited to the aspects of villains. Since the images of villains in the social order discussed in this paper deliver certain messages, an attempt will be made to clarify both overt and covert implications.

### 3. The villains within the society

In order to give as clear a picture as possible, and avoid losing the thread of paper, it has been thought best to defer the elucidation of the act of villainy. We shall begin with the general analysis of the stories which have the villains within society.

*The Story of Bugach Khan, Son of Dirse Khan* revolves around Dirse Khan and his being allotted a black coloured tent at the annual feast; an image of humiliation and a symbol of man's lower status in the society for not having a child. The story goes on Dirse Khan's wife giving a birth; a son named Bugach meaning like a Bull. After a while, the warriors plot together: 'Let us turn his father against him, so that he may put the son to death, thus our esteem with the khan may continue and grow.'<sup>16</sup> They tell a lie Dirse Khan that his son attacks mighty Oghuz people, kidnaps a pretty girl, insults old men and so on. They warn him against the evil deeds of his son, 'such a son is not worthy of you. It is better not to have such a son. Why do you not put him to death?'<sup>17</sup> By means of the incitements of the warriors, the father attempts to kill his own son. Fortunately, with the arrival of the grey-horsed HIZIR,<sup>18</sup> Bugach is saved. Dirse Khan might be encoded as a villain or the victim of the society.

In *The Story of Bamsi Beyrek, Son of Kam Büre*, Beyrek and his warriors are attacked and taken prisoner by the infidels. Banu Chickek, the wife of Bamsi Beyrek, waits for sixteen years for her husband to come. Regrettably, he doesn't. Then her brother announces that if anyone who brings the news that Beyrek is dead, could marry his sister. Then Yaltajuk,

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the son of a man called Yalanji, who has already kept the shirt of Beyrek, dips it in blood and brings it to Bayindir Khan to prove that Beyrek is dead. And he acclaims that he is to marry Banu Chichek. On account of his presenting the false as real, Yaltajuk is considered as a villain character.

*The Story of Kan Turali, Son of Kanli Koja*, revolves around Kan Turali and his experience and marriage with a daughter of infidel king of Trebizond, named Seljen Hatun. Immediately after fulfilling the prerequisites for marrying the daughter of infidel king, the couple sets out. On the way of their destination, on account of Kan Turali's falling asleep, they are exposed to the attacks of the infidels. Thanks to Seljen Hatun's wisdom, alertness and courage, they are both saved. Later, Kan Turali decides to kill his wife for the fear that she would tell Oghuz that she has saved him from the infidels. He thinks he would be humiliated and dishonoured. Then he challenges and attempts to kill her. Indeed the villainous act of Kan Turali suggests that he is under the influence of social pressure. In some sense, it may be alleged that Kan Turali shortly becomes a villain because he is the victim of the society.

*The Story of the Revolt of Outer Oghuz against the Inner Oghuz and of the Death of Beyrek* reveals the rebellion of a jealous prince against his Khan and his defeat in battle immediately after the attainment of the loyal Oghuz warriors to their Khan's armed forces.<sup>19</sup> The story begins with a conflict; although Kazan is used to have his tents plundered at the gatherings of Inner and Outer Oghuz, on one of the occasions, the Outer Oghuz is not invited for the plunder. Immediately after, Uruz Koja declare his hostility to Kazan by stating that 'He (Kazan) forgets us when it comes to plunder, but remembers us when he needs help. Let it be known to him that from now on we are his enemies.'<sup>20</sup> Then all the Outer Oghuz beys declare their hostility against Kazan by taking an oath on the Koran; 'We are friends with your friend and foes to your foe.'<sup>21</sup> However, at the end of the story it is noticed that the outer Oghuz beys don't keep their promises and they turn out to be as villains. Thus, they can be regarded as the *villains within the villains*. But primary villain is indisputably Uruz Koja himself. In such a schema, a man like Uruz Koja becomes a villain if he betrays his kinsman, no matter how justified his betrayal.

In sum, the villains within the society suggest both divergence and conflict. As seen in the given examples the villains are under the pressure of society's traditions and its clichéd assumptions; the thought of what the *others* would think if some of the hidden things of darkness are brought to light or revealed is a fundamental issue that leads the villainous deeds. Moreover, incitement, conspiracy, jealousy, and presenting the false are the basic factors that the villains in the society adopt but the motivation for the betrayal is entirely private and personal. If the behavior of villains within the society is considered as villainy, it is judged not by an ideological criterion but by the conventional social norms.

#### 4. The villains out of society

The least explicated of all the villains in the epic stories are the infidel enemies of the Oghuz. They never come alive and never undergo significant change. In all the struggles the villains remain as static characters while the beys of Oghuz emerge as dynamic characters, undergoing some kind of change throughout the epic story. Even though the villains out of society, namely the infidels lead attacks, capture and imprison the Oghuz warriors and commit villainous deeds against their challengers, they 'lack humanity and serve more as dramatic agents than as dramatis personae.'<sup>22</sup>

The stories named *The Sack of the House of Salur Kazan* and *the Story of the Capture of Uruz Bey, Son of Kazan Bey* are about the separation of son and father; and after several heroic feats their reunion from the capture and imprisonment. What is common in these two stories, fathers save captive sons. In the latter one, Salur Kazan identifies the meaning of enemy to his son: 'Enemy is he whom we kill when we can, and if they are able, then they kill us.'<sup>23</sup> Yet, in the other two stories named *the Story of Yigenek, Son of Kazilik Koja* and *the Story of Salur Kazan's Captivity and His Rescue by His Son Uruz*, whereas the basic form of separation and reunion is almost the same, sons save fathers in this case. And in one of the other stories called *the Story of Emren, Son of Begil*, the son performs heroic feats in a battle to help his father in difficulty. But there is no capture and imprisonment. The other one named, *The Story of Seghrek, Son of Ushun Koja*, describes how a younger brother rescues an elder one who has been captured and imprisoned. Six of the twelve stories have the most basic form of pattern; separation and reunion after a chain of incidents plotted by the villains.

As seen the themes of the stories are much or less the same. Then it would be better to identify the villains in the epic stories according to linguistic devices, namely the epithets. The epithets, which are among the strongest devices of poetic speech, have a very significant role in describing the villains out of society. The greatest emphasis as far as the epithets is concerned lies *on the villains out of society* not *on the villains in the society*. Some typically permanent epithets such as, 'an infidel of filthy religion', 'an infidel in black clothes', and 'an infidel of savage religion' are emphasized throughout the epic stories. What is more, the use of such epithets represents the overt implications made by the narrator. Some of them are; 'the wicked infidel', 'infidel dog', 'irreligious and ignorant infidel', 'ill-bred and uncivilized infidel', 'infidels with the foul faith', 'the infidel men with the vile religion', 'the infidels with the savage religion', 'cursed heretic' and 'the infidel's ill-starred head'. Additionally, the expressions used for the infidels are all depicted in black color; 'seven thousand black infidels', 'black suited infidels', 'the infidels with the black religion', 'black-clad infidels' and

'black dressed infidels'. The infidels themselves or their costumes are all associated with the black color represents the evil and the wicked aspects of the human beings. All these epithets either overtly or covertly implied are uttered by either Dede Korkut or the narrator himself. It is obvious that a dynamic relationship occurs between the villain and hero, since one affects the other.

### 5. Villains as Supernatural powers

The villains having some supernatural powers play a crucial role in two of the epic stories; *the Story of Wild (Delü) Dumrul, Son of Duha Koja* and *the Story of Basat, Killer of the One-Eyed Giant*. The former one is about Delü Dumrul's challenge everyone among Oghuz and his experiences on life. Immediately after building a bridge across a dry river bed, Wild Dumrul collects thirty three *akchas*<sup>24</sup> from anyone who passes over it and beats those who refuse to pass over and charges forty *akchas*. Then, the death of one warrior enforces him to find out who the killer. Upon learning that the warrior is killed by God's command, he challenges Azrael, the Islamic Archangel of death. Nevertheless, God forgives Delü Dumrul in return for providing the life of someone else for his own. Neither his father, nor his mother, whom he trusted most, sacrifices their souls but his wife with two children. Delü Dumrul's pleading for forgiveness pleases Allah and orders Azrael to take the lives of Wild Dumrul's parents and grants the young couple 140 years of life. That the villain Delü Dumrul having the ability of communicating with the spiritual beings proves that he has supernatural powers.

*The Story of Basat, Killer of the One-Eyed Giant* begins by Uruz Koja's little son named Basat's falling from a horse during a fast flight and his rearing by a lioness. When Basat grows up he turns out a big trouble. Whatever Oghuz do to make Basat stay at home is futile. For, he attempts to go to the lioness's den in every chance; then Dede Korkut advises him not to go and reminds him of his not being an animal but a human being. The story goes on a shepherd's finding a huge glittering mass; the more he hits the mass the bigger it becomes. The mass is split in two and a creature one single eye on the top of his head and a human body pops out from inside. Uruz Koja adopts the child. From now on, the problems of one-eyed creature named Tepegöz, such as eating the nose and the ears of his playmates, grows bigger and bigger. Even though Uruz Koja warns him many times, he resists correction. By the same token, he sends him away. Then Tepegöz climbs up a mountain where he settles; he becomes a bandit, he robs and kills people. Even though Oghuz have tried many times to kill the creature, they are unable to do so because the spears do not pierce him. Then for the sake of avenging the death of his brother and rescuing the tribe of Oghuz, Basat decides to confront his giant stepbrother. The story continues with further

confrontations of the hero and the villain. After many attempts, Basat succeeds in killing Tepegöz by pushing the heated skewer into his eye. The story of Basat suggests not only 'the primal struggles between individual and group, father and son, brother and brother, as the good and the evil sides of the self,'<sup>25</sup> but also the struggle of the individual within the social system. It is obvious that Tepegöz's own act of violence is performed against his own family and his people. Although adopted, nourished and reared by Uruz Koja, Tepegöz betrays first his stepfather, and his stepbrother and then his society.

## 6. Conclusion

From this brief study of the types of villains and their conduct, we may arrive at some generalizations. The villainous deeds of the characters are classified according to two criteria: social and ideological. The social criterion is valid for the villains within society whereas the ideological one is applicable for the villains out of society. With regard to the social criterion, the villains are those who disguisedly devise a plan, those who sabotage the social order, and those who are under the pressure of social norms, those who exploit the heroes and those who incite people for their own benefits. That is that, the villains are portrayed in the social code of conduct. The ideological criterion is another criterion applied to the villains out of society. The villains out of society are depicted not only as cruel oppressors but also as tricksters. The villainous deeds occur naturally when the villains out of society attacks to the members of Oghuz tribes. Additionally the villains as supernatural powers conduct villainy. The significance of all these is that these considerations help to explain the nature of the villains within the social system either genuinely or fantastically. We must acknowledge that *BDK* bearing the marks of political and social history of Turkish people still sheds light upon the conventional ethics of the Turkish society.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Until 1950, the only known manuscript of *the Book of Dede Korkut*, the collection of twelve tales from the heroic age of the Oghuz Turks, was the one in the Royal Library of Dresden. In 1950, Ettore Rossi announced his discovery, in the Vatican MS Turco 102, of a text of six of the twelve stories, and he subsequently published a facsimile of the new text, with introduction, translation into Italian of all twelve stories, notes, and glossary: *II Kitab-i Dede Qorqut* (Vatican City, 1952).

<sup>2</sup> M Turhan, *Kültür Değişmeleri* (Cultural Changes) 1000 Temel Eser, Istanbul, 1969, p. 56.

<sup>3</sup> S Tural, *Sensibility Flowing from History to Epic*, Atatürk Culture Center Publications, Ankara, 1999, p.39.

- <sup>4</sup> Ş. Ruhi, 'The Bone Motif and the Lambs in the Turkish Folktale: The Reed Door', *Asian Folklore Studies*, v. 59, 2000. p.68.
- <sup>5</sup> S Tural, 'Dr. Nerimanoğlu's Book and the Importance of the Epics of Korkut Ata in Turkish Culture', in *The Poetics of 'the Book of Dede Korkut'*, K V Nerimanoğlu, Atatürk Culture Center Publications, Ankara, 1998, p. 4
- <sup>6</sup> S Tural, *Sensibility Flowing from History to Epic*, p. 60.
- <sup>7</sup> M Ekici, 'Dede Korkut Kitabında Kadın Tipleri'. *Uluslararası Dede Korkut Bilgi Şöleni Bildirileri*. Atatürk Kültür Merkezi Yayınları, Ankara, 2000, p. 123.
- <sup>8</sup> Tural, *Sensibility Flowing from History to Epic*, pp. 20-21.
- <sup>9</sup> Tural, *Sensibility Flowing from History to Epic*, pp. 111-112.
- <sup>10</sup> K Üstünova. 'Common Qualities in Stories that Make up Dede Korkut Epic', *Turkish Studies, International Periodical For the Languages, Literature and History of Turkish or Turkic*, V 3, No 1, Winter, 2008, pp. 139-143.
- <sup>11</sup> M Ergin, *Dede Korkut Kitabı 1. Introduction, Texts and Facsimili*, Turk Dil Kurumu Publication, No: 169, Ankara, 1997, p. 23.
- <sup>12</sup> *ibid.*, p. 23.
- <sup>13</sup> A *Rekat* is made up of two series of ritualistic body gestures and prayers.
- <sup>14</sup> Ergin, *op.cit.*, p. 27.
- <sup>15</sup> Tural, *op. cit.*, p. 100.
- <sup>16</sup> F Sümer, A E Uysal, W S Walker, (translated and edited by) *The Book of Dede Korkut. A Turkish Epic*, University of Texas Press, USA, 1991, p. 15.
- <sup>17</sup> *ibid.*, p. 13.
- <sup>18</sup> Hızır, the most popular Moslem saint, is the last minute rescuer from every kind of disasters. When the hope is lost, he has the power of extricating the unfortunate one from any kind of danger.
- <sup>19</sup> M E Meeker, 'The Dede Korkut Ethic'. *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, vol. 24, No. 3, August 1992, pp.399- 401. <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/164622> viewed on 05 June 2009>.
- <sup>20</sup> Sümer, *op.cit.*, p. 169.
- <sup>21</sup> *ibid.*, p. 170.
- <sup>22</sup> Sümer, *op. cit.*, introduction part. p. XVIII.
- <sup>23</sup> *ibid.*, p. 73.
- <sup>24</sup> Akcha, was the name of a silver coin in circulation during the Seljuk and Otoman periods.
- <sup>25</sup> J Renard, *Islam and the Heroic Image: Themes in Literature and the Visual Arts*, Mercer University Press, USA, 1999, p. 125.

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\***Dilek Tufekci Can**, PhD candidate & lecturer, Balıkesir University, Department of Foreign Languages, [tufekci@balikesir.edu.tr](mailto:tufekci@balikesir.edu.tr).

\***Metin Ekici**, Prof. Dr. Ege University, The Institute of Turkic World Studies, the department of Turkish World Literature, [mekici@yahoo.com](mailto:mekici@yahoo.com).

