



FULL LENGTH ARTICLE

Common Mythological Characters in World's Epic Masterpieces: DedeKorkut, Shahnameh, and Iliad and Odyssey

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ABSTRACT

The Book of DedeKorkut is a literary masterpiece of Oghuz Turks and one of the greatest epics of all time. This literary work is laden with sublime emotions and values. This epic reflects, like a full-length mirror, the culture, customs, and traditions of the Turkmens. In terms of aestheticism, literariness, grand sceneries, and mythological content, this book is comparable with the most notable epics of the world, including Ferdowsi's Shahnameh and Homer's Iliad and Odyssey. There are striking similarities between these epics in spite of apparent differences: similar destiny of the heroes (e.g. Siavash, Bellerophon and, Bogac), invincibility (Tepegöz, Achilles, and Esfandiyar), physical similarity of Tepegöz and Cyclops, and training of characters such as Zal, Oedipus, Paris, and Basat by animals. These similarities suggest the common origin and the interaction between the epics in question. In this paper, we introduce DedeKorkut and provide insights into some common characters in these epics.

Keywords: Epic, DedeKorkut, Iliad, Odyssey, Shahnameh, mythology

INTRODUCTION

A review of the literary masterpieces of the world indicates, despite apparent differences, there are many similarities that are rooted in the collective consciousness behind these works and the interaction between peoples of different nations. There have been common mythological beliefs among ancient humans that still manifest themselves in their psyche (thoughts and dreams) and artifacts (art and literature) (Shamisa, 2002). As a result, the literary masterpieces of the world, including epics, often share common motifs, symbols, and mythological foundations. In this paper, we introduce the Book of DedeKorkut and at the same time compare it to Persian and Greek epics.

DedeKorkut

The Book of DedeKorkut is one of the greatest literature works of Azerbaijan and one of the literary masterpieces of the world. The story is laden with sublime morals and values of Oghuz Turks and represent their ideas, customs, and traditions.

This epic consists of a prologue and twelve stories. The stories are 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 notions as nationalism, hospitality, kindness, dignity of women, confidence, and valor (Mohammadinah, 2009). The prose is simple, musical, and rhymed, and the ballads include 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 at 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 DedeKorkut, 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 DedeKorkut 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, and mythological beliefs.

DedeKorkut has had a significant impact on the narrative tradition of Azerbaijan and is considered the origin of epic and lyrical stories in this region. SamadBehrangi 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. DedeKorkut 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, while still being characteristic of epics. From aesthetic and literary perspectives, the Book of DedeKorkut 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.

Similarity of Kings and Heroes

Bogac, Bellerophon, and Siavash

Siavash, Bellerophon, and Bogac all face a similar destiny. The Book of DedeKorkut tells the story of a man and a woman who could not have a child, but due to their kindness and prayers, the mother gives birth to a boy whom they name Bogac. Bogac grows up to be a brave warrior who rises contempt in the hearts of his father's soldiers. Subsequently, he is accused of having an affair with his own mother. His father, ignorant of the trick that was being played on them, shoots Bogac with an arrow while he was hunting in the woods. The arrow lands between his shoulders and Bogac falls from his horse bleeding. He is then saved by his mother. Later, Bogac's father also becomes the victim of enemies' tricks and is imprisoned by them. But Bogac heroically goes on a rampage and rescues his father (Behzadi, 2002).

In the epics of Ferdowsi and Homer, Siavash and Bellerophon are handsome heroes who are falsely accused and are forced by kings to put their honesty to the test. Both perform the tests successfully and prove their innocence.

In Shahnameh, Sudabeh is in love with her stepson, Prince Siavash, and tries to seduce him. Siavash resists her sensual advances. Left with a scar, Sudabeh seeks vengeance by provoking her husband against him. Siavash is forced to prove his innocence by riding through a colossal mountain of fire. He succeeds, but due to growing conflicts he chooses self-exile.

Similarly in Iliad, Antea, the wife of Proetus, is in love with Bellerophon. When she fails to seduce him, she tells her husband that Bellerophon had tried to rape her. Proetus cannot kill Bellerophon himself, as he was his guest, and decides to send Bellerophon to his father-in-law, the king in Lycia, with a note telling

the Lycian king to kill the bearer of the note. Once again, hospitality prevented the king of Lycia from killing his guest. Instead, the king sent Bellerophon on successive quests to kill the Chimera (a monstrous fire-breathing creature composed of parts of a lion, a goat, and a snake), the Solymi, and the Amazons. Bellerophon succeeds in these tasks, and the king of Lycia gives him a daughter as wife (Homer, 1991a). However, Bellerophon's hubris grows stronger after these victories. Bellerophon feels that he deserves to fly to Mount Olympus, the realm of the gods. Angered by this presumption, Zeus drops Bellerophon to the Earth and kills him (Grimal, 1992).

The story of the Persian prince ends with his truce with Esfandiyar and his return to the land of Turan. Siavash marries the daughter of Afrasiab, the king of Turan. One day he envisages his murder at the hands of Afrasiab, the chaos in Iran and Turan, and war and nemesis between the warriors of the two lands. Later he dreams of a fiery river flowing toward him, while being attacked by an army led by Afrasiab. He wakes and shares his dream with his wife, Farangis. She says that Garsivaz, the brother of Afrasiab, will be caught in this fire. In a fortnight, a messenger arrives with a message from Garsivaz, challenging Siavash to a battle. Siavash gets killed and beheaded, while she is imprisoned and later saved by Piran, one of Afrasiab's warriors. She gives birth to Kai Khosrow who grows up to become the king of Persia and seeks vengeance from Afrasiab and the Turanian army. (Ferdowsi, 1991).

Invincible Heroes

Tepegoz, Achilles, and Esfandiyar

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 a mysterious spring. However, he closed his eyes when swimming in invincibility pool and that becomes his only weakness" (Razmjoo, 2002).

In the 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 (Homer, 1991a). In the Trojan War, Achilles is shot in the heel and killed.

In the Book of DedeKorkut, 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.

Tepegoz and Cyclops

The story of Tepegoz in DedeKorkut is somehow similar to the story of Cyclops 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 eye—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.

Hector and Esfandiyar

Esfandiyar can be compared to Hector, the Trojan prince. Esfandiyar knows well that Vishtaspa is sending him on a mission of death, but he rushes to his demise to prevent disgrace and to follow his father's orders. His mother, Katayun, grieves in his death just like Hector's mother, Hecuba. Like Hecuba, Katayun tried to prevent his son from embarking on this ill-fated mission, but his fate was unavoidable. Even the bereavements following Esfandiyar's death are reminiscent of the cries of sorrow after the death of Hector.

In his duel with Achilles, Hector was wearing Patroclus's armor which was made by Hephaestus and no weapon could get through it. Achilles kills Hector by stabbing him through the neck which was not covered by the armor (Homer, 1991a). Esfandiyar was also invincible and no weapon could harm. His only weakness was his eyes, and Rustam, with the help of Simurgh, stabs him through the eye and kills him.

Also in both these epics there are imaginary creatures helping the victorious heroes. Chiron, a centaur, gave Agamemnon's father a spear carved out of cut from an ash on the summit of Mount Pelion to kill the strongest of warriors (Homer, 1991a), and Simurgh, a mystical bird, guided Rustam in finding tamarisk wood for killing Esfandiyar (Ferdowsi, 1991).

Odysseus, Beyrek, and Bijan

Calypso, the Greek goddess, is in love with 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. Zeus orders Hermes to tell Calypso to release Odysseus. This infuriates Calypso and she calls them cruel, but she finally concedes and lets Odysseus go free (Homer, 1991b).

In the Book of DedeKorkut, BamsiBeyrek, in accordance with the Oghuz tradition, is betrothed to his niece Chichekin the cradle. Years later, Beyrek was 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 (Chichek) being tended to by several maids. The beautiful girl in the tent introduces herself as one of Chichek's companions and challenges Bamsi Beyrek to a competition. They compete in equestrianism, shooting, and wrestling, and as Chichek 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. As they get ready for the wedding ceremony, enemies attack them and take Beyrek prisoner. Banu Chichek'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 Chichek. 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 Chichek away with him.

Both Odysseus and Beyrek spend several years away from their beloved. They both have chaste and virtuous wives who are counting the hours until they meet their husband. Both heroes return to their land in disguise—Odysseus as a vagrant and Beyrek as a minstrel. They both participate in a shooting match before they can join their wives and are victorious. Also Bamsi Beyrek and Odysseus overcome their wives' suitors.

Similarly in Shahnameh, Bijan spends years away from his homeland and is imprisoned in a well by Afrasiab. Manijeh, the daughter of Afrasiab, falls in love with the Persian prince. Rustam disguises himself as a merchant, travels to Turan, saves Bijan with the help of Manijeh, and brings him back to Iran.

Achilles and Rustam

Rustam is the strongest of all heroes in Shahnameh. He defeats all warriors and armies and is always protecting Iran and its kings from enemies. Even Kai Kavus, the greatest king of Iran, bows before him in humbleness. Achilles, too, is the strongest warrior in Iliad. His war cry frightens victorious Trojans, he can defeat an army on his own, and many a great warrior, including Hector, are killed by his sword.

Achilles' mother prophesies that he will not live long if he kills Hector (Homer, 1991a). But to avenge his beloved friend, Patroclus, he has no choice but to kill Hector. Similarly, Rustam is informed by Simurgh that he will have an ominous fate if he kills Esfandiyar (Ferdowsi, 1991).

Both heroes fight the bravest and strongest of warriors, are guided by mythical creatures, and manage to win over their foes. Peleus, Achilles' father, entrusts him to Chiron the Centaur, on Mount Pelion, to be reared (Homer, 1991a). Likewise, Rustam is trained and helped by Simurgh.

Of course Rustam and Achilles diverge in one major respect: a conflict arises between Achilles and Agamemnon when Agamemnon tries to take away one of Achilles' war prizes, queen Briseis. Consequently, Achilles prays that Zeus will punish the Achaeans. Rustam, on the other hand, never turns his back on his own compatriots. In this respect, Achilles is more similar to Esfandiyar. They both seek power and they are both protected by supernatural forces. In the Greek epic, Thetis, a sea goddess, bathes her son Achilles in the waters of the Styx, thus rendering him invulnerable (Homer, 1991a), and in Shahnameh Zoroaster gave Esfandiyar an armor from heaven that made him invincible.

Hector and Rustam

Hector, the other Trojan hero, can be compared to Rustam. He is aware that the gods favor the fall of Troy and he is doomed to defeat, but he resists these forces. He also rebukes his cowardly and promiscuous brother Paris, and hopelessly sacrifices himself and becomes a martyr to loyalties.

Likewise, Rustam knows that his battle with Esfandiyar is ill-starred. Like Hector, he stands against supernatural forces, and though he considers his defeat inevitable, he prefers to die honorably than to be manipulated by Vishtaspa (Goshtasp).

In addition, there is another minor but interesting similarity between these heroes. Both Hector and Rustam are so strong as to wield a huge stone and throw it. Rustam rescues Bijan by removing a huge stone that covered the well in which he was imprisoned and threw it miles away (Ferdowsi, 1991). In Iliad, Hector smashes open a gate with a large stone and clears the gate: "And Hector grasped and bore a stone that lay before the gate, thick at the base but sharp at the point; not easily might two men, the mightiest of the folk, have upheaved it from the ground upon a wain-men, such as mortals now are—yet lightly did he wield it even alone" (Homer, 1991a).

Zal, Oedipus, Paris, and Basat

Zal, the legendary Persian warrior, is born with white hair, and his parents leave him upon a mountain because of this defect. Simurgh, the mythical bird, finds the child and raises him. Years later, Zal's father, Sam, dreams of an Indian messenger bringing news about the health of his son. He then travels to the mountain, where he is seen by Simurgh and the devoted bird picks up Zal and brings him to his father (Ferdowsi, 1991).

This myth is somehow similar to the story of Oedipus. In the Greek epic, Delphi, an oracle of Apollo, informs Laius, the king of Thebes, that any son born to Laius will kill him. When Jocasta gives birth to a son, Laius has his ankles pierced and tethered and orders a servant to abandon him on a mountain. The servant, out of sympathy, passes the kid on to a shepherd. One day Polybus and Merope, the king and queen of Corinth, are passing in that direction when they hear the cries of the baby and adopt the kid as they have no children (Kazazi, 1988).

Likewise, just before Paris is born, his mother dreams of giving birth to a torch. An oracle interprets it as the downfall of Troy and prophesies that the child will be the ruin of his homeland. His father gives Paris to his chief herdsman, asking him to take the child away and kill him. The herdsman cannot kill the child himself, so he leaves him on Mount Ida. There, Paris is suckled by a she-bear. The herdsman returns after a few days, finding the infant alive to his surprise. He adopts and rears Paris until he and his father are reunited (Mokhtari, 1990).

In the Book of Dede Korkut, Basat, the infant child of an Oghuz noble, is separated from his family by an enemy attack and is raised by a lioness. The story begins when the Oghuz are attacked by enemies while resting in their encampment. In the darkness of the night they brake and scatter. As they flee, the baby son of Uruzkoja falls. A lioness finds him and rears him. Time passes, and the Oghuz come back and settle in their old home. One day the horse-drover of Oghuz Khan brings him news of his son living with lions. The nobles mount their horses and ride to the lair of the lioness. They drive her off and seize the boy. Uruz takes him to his tent. They hold a celebration, but the boy goes back to the lion's lair. Again they seize him and bring him back. Dede Korkut comes and says, "My boy, you are a human being; do not consort with wild beasts ..." (Seyyed-Salamat, 1997).

CONCLUSION

All the literary masterpieces of the world share similarities despite apparent differences, which originate from the collective consciousness behind these works and the interaction between peoples of different nations. Dede Korkut is one of the greatest literary works of Azerbaijan and the world, and is comparable to the greatest epics, including Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh* and Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*.

Many striking similarities were observed in these epics, including the similar destiny of the heroes (e.g. Siavash, Bellerophon and, Bogac), invincibility (Tepegoz, Achilles, and Esfandiyar), physical similarity of Tepegoz and Cyclops, and training of characters such as Zal, Oedipus, Paris, and Basat by animals. These similarities support the notion that there are universal human truths based on the literary archetypes that appear throughout literatures from all times and places

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