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KARAKALPAK KIZI: AN ANALYSIS OF KARAKALPAK CULTURE

Abstract

An autonomous country of Karakalpakstan is located on the territory of Uzbekistan and has its own specific culture and lifestyle. Although information about this small country is rare, some of this information bears the signs of profound dependence on ideology. Thus, a novel *Karakalpak Kızı* (1963) (*Karakalpak's Daughter*) by Karakalpak writer Tolepbergen Kaipbergenov is heavily influenced by the fundamental ideology of the country at that time. The novel depicts Karakalpaks' life on the brink of Bolshevik revolutionary change on the wide territory of Central Asia. However, this life in the novel does not reflect Karakalpak traditions accurately. This study analyses the main differences between Karakalpak culture and Kaipbergenov's novel *Karakalpak Kızı*. The analysis of the novel is focused on such elements like women's role in Karakalpak society and Karakalpak folk culture.

Keywords: Karakalpakstan, Tolepbergen Kaipbergenov, *Karakalpak Kızı*, Karakalpak culture

KARAKALPAK KIZI: KARAKALPAK KÜLTÜRÜNÜN ANALİZİ

Özet

Özbekistan içinde özerk bir yönetim ile yer alan Karakalpak Muhtar Cumhuriyetinin kendine has kültürü ve hayat biçimi vardır. Bu küçük ülke hakkında bilgi çok az olmasına rağmen, varolan bilgilerin de ideolojiden dolayı farklı bir biçimde oluşturulduğu açıktır. Karakalpak yazar Tolepbergen Kaipbergenov'un *Karakalpak Kızı* (1963) adlı romanı ülkenin o zamanki ideolojik bakışıyla şekillenmiştir. Çalışmamızda ilgili roman ile var olan kültürü karşılaştırdık. Bu romanda Bolşevik İhtilali döneminde Karakalpakların Orta Asya

bozkırlarındaki hayatı anlatılmaktadır. Fakat romanda anlatılan olaylarda Karakalpaklara ait gelenek ve kültür tam olarak yansıtılmamıştır. Bu çalışmada Karakalpak kültürü ve Kaipbergenov'un *Karakalpak Kızı* adlı romanı arasındaki farklılıklar incelenmektedir. Bu çalışmada, Karakalpak toplumundan gelen örneklere bakılarak kadınların rolü ve Karakalpak halk kültürü incelenmiştir.

AnahtarKelimeler: Karakalpakistan, Tolepbergen Kaipbergenov, *Karakalpak Kızı*, Karakalpak kültürü

Introduction

Karakalpak people living on the territory of autonomous Karakalpakstan in Uzbekistan belong to the Turkic world of the Central Asia. Along with the numerous peoples occupying the territory of the Central Asia, Karakalpaks have their own specific culture with its varying colours and attributes. However, due to the fact that Karakalpakstan is tucked away in Uzbekistan, there is rarity of information about it. Only after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the analysis of peoples like Karakalpaks has become possible and available. This study dwells upon the work of Karakalpak author TolepbergenKaipbergenov, *Karakalpak Kızı*. It observes the Karakalpak culture through the lens of this novel and juxtaposes this observation with the analyses of Karakalpak folk culture as seen in the scientific materials. The study comes to a conclusion that Kaipbergenov's novel falls short of depiction of real Karakalpak culture as it used to be experienced by people. In other words, this study tries to show that what Kaipbergenov's novel does is to comply with the current ideological situation.

Karakalpak Kızı is a novel about Cumagül, a young Karakalpak girl whose strife with patriarchal norms is, nevertheless, worth attention. Born into a rude Karakalpak patriarchal society where women stand only for serving the men, Cumagül witnesses all the difficulties that her mother, Sanem goes through at the hands of her husband. When Cumagül is a small girl, her father Zaripbay throws them away as he wants to get a new wife. Struggling to find a new place to live, Sanem and Cumagül start begging for food and eventually settle down in a small village. After a while, Turumbet, a young man from Mangit, another small village, comes to marry Cumagül. Yet, Cumagül's fate is not different from that of her mother. She undergoes the same treatment from her husband who also throws Cumagül and her new born baby girl away into the frost. Cumagül and her baby are rescued by neighbours who turn to be the supporters of the Soviet regime in the country. This becomes a turning point for Cumagül as she enters the circles of revolutionaries and becomes an independent and strong woman who struggles to spread the ideas of Leninism and Soviet ideology.

If viewed from a feminist point of view, Cumagül's life is full of examples and honour. Yet, because the novel is set in a specific environment with a specific cultural background, it is expected that a reader can feel the cultural atmosphere between the lines. Kaipbergenov has lost this chance to present his culture and traditions in this way as the novel is replete with the harsh Islamic ideology with almost no space for the territorial customs. This study is going to bring forth the difference between Karakalpak culture in the Kaipbergenov's novel and Karakalpak customs in reality in terms of Karakalpak women's condition in their society and Karakalpak people's lifestyle in general.

The Role of Karakalpak Women in Society

As it is seen in the novel, Karakalpak women lack any kind of importance in their society. Men see them as their objects and do not allow them any freedom. The beginning of the novel symbolises this anger and aggression towards women as the novel starts with physical aggression directed towards Sanem. Men can easily get rid of women any time they want. For example, when Zaripbay forces his wife and his daughter to leave his house, he does not feel sorry: “Damn you, woman! Are you going to get out, or do you want me to throw you away?”¹ (Kaipbergenov 2006: 9) And the reason for Zaripbay’s such behaviour is his desire to get a new wife, which is quite an acceptable act in this society. Sanem’s inability to come against this aggression is intensified by the fact that there is nobody in their village to protect them. Zaripbay’s physical harassment leaves Sanem immovable and sick for months. Zaripbay firstly beats Sanem until she loses her senses and then throws her away out of his house. Sanem’s beaten image is observed through Cumagül’s focalisation: “Sanem was lying close to the door. The blood was running from her mouth” (Kaipbergenov 2006: 10). Cumagül, a twelve-year-old little girl has to give first aid to her mother as there is nobody to help her: “Cumagül tore the lower part of her silk skirt, wiped out the blood from her mother’s face and clumsily wrapped her head” (Kaipbergenov 2006: 10).

The same image of patriarchal aggression is seen when Cumagül is thrown away by her husband. The reason for this action is the same as it was with Sanem; Cumagül’s husband Turumbet wants a new wife and a new life. The only difference is the fact that Cumagül’s daughter is a new born baby. Turumbet shouts: “Come on, pack up! Why don’t you move? Get out!” (Kaipbergenov 2006: 174-175) Turumbet’s behaviour bears the same identification of aggression and violence as he also beats Cumagül until he tears a piece of her nose away: “Turumbet has lost himself. He could not hear anything anymore. When he saw a sticky red piece of bloody flesh on his hands, he stopped abruptly. . . . It was impossible to see his wife’s face because of the blood” (Kaipbergenov 2006: 151). Eventually, Cumagül is out of her house with a small baby in her hands and she has nowhere to go to: “Cumagül, who leaves herself to the horror of freezing February wind says to herself: ‘This is the end of family happiness’” (Kaipbergenov 2006: 175).

Women in the novel experience the sense of slavery and are treated like objects. They should obey strict rules of patriarchy. For example, when Cumagül is first seen in the novel together with her father the latter shouts at her: “How dare you come out without a scarf in front of me?” (Kaipbergenov 2006: 11) Women are not allowed to start a conversation with a man. When Cumagül marries and travels to Turumbet’s village with one of the bridegroom’s friends, they cannot initiate a conversation and had to travel in silence for a long time (Kaipbergenov 2006: 78). Cumagül cannot even ask a question to her husband. For instance, she cannot ask what he has been doing recently outside the house (Kaipbergenov 2006: 100). Indeed, one of the striking features of the novel is loneliness of these female characters. Even during their most horrible conditions when they encounter death at the hands of their husbands, there is nobody to help them or support them. Cumagül’s best friend Bibigül marries a rich man from the same village where Cumagül lives with her husband. This is what Cumagül thinks about her inability to see her friend: “It is sorrowful not to be able to see Bibigül! They do not allow. Maybe it is

¹ All the translation from Turkish into English is done by the author. Kaipbergenov’s novel that has been used in this study is the Turkish translation by Kayhan Yükseler.

the same for Bibigül” (Kaipbergenov 2006: 100). When they eventually meet by chance, Bibigül says: “I live here as a slave in a cage” (Kaipbergenov 2006: 163). Women do not have freedom of choice; they are not free to communicate with the others. What is more, no matter whose wives women are, men are free to treat them as they want. When Bibigül serves her husband’s friends, one of the men “[s]tares at her with his eyes shining with lust” (Kaipbergenov 2006: 165). Bibigül’s husband’s reaction to such behaviour is ignored by the narrator. Moreover, it is forbidden for a woman to sing in front of everybody or have a role on the stage. When Cumagül decides to take a part in a play, she goes through harsh humiliation from the audience (Kaipbergenov 2006: 395) although everything takes place after the Soviet ideology establishes its power. Yet, despite this humiliation on stage, Cumagül comprehends the fact that she did it just to “make the others accept her identity as it is” (Kaipbergenov 2006: 418). It was her first step in seeing herself as an independent and free individual.

What should be underlined here is the idea that for Karakalpak people, if their pre-Islamic culture is taken into consideration, women have always played an important role in their lifestyle. This is not shown in the novel. Women’s power and Karakalpaks’ acceptance of it can be traced back to the Karakalpak belief in the power and fertility of goddesses, especially the goddess of Anahita. Anahita is one of the most popular goddesses that are seen in Avesta, the collection of religious texts of Zoroastrianism². As Mambetullayev states, terracotta female statuettes found in Toprak-Kala, which is located on the territory of Karakalpakstan, are the symbols of Anahita (1990: 77). Similar statuettes are found in another region of Karakalpakstan, Janbas-Kala. Regarding these female statuettes Mambetullayev adds that female strength is the initiation of everything (1990: 80). Such findings show that women played an important role in Karakalpak culture. Women, seen as the beginning of life, fertility, and bounty, could not have been accepted as low as ones whom it is very easy to throw away from the house. Another evidence for women’s importance can be seen in Karakalpaks’ treatment of their houses, yurt. Yurt is a kind of tent in which Karakalpaks live. Tleubergenova states that yurt is accepted as the centre of existence for Karakalpaks; everything else rotates around yurt (1995: 101). In other words, family and the idea of home – where women are definitely included – are central to the conceptualisation of life in Karakalpak culture. In Karakalpak epic *Kırk-Kız*, yurt is seen as an ancient social institution (Tleubergenova 1995: 107), which shows the significance of family for Karakalpak society.

Karakalpak epic *Kırk-Kız* is itself a clear exemplification of the idea of female significance in Karakalpak culture. The epic is about a group of girls who fight against the enemies in order to establish peace and unity in the country. Regarded as the only epic about female heroes in the Turkic world, *Kırk-Kız* is a very popular piece of literary work in Karakalpak society. In his monumental study of the epic, Maksetov states that *Kırk-Kız* embraces the real facts from the history of the Karakalpaks (1962: 19). It means that women, as well as men, took part in the organisation of the Karakalpak society on the basis of nationalism, peace, and unity. As Maksetov adds, although it can be said that Karakalpak women, similar to the women of all eastern nations, were under the pressure of patriarchal ideology, they had enough power and freedom to participate in the issues regarding their nations and countries (1962: 20). The epic describes the events taking place between the 13th and the 17th century, when general social structures were much more complicated with reference to the female world.

²One of the beliefs that was spread on the territory of the Central Asia.

However, the epic depicts women's freedom to choose their lifestyles. If, however, Kaipbergenov's novel, which describes the events taking place at the beginning of the 20th century, is taken into consideration in general terms, the female condition is even worse. That is why it seems that the novel does not reflect the real condition of Karakalpak society.

However, the novel provides some details through which it is possible to believe that women indeed have a role in Karakalpak society. For example, in the novel, there is well known Ayshe, who is often invited to wedding ceremonies to read her satiric poems and whose influence on the powerful men in the village is quite obvious (Kaipbergenov 2006: 41). Next, there is widely respected Anar-analik, an old, authoritative and wise woman to whom everybody comes to take advice (Kaipbergenov 2006: 63). The figures of these strong women in Kaipbergenov's novel resemble the strong Karakalpak woman Jupar-kempir, whose existence is recorded by the leading historian of the Karakalpak peoples Tolstova. In Tolstova's book, it is said that Jupar-kempir was a strong woman who could influence even the khan and who ruled her village (1963: 187). Seemingly, what Kaipbergenov has in his novel about Ayshe and Anar-analik is not without evidence from the real history of Karakalpaks. Yet, the figures of these women are not enough to resurrect Karakalpak women in the novel.

Karakalpak Folk Culture

As it was said above, Kaipbergenov's novel makes the reader feel the sense of abandonment and loneliness as there is nobody to support one during the times of difficulties. For example when Sanem was beaten by her husband nobody protected her. Only after a while, some neighbours come but with no solution: "Neighbours, looking around with frightened eyes, started to fill the front of the house. They crouched down, closed their mouths with their scarves, and sighed with sorrow" (Kaipbergenov 2006: 11). Obviously, the communal gatherings of Karakalpaks in this novel do not give birth to any kind of support or help. What is more, these women stop talking and murmuring when they see Zaripbay (Kaipbergenov 2006: 11). Another example of forlorn gatherings of Karakalpak society is seen when Cumagül marries. The house is full of people, but there is no cohesion. Cumagül feels lonely, forgotten, and isolated; she thinks that it is "[w]eird" (Kaipbergenov 2006: 87). When the figure of a close relative appears in the novel in the role of Sanem's brother, the readers' hopes seem to flourish. Yet, once more, hopes for Sanem's protection are exploded since Sanem's brother Niyaz has quite egoistic tendencies. When he talks to Cumagül, he offers her to murder Sanem and take money from Zaripbay for revenge, which is one of the Karakalpak traditions (Kaipbergenov 2006: 21).

Yet, if Karakalpak culture is taken into consideration as it is analysed in historical materials, it is possible to see that Karakalpak people are closely united and have a strong sense of community. The idea of a community life is obvious in Karakalpaks' way of dividing themselves into groups which are called "ru" the members of which are seen as close relatives; the members of these groups cannot marry each other because they live in one village and regard each other as members of the same family. According to the information provided by Kamalov, Karakalpaks have fourteen great groups and each group is roughly divided into smaller family units (2001: 23). These units often come together, especially during weddings and holidays. Even in the novel, Kaipbergenov could not escape from the stories where people often come together to fight against inconsistencies and persecution by the khans. For example, one of the wise women in the novel, Ayshe, often talks to the young describing different

important people's gatherings and their struggles against oppression (Kaipbergenov 2006: 40). These stories tell about the power of the Karakalpak community as people fight against difficulties by coming together. Another example of communal strength in the novel is the story of Turebay and Bağdadul, Cumagül's neighbours and friends. Because they have nobody to help them, all the village people came together and helped them establish a family and organise a house (Kaipbergenov 2006: 126). Furthermore, during one of the preaching by one of the revolutionaries, it is said that Karakalpak traditions should not be forgotten because they constitute the wealth of the nation (Kaipbergenov 2006: 474). In other words, the novel sometimes reveals the fact that Karakalpak traditions are still important to bring people together in a peaceful way.

The novel presents images where people help each other, but these people are the supporters of the Soviet revolution. With the strengthening of the Soviet ideology in the country, these people establish their dominance over the others and try to overcome the oppression over women and the poor. When, for example, Turebay and other young men in the village learn about Cumagül's painful condition at the hands of her husband, they come and warn Turumbet about it: "We cannot stand your behaviour anymore . . . The government is in new hands now, the system that allowed people to humiliate and despise the others is left behind. You should be aware of that!" (Kaipbergenov 2006: 169) When Cumagül starts working with the help of Turebay, people start thinking about the fact that a woman can look after herself and after her children (Kaipbergenov 2006: 181). This also shows the idea that only with the advent of the Soviet ideology women could access independence and importance. Additionally, the novel depicts Karakalpaks' gradual growth and development in mastering of the lands after the Soviets occupied and divided their territory among the workers. Yet, Karakalpaks have always been masters of their lands since the territory on which they lived lacked water (Yılmaz 2006: 108). Their mastering of the lands does not occur with the Soviet government; Karakalpaks' existence depended on their skills in agriculture. This type of economy also required Karakalpaks' coming and working together.

What should be stressed here is the idea that there is a great difference between Karakalpak folk culture and Islamic culture. Although it is undeniable that Islam plays a great role in the social system of Karakalpaks, it should not be forgotten that Karakalpak folk culture always protected its dominance as the main frame of reference in terms of people's lives. Karakalpak folk culture is based on togetherness and strictly forbids isolation regardless of gender roles. For example, as it is also seen in some instances in Kaipbergenov's novel, wedding ceremonies are the main events when people come together and share the responsibilities. As Inan states, it was important for the families of the newly-wed couples in Turkic nations to come together and share the celebrations (1998; 346). Marriage was based on communal rites without which it was impossible to initiate a life. For example, during horse races on wedding ceremonies and other national holidays and festivals, the whole village participated in games regardless of the differences in sex (Toleubayev 1991: 16-17). Another fact in Karakalpak folk culture that emphasises people's closeness to each other is their togetherness with nature and animal world. The cult of animals plays an important role in Karakalpak culture and it means that besides bringing all the community together, Karakalpaks tend to reflect their togetherness with the rest of the world. According to Kamalova, Karakalpaks' preoccupation with animals in almost every aspect of their lives shows their strong links with the pre-Islamic culture which did not lose its dominance even after the

establishment of Islam as the main religion (1996: 89). In other words, under the light of this information it can be maintained that the sense of togetherness plays an important role in Karakalpak culture. Notwithstanding the rules of Islam that were also taking a role in Karakalpak society, Karakalpak people followed the traditions of pre-Islamic lifestyle which is heavily dependent on communal bonds. As Basilov states, because Turkic nations strongly followed their pre-Islamic culture, a separate field of pre-Islamic beliefs had to be established under the category of Russian ethnography (1992: 3).

Conclusion

TolebergenKaipbergenov's novel *Karakalpak Kızı* reflects the frame of Karakalpak society that was dominant at the beginning of the 20th century. The country was on the brink of a huge change as revolution took its place and Soviet ideology was spreading its regulations on the wide territory of the Central Asia. The gradual appearance of a new governmental organisation on Karakalpak area revealed its pros and cons in people's lives. Kaipbergenov's novel mainly focuses on the positive sides of this great change as the author stresses its importance in Karakalpak people's ability to throw away the chains of slavery, poverty, and ignorance. Cumagül, a Karakalpak young woman, withstands the horror of patriarchal norms and comes out as the winner because she submits herself to the new order completely. Up to this point, it is difficult to criticise the author for the ideas that he spreads throughout his novel. However, when it comes to the tiny details in the novel which constitute the bigger picture of Karakalpak culture, it is not easy to accept the idea that Karakalpak people were buried under the Islamo-dominant patriarchal core that erases the figure of a woman from the whole Karakalpak social structure. Moreover, it is difficult to cope with the idea that Karakalpak people preferred to remain blind to everything that happened around. The territory on which Karakalpaks used to live and are still living does not allow the separation of genders and isolation of some of the groups of a society. Harsh weather conditions and oppression from the higher rulers and khans prevented Karakalpaks from indulging in comfortable life and peaceful existence.

In short, while reading Kaipbergenov's novel, one should bear in mind the ideological pressure that used to be shown on the authors at that time. Although Cumagül is a brilliant example of women's struggle for freedom from patriarchal dominance, what the novel shows is not her potential as a woman. The novel focuses on the power of the Soviet ideology to transform such harsh and strict rules of pre-revolutionary state and Islamic norms. Yet, what this study tries to accomplish is to show that no matter how imposing any norm is, people's might and strength to overcome it should be manifested as the only reliable source of peace and unity. What Cumagül experiences in the novel is not something extraordinary, especially in Karakalpak society of those times. It is undeniable that women were oppressed by the patriarchal norms in Karakalpak society at those times. However, it should not be forgotten that such instances of humiliation cannot be spread to the whole nation or religion. What is more, it should be noted that Karakalpak people, as it is evident from their history, could withstand many types of oppression just because they always come together and support each other.

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