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*Philosophical Background of Justice and  
Freedom Concepts in Koroglu Epic*

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*Abstract: Each individual and social form, depending on its social conscience and common sense, reflects its own concepts that carrying the same intentional emphasis, conception, comprehension and emotion in a specific expression framework. The sense that 'Justice' and 'Freedom' concepts refer, causes embodying behaviors in personal and social life as a result of the reflection of similar perception and conscious. In an environment where the impulse of justice and freedom is destroyed, consciousness depending on this impulse propels the individual and society to the satisfied behaviours. In Koroglu Epic, one of the most famous Turkish folk tales, in contrast to the fact that justice and freedom impulse are not reflected in individual and social life under normal conditions, how satisfaction of these impulses returned to a solid struggle in Koroglu and his friends' story. Against the fact that universal human impulses are manipulated and exploited as it is seen in Bolu Beyi's example, it is told how the governed people reacted and turned that reaction into a struggle. During this struggle, social opposition that arised from the impulse of justice and aesthetic form of human emotions in this opposition come into existence. Koroglu Epic is not only important for the topic, but also for the epic language, poetic expression, and the way of reflecting the depictions together with imaginations and images of those depictions in a poetic expression. Through the Koroglu Epic, we confront with a literary genre, which is worth to investigate by means of understanding the originality in ideas and mental ability of Turkish society to perceive the concepts. The philosophical background that this literary genre contained provides exemplification for understanding the philosophical content of works in Turkish Folk Literature. In the context of Koroglu Epic, results show the reflecting forms of human sensation and perception in Turkish people's imagination investigated. This study provides a good example of Turkish people's linguistic and aesthetic ability in addition to mentality and perception. Based on this example, an*

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attempt is made to understand imagination and philosophical thinking ability of this society.

**Keywords:** Justice, freedom, injustice, epic, heroism, Turkish folk tale.

### *Köroğlu Destanında Adalet ve Özgürlük Kavramlarının Felsefi Arkapları*

**Özet:** Her bir insan ve toplumsal yapı, ma'seri vicdanı ve sağduyusuna bağlı olarak aynı içlemsel vurguyu taşıyan kavramlarla, algı, anlayış ve duygularını kendi kültürel ortamlarında, kendilerine özgü bir ifade formunda dışa yansıtır. "Adalet" ve "özgürlük" kavramlarının ifade ettiği anlam, hemen bütün insanlık için, benzer algı ve bilincin dışa yansımalarının sonucu olarak, kişinin yaşamında ve sosyal hayatta somutlaşan davranışlara neden olmaktadır. Adalet ve özgürlük dürtüsünün tabrip edildiği ortamda bu dürtüye dayalı bilinç durumu, kişiyi ve toplumu tatmin olacak davranışlara iter. Türk halk hikâyelerinin en ünlülerinden olan Köroğlu destanında da, adalet ve özgürlük dürtüsünün normal koşullarda kişi ve toplum hayatında yansıma bulmayışına karşılık, bu dürtülerin tatmininin Köroğlu ve Arkadaşlarının hikâyesinde nasıl somut bir mücadeleye dönüştüğü örneklenmektedir. Köroğlu destanında, evrensel insani itkilerin Bolu Beyi'nin yönetim örneğinde görüldüğü gibi tabrif ve istismar edilmesine karşılık, yönetilenlerin nasıl tepki koyduğunu ve bu tepkiyi o günün koşullarında nasıl bir mücadeleye dönüştürdükleri anlatılmaktadır. Bu mücadele esnasında, adalet duygusunun itkisiyle oluşan toplumsal mubalefet ve bu muhalif karşı çıkışta insani duyguların nasıl bir estetik formda ortaya çıktığı vucut bulmaktadır. Köroğlu destanı, sadece hikâyesinin konusu itibarıyla önem arzetmez, bunun yanında, destan dili, şiirsel söylemi, tasvirleri ve bu tasvirlerin zihindeki tabayyül ve imgelerinin şiirsel bir söylem içinde dışa yansıtılışı da bu destanı önemli kılmaktadır. Köroğlu destanıyla, Türk halkının tasavvuru ve kavramları algılamadaki zihinsel yetinin orijinalitesini anlamak bakımından da ayrıca incelenmeye değer bir edebi türle karşılaşırız. Bu edebi türün ihtiva ettiği felsefi arkaplan, Türk Halk Edebiyatı alanındaki eserlerin taşıdığı felsefi içeriği anlamada yol gösterici bir örneklik sağlamaktadır. Bu destan örneği bağlamında, Türk halkının muhayyilesindeki evrensel insani duyum ve algıların dışa yansıyış formlarını inceleme imkânı hâsıl olmaktadır. Bu çalışma, Türk insanının, düşünüş ve algısının yanında dilsel ve estetik yetisinin de iyi bir örneği durumundadır. Bu örnekten yola çıkarak, bu halkın muhayyilesi ve felsefi düşünüş becerisini anlamaya yönelik bir girişim gerçekleştirilmektedir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Adalet, özgürlük, zulüm, destan, kabramanlık, Türk halk hikâyesi.



## Introduction

The principle that “justice is the basis of property” has taken root as a permanent criterion in the consciousness and conscience of Turkish world where the Islamic culture has prevalence. Internalizing this principle, Turkish people, did not accept the derogation of the justice basis which is formed in their common sense and conscience. Here, the Epic of Koroglu is a epic story of this rejection in the folk culture.

Epic of Koroglu is the idealization of the sensitiveness to the justice in Turkish people’s imagination. The basic motivation behind the composition of this epic is justice and freedom. Besides the freedom desire, which is depending on the justice fact, Koroglu epic is worth of consideration in terms of its characteristic literal esthetic structure. Koroglu’s hometown, friends, beautiful women that Koroglu is impressed by their charm and portrait of marvelous natural landscapes are the esthetical aspect of the epic story in addition to its poetic language in both prose and verse.

Therefore, the epic story improves in two main lines: first, the idea of justice and freedom and the second the verbal form of the beauty that is reflected to ‘koşma’ (folk poem) and ‘türkü’ (folk song) which display the melody of the language. Love of friendship, mountains, trees, animals, light, springs, love of country and descriptions which are reflected in verbal formation with a poetic wording and simple, pure and clear emphasis of Turkish language are composed the second part of the epic story.

Now, in the scope of this article, I will focus on the appearance of justice and freedom and its philosophical background.

## The Justice Theme in Epic of Koroglu

Epic of Koroglu has arised from the act that Koroglu’s father whose the name is called in texts as Deli Yusuf or Ürüßen Baba’s eyes are blinded by Bolu



Beyi. Deli Yusuf is a stableman under the service of Bolu Beyi and he is ordered to select a good horse to be presented to Sultan.<sup>1</sup> Bolu Beyi does not appreciate the selection of his stableman and orders to him to be blinded by searing. Then, the son of Deli Yusuf, Ruşen Ali or Ali, started a battle with Bolu Beyi to take revenge of his father. The root of the legend comes from this event. Now we should elaborate on the case that Bey ordered to make his worker blinded after his dissatisfaction about the selection of horse. Bolu Bey's this cruel and immoderate judgment shows that he damaged the justice phenomenon and lost his legitimacy in public's eyes. Therefore, the case that is described in Koroglu's story is a typical cruelty of a feudal lord. At the end of 16<sup>th</sup> century and the beginnings of 17<sup>th</sup> century, which are tough terms for Ottoman Empire, feudalism that is strengthened because of the weakness of centralized administration instigated the rebellions in provinces and people who exposed to injustice behaved as social rebels. Social bandits and rebels are the people who lived in the past, conflicted with the current system by moving to the mountains with a group of men (followers). Their aim is to establish the social balance and struggle in order to remove the rich-poor contrast. Following statements support this situation:

In this four-cornered perishable world / If brave young men would not exist /  
Cruelty would surround the world / If crying would not smile.

Cruelty would surround the world / The day would not dawn / Lovers became  
crazed by love / If they would not see their beloveds<sup>2</sup>

The reason that feudal lords' treatments that are lack of fair and legislation caused Koroglu to depict attempts that have become legendary. In addition to this, Koroglu is modest and devoted to his fatherland in such a

<sup>1</sup> In this paper, the main theme is based on the story's hero Rusen Ali Bey (Köroğlu) who has fought against to lord of Bolu region who lived in the late 16th century. Certainly almost every Koroglu saga in Turkish region tells the story in a different form from others. In this article, differences in details are observed, however the main theme is the same as in all various stories.

<sup>2</sup> Tahir Kutsi Tecer, *Köroğlu*, İstanbul, 1987, p. 96-97.



desire, he put his humanity forward, with these entire in his nomadic status he is pleased with his authentic way of life. But, Koroglu as a phenomenon is essentially insurgent. The public mention warmly about him who is actually not insurgent to government, and only rebels towards local officials making people suffer, and their unfair decisions. Therefore, by composing folk songs, legends and tales the public characterize him as a person who dealt with social unfairness, poor people and accompanied with suffering people. Although he is just a mugger according to the government, for us he is such a brave man who had always tried to provide social fairness.<sup>3</sup> In addition to this, in the legendary of Koroglu there is no event indicating that he rebelled towards Ottoman Empire directly. Conversely, the main point in the legendary is Koroglu's individual struggle for fairness that had been demolished by feudal lord.

Fairness is to be correct in treatment and judgment, to judge in the way of right, justice and to treat equally. In the story of Koroglu, the administrator's -who is supposed to provide fairness- treatments which are lack of fairness and inhumane behaviors towards to people working him indicates that he is lack of philanthropy and sense of equality. Whereas in the environment that this fairness fact occurred, fairness fact exists with the meanings: balance, equality, the social order, judgment in the way of right, honesty, following the right way. Unfairness is exceptional and illegal in the environment where fairness exists. Koroglu tells this unfairness, cruelty and despotism of Bolu Beyi as follows:

Do not know what guilt I have / My little Ali is an orphan now, lords / Many efforts I had, but all wasted / My property is ruined lords.

What did I do to general / He drenches my body to red blood / My friends cry, my enemies laughs / Is the persecution proper for me, oh lords

Two years I moved around foreign lands / I wrote dark fate to my light forehead / I crushed my dark bosom in vain / One day opposes me lords

<sup>3</sup> Fuzuli Bayat, *Koroğlu Destanı, Türk Dünyasının Koroğlu Fenomenolojisi*, İstanbul, 2009, p.96.



Koroglu supplicates from almighty God / Bey shall not get rid of the trouble / It is written in my fate / The ones see me draw lesson, oh lords.<sup>4</sup>

In these lines of poetry, Koroglu is expressing the events his father lived and remaining life of his father, Koroglu draws a picture of his ruined life and his thought that this is the dark fate. Balance is the scale that life walks on it. If an individual or society loses the balance of life, then is not possible to be in peace and fulfillment, to achieve human acts, and to beautify the life. But in the Epic of Koroglu, we witness that humanitarian acts present themselves even in difficult conditions. Love of nature, human, animal, tree, friendship, longing, joy, adoration, trust in his poems shows that he is a person who takes pleasure from life and this pleasure causes longing for him. In fact, in the following lines:

Roses growing in this mountains / Their smell makes mute / Nightingales apart from their branch

Our wolds are grooved / Fishes live in flowing waters / With red scarf, purple trousseau / Girl is desired, Ayvaz is coming<sup>5</sup>

Sorrow of bad day did not deplete / I never have been in joy / Kırat does not eat for three days / One should take news from Kırat ...<sup>6</sup>

Grasses grow around your lakes / Your floods flow muddy and wild / there are many places to entertain / Our country, Çamlıbel, well done!<sup>7</sup>

Devastation of his life and system by Bolu Beyi is the factor that converted his aspiration of hometown to passion.

Balance and concordance which are expressed with grace and balance by Islam philosophers are mentioned with 'Ahsan-i Taqwim' (creation of human in best form by God) and smoothing. Justice is being right according to

<sup>4</sup> Tecer, *Köroğlu*, p. 77-78.

<sup>5</sup> Tecer, *Köroğlu*, p. 109.

<sup>6</sup> Tecer, *Köroğlu*, p. 85.

<sup>7</sup> Tecer, *Köroğlu*, p. 104.



universal (or divine) orders by eliminating personal desires and ambitions.<sup>8</sup> Accordingly, justice is a spiritual balance and base that is achieved by obeying to a consistent integrity and moral position which are not affected by others' excursive wishes and suggestions. Islam ethics recommends people to avoid extreme manners and to internalize a balanced and coherent life style.

Justice is an objective concept and a constant principle of regulation. The one who does not act objectively about rights falls into a cruel position.

Now, if we consider the time which Koroglu's story happens, at the ends of sixteenth century and later on, we can see that '*Adaletname*'s are published because of the unjust policies of administrators in Ottoman Empire. In 1637 an Anatolian Governor-General is warned not to behave cruelly towards people in an *Adaletname*. Continued existence of some unjust implementations in province organizations caused the pursuit of application '*Adaletname*'.<sup>9</sup> However, in practice of governmental administration, the emperor is obliged to prevent the cruelty and rule out the injustice. There are many explanations about the establishment of justice in Nizamulmülk's *Siyasetname*.

Cruelty is openly condemned in Keykavus' *Kabusname*. Despite all these facts, when the government authority is damaged and transparent and open society model is diverged, one can witness impulsive and unacceptable cruelties. As a result of being exposed to unjust attitude, revenge comes up. Among the group, which joined because of revenge, beside the revenge to the opposer, compassion, sacrifice, altruism and voluntariness arises in interrelations of the group members.

Today's philosophers accept that resentment is a factor in the psychological origin of justice. Resentment is a psychological attitude that the individual develops internally against the unjust institutions. It externalizes itself by motivation of generalization and reflectivity in order to sabotage the

<sup>8</sup> Mustafa Çağırıcı, "Adalet", *DİB İslam Ansiklopedisi*, Ankara, 1988, vol. 2, p. 341.

<sup>9</sup> Ahmet Mumcu, *Osmanlı Hukukunda Zulüm Kavramı*, İstanbul, 1972, p. 9.





status quo. Resentment is not consented with only one person in the societies where cooperation is strong. It motivates all the people with the same or similar distress and encourages a collective feeling of revenge in these people's lower-self against the cruel attitude in that society.<sup>10</sup>

In light of these analyses, if we look at the Epic of Koroglu, as a reaction to Bolu Beyi who made Deli Yusuf blind, not only Koroglu, but also the people around him protested against Bolu Beyi. This situation shows that resentment is turned into revenge and a collective objection arised. Because in this struggle Koroglu is not alone. Nomadic Turkmen are appear as fighting warriors along with him. In the Turkmen's battle of substituting injustice for justice, we can see the points: loyalty, friendship, fidelity, 'sılayı rahim' (being in contact with relatives), prize, 'hüsni şerika' (being honest in common business), 'teveddüt' (gaining friendship of virtuous people), resigning themselves in God's hand prevail and conceding among Koroglu's friends' relationships. For example, fidelity of Koroglu's to Ayvas who is almost in his son's status, loyalty of Ayvas's to Koroglu, loyalty of Koroglu's to Demircioğlu, his wife, his horse, his friends should be evaluated in this framework. Hence, in the folk poems of Koroglu, written to express the amity with Ayvas, we can see the reflections of loyalty, commitment and compassion.

Sirs and pashas appeared / Seeing them, enemies are astonished / Forests oaks in mountain / Give way, Ayvas is coming

Hero of our wold / Silver ink holder in his waist / Cypress and willow hop ups / Flow, Ayvas is coming

Crops of our world / Cherry is sweeter than sugar / Pleiades (ülker) scale in sky / Do not pass, Ayvas is coming.”

In this folk-poem, all the nature and beauties in nature are witnessed to

<sup>10</sup> Robert C. Solomon, *Emotions and the Origins of the Social Contract*, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1995, p. 329.





Koroglu's joy.<sup>11</sup> In another poem:

Give way misty mountains / Ripple cold springs / Ayvaz is coming to drink

Roses growing in this mountains / Their smell makes mute / Nightingales apart  
from their branch / Chirrup, Ayvaz is coming

Here, Koroglu narrates the arrival of Ayvaz, yearning to him, joy, happiness and compassion. In poems of Koroglu, we witness the fact that a hero who symbolizes the justice fulfills the virtues which composes justice concept in relations with his friends. We can infer such a result from here: in a place where the justice is substituted friendship, love, respect, loyalty, 'silay rahim' (being in contact with relatives) and resigning oneself in God's hands are prevail. In another poem:

I remembered my heroes again / Lord of the lord shall stand by me / The one  
who breaks seven horseshoe in one wring / Brave Demircioğlu shall stand by me

Koroglu expresses his compassion, love and honor to his friends and beloveds. Moral and esthetic values that constitute the scope of justice concept, actually, are reflections of the phrase "God is beautiful and likes beauty" in Turkish people's language. Likewise, Muslim philosophers consider justice as a ontological concept. This concept is explained in a way that each entity takes a part of presence from the initial entity (mentioning God) according to its own degree. Accordingly, God attributes completeness and perfection to each entity in proportion to the entity's position (or status) in peresence hierarchy, this can be defined as the God's justice. This way, Muslim philosophers state that depending on the grant of God, justice is appeared in every step or stage of entity's development. Thus, Farabi indicates that justice exists in the process of bio- psychic structure of human.<sup>12</sup> According to this brain, which is under the service of heart, keeps heart's temperature in balance and by this means justice which is the resulting form of psychological activities

<sup>11</sup>Müjgan Cumbur, "Koroğlu Destanında Lirik ve Epik Unsurlar", *Koroğlu Semineri Bildirileri*, Başbakanlık Basımevi, Ankara, 1983, p. 45.

<sup>12</sup> Farabi, *El-Medinetül-Fazıla*, trans. Ahmet Ateş, İstanbul, 1990, p. 54.



like: learning, remembering, imagining and thinking accrues.

Human's moral essence is closely related to the justice. According to the idea that continued from Platon and changed in some extent by Islam moralists three virtue emerge from three basic power of human personality (lower self): power of knowledge, power of anger and power of desire (lust). These three virtues are wisdom, bravery, and chastity. Justice is the fourth basic virtue that gained by the occurrences of these three virtues and covers all. Gazali<sup>13</sup> and İbn Sina<sup>14</sup> comply with this classification whereas İbn Hazm expressed these as justice, comprehension, generosity, and bravery. İbn Miskeveyh, in his *Tezhibül Ahlak*, lists the virtues coming from the justice like: loyalty, friendship, compassion, '*sila-yı rahim*' (being in contact with relatives), gratification, award, honesty, remuneration, fellowship with virtuous people, trust in God and worship (prayer).

Koroglu, who is a warrior of justice against the injustice, embodies the virtue that compose the justice concept in his personality and manners. In that case, the question of being fair is related to being a right and virtuous person. We see that the way of being right and virtuous person is related to the values of the culture that one belongs to consciousness of the values is possible by growing in a system of manners composed by these values. In Epic of Koroglu, his moral and virtuous attitudes are indicators of his commitment to humanistic and social values. That means values that the people live in cover the society as an atmosphere and make themselves accepted by society and individual. Therefore, a person who is an exception in that society may become a representative of status quo, as exemplified in the story.

### The Freedom Theme in Epic of Koroglu

Çamlıbel is the support of Koroglu in his justice struggle against Bolu

<sup>13</sup> Ghazali, *İhya*, Kahire, 1356, vol. 3, pp. 53-55.

<sup>14</sup> İbn Sina, *Eş-Şifa, el-İlahiyyat*, ed. G.C. Anvati - Sa'id Zayed, p. 455.



Beyi. The location that is expressed as Çamlıbel is a mountainous region. The concept 'mountain' has an especial position in imagination of Turkish nation. Mountain is the place of safety and shelter. Therefore, it symbolizes the freedom. The sense of freedom sensation becomes satisfaction in human ego. Lets scrutinize the basis of justice and freedom in poetic language with the following famous lines:

I depended on you and God / You are my support and fort, mountains / I do not have support other than you / You are my back and my fort, mountains<sup>15</sup>

In this poem, Koroglu states that he describes mountains as a place of shelter and safety are the place that he feels safe. In the background of the feeling of confidence and safety that directs him to mountains, trust and faith of God exists. The fact that God is the only authority to rely on and shelter is confirmed with Islam more strongly.<sup>16</sup> God is the shelter and companion that every person can rely on. Mountains are the physical place where the people under God's preservation can feel in safety. Especially the 'mountain' image is in an identity of mythological protector since the terms before the acceptance of Islam by Turks. He came from the side of God *Ülgen*. Past Turks worshipped the mountain that is accepted as the beginning by them. They consider the mountain as the protector of the generation and clan.<sup>17</sup> In Epic of Koroglu, Çamlıbel where the place of confidence, safety, protection and power is considered as a shelter to be rescued from cruelty and extinction for Koroglu's fellows. It is claimed that as long as Koroglu do not leave Çamlıbel, no one can compete with him.<sup>18</sup> According to Altay believes, it is reported that mountain attributes bravery and belligerency to a man.

One of the most prominent objects of Epic of Koroglu, Çamlıbel, is described as infinite and tremendously high mountain with a mythological

<sup>15</sup> Orhan Ural, *Üç Destan*, Ankara, 1972, p. 34.

<sup>16</sup> Qur'an, 1 Baqara, 5.

<sup>17</sup> Mireli Seyidov, *Ali Kişi ve Koroglu Karakterlerinin Prototipleri Hakkında*, Azerbaycan, 3, 1978, pp. 184-207.

<sup>18</sup> This emphasis exists in Kirghiz and Azerbaijani variants of Koroglu Epic.



identity. Therefore, as a protector of human, mountain is considered as a place of gaining noble feelings, ability of discovery and strength of sound and poetry. As a matter of fact Koroglu achieves his qualification of bravery in mountains. *Water* that gives strength and ability of poetry to him also exists in mountains.

After acception of Islam by Turks, mountain is considered as the stabile element that provides the balance of human and the earth besides being the place to discipline or train the lower-self. In fact, mountains are expressed as the support of balance, stability, steadiness, and strength.<sup>19</sup>

Besides the attributes that mountains cause people to gain, they are seen as the place where people feel safe inside, savor the freedom, get rid of all the fear and restraint, and beware of their own existence and ontological independency. In the previous poem, Koroglu expresses the confidence and freedom coming from reaching to mountains by emphasizing his trust in mountains. Starting point of his justness and struggle is presented as the mountain. It seems like if the mountains would not exist, he would not find a support in his battle against cruelty and injustice in first place. What makes Koroglu a hero is the presence of mountains and the opportunity to shelter, live, take heart provided by the mountains. He rely on the mountains as a place of freedom.

Since the environment of Koroglu is mountains, his words circulate in mountains. He made mountains a fort for himself against the cruel. He is the one who knows best the difficulties that are raised by mountains which become eye and ear of him in daylight and bed and quilt in the night. He seeks and asks in mountain what he lost. He uses and mentions mountains in his poems.<sup>20</sup> Mountains are all the wealth (or everything) of Koroglu. They are the place where nobody else exists, in his words: his 'complete entity. They are his home, protector, and support. He takes his self-confidence from mountains.

<sup>19</sup> Qur'an, 16 Nahl, 81; 27 Naml, 61; 35 Fatir, 10; 50 Kaf, 7; 79 Naziat, 32.

<sup>20</sup> Hatice Akdoğan, *Şirde Dağ İzleği*, 2005, p. 20.



He gives ultimatum to sirs by taking power from mountains. In front of the mountains, sirs cannot achieve their wishes whereas Koroglu is in pleasure. He has attained his wishes in mountains.<sup>21</sup> In short, mountains are conceptualized as a place of freedom and well-being in Epic of Koroglu.

### Conclusion

Epic of Koroglu represents the character of epic hero in Turkish legend tradition. It is narrated not only in Anatolia, but in the whole Turk geography in several variations. In the study which Anatolian variation is taken into account, it is seen that Epic of Koroglu is formed at the end of 16<sup>th</sup> century and the beginnings of 17<sup>th</sup> century. These time period corresponds to the painful terms that nomadic Turkmen become settled down. Epic of Koroglu guides that term's socio-cultural life. The fundamental themes justice and freedom are the concepts that describing the characteristics of Turks, thus these themes are also important in this manner. In Turkish National Anthem, the poet Mehmet Akif Ersoy says:

I have been free since the beginning and forever will be so / What madman shall put me in chains! I defy the very idea / I'm like the roaring flood; powerful and independent / I'll tear apart mountains, exceed the heavens and still gush out!

We confront with the willpower of freedom in these lines in a story of nomadic Turkmen, the Koroglu's legend, from centuries ago. That is to say, willpower of justice and freedom is the fundamental struggle element of Turks.

<sup>21</sup> Akdoğan, *Şiirde Dağ İzleği*, p. 24.



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