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Characteristic Features Of The “Bald” (Kal) Image In The Oral Folklore Of Turkic Peoples

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Abstract: This article discusses the distinctive features of characters corresponding to the “bald” (Kal) type in the oral folklore of Turkic peoples. It also presents certain reflections related to the transformation of a secondary or supporting character into the main hero, as well as processes of typification. Some of the characters found in fairy tales and epics are analyzed from a typological point of view. In particular, the paper examines the expression of features specific to the “bald” type in the main heroes of the fairy tale Elo’g’li and the epic Koroglu.

Keywords: Type, typological analysis, folklore, fable, fairy tale, genre features, character, image, storytelling, fairy-tale studies.

Introduction: In folk oral creativity, no image is created arbitrarily. Each character emerges as an expression of the people’s hopes and aspirations. The process of typification of a hero or an image arises as a result of a deeper admiration and, moreover, a continuous social and emotional need for that figure.

The Turkish folklorist M. Harmancı, who conducted research on the topic “The Bald Type in Turkish Tales,” notes that the stage and manner in which the Bald type (Kal tipi) entered tales and epics remain unclear. However, he emphasizes that its appearance in folk narratives such as “Köroğlu,” “Ashık Garip,” “Tahir and Zuhra,” and “Navruzбек” is significant for tracing its historical roots.

The earliest studies concerning the origin of this type in Turkic folklore were carried out by Tahir Alangu. For many years, the scholar collected and published tales related to the bald hero and compiled them in his work entitled “Keloğlan Tales.” At the end of this book, he

also presented his views and reflections on the subject in the form of a scholarly article. In it, he focuses on the distinctive traits of the “Bald” character, stressing that this type appears not only in the tale genre but also in other forms of oral folk creativity. This, according to Alangu, demonstrates that the character has lived for many centuries in the people’s language, memory, and collective consciousness.

Similarly, in Uzbek oral folklore, the Bald type appears as an episodic hero in epics such as “Hasankhan” (from the Gorogly cycle), “Ravshan,” and “Qunduz and Yulduz.” These instances can be viewed as traces of the early stages in the emergence of this type. Descriptions and depictions within these texts clearly reveal his distinctive features; however, this does not yet allow us to conclude that the image has fully developed into a typified character. In other words, the bald figure was already transformed by the people into a popular character type, yet his image in the epics, although faint, still appears. Moreover, his representation as a daring and straightforward hero suggests that he had already begun to display his defining characteristics.

For instance:

“The city of Chambil had six gates, and at each gate stood seven guards. Their chief was called Sattor the Bald. His blow was strong, his gaze fierce; if drunk, he was wild, and when sober, his mood was low.”

This description portrays the character as a rough yet sincere and resourceful fighter, combining traits of leadership, courage, and frankness typical of the Bald type. The quatrain uttered by him also reflects the verbal expressiveness characteristic of this folk image:

You do not yet know who I am,
If I grow angry, you will not come again.
When I strike, you will not rise again,
Without Koroğlu’s leave, you shall not enter in.

In this passage, the characteristics of militancy and mercilessness, which are inherent to the Bald (Kal) type, are vividly reflected. It can be stated that the minor character appearing in the epic “Hasankhan” from the “Gorogly” cycle has not yet attained the status of a central hero; however, his presence as a folk-created figure indicates that the image existed, though it had not yet become fully typified.

According to M. Harmancı, the traces of the Bald type in the “Koroğlu” epic are of particular importance. Moreover, the features embodied by the hero of the Azerbaijani tale “Eloğlu” are also of great significance for identifying the existence and developmental stages of this type.

In the folktales of many nations, unnamed and

ordinary heroes often appear as fools or lunatics, poor yet brave and courageous young men. Such figures have contributed to the gradual formation of the Bald image. Hence, it may be observed that this type emerged as a response to social need within the community. As in epics, these characters in fairy tales also appear as auxiliary heroes, who, although not central figures, play supportive roles. Indeed, helper characters occupy an important place in epic tradition.

For instance, Qorajon, Qultoy, and Qaldirg’och in “Alpomish”; Soqibulbul, the Forty Youths, Hasan Chopson, Hasan Yakdasta, and Hasan Ko’lbar in the “Gorogly” cycle; Dono Shepherd in “Orzigul”; Janjal the Bald in “Qunduz and Yulduz”; and Hasan and the Bald Brothers in “Ravshan” are examples of such figures. Folklorists emphasize that the primary mission entrusted to these characters is to assist the main hero. However, over time, the Bald figure, initially functioning as a supporting character, became typified through the stability of his attributes, his consistent role, and his recurring functions in various narratives. Consequently, he was eventually recognized as a central character. Numerous Turkic folk tales confirm this evolution.

Among the oldest Turkic tales, the Azerbaijani story “Eloğlu” and the “Koroğlu” epic both reveal the roots of the Keloğlan type, as observed by various folklorists who have approached this figure from a typological perspective.

An analysis of the “Eloğlu” tale reveals that the main character possesses the most fundamental trait of the Bald type — baldness itself. From a typological standpoint, however, it is not only his bald head that defines him, but also a range of characteristics traditionally associated with the Bald type.

For example, a king, fearing to send his son alone to Samarkand, reasons: “Perhaps a bald-headed man, through cunning, could accomplish this task.” Thus, the king appoints Eloğlu, a clever and shrewd figure, to undertake a challenge that even he himself could not accomplish.

As in nearly all tales about bald heroes, this one also depicts society’s distrust toward Eloğlu. Nevertheless, he insists, “By God’s truth, even a bald head can be complete,” and strives to solve problems with his intellect and determination. As in many similar tales, the narrative follows a familiar pattern — initial disbelief followed by the hero’s triumph through his own wit and confidence.

Ultimately, Eloğlu not only marries the vizier’s daughter but also rises to the rank of vizier himself. Recognizing his intelligence, the king entrusts him with the state treasury, acknowledging his wisdom.

Eloğlu's manner of combat, his invention of various strategic methods, and his skill in solving intellectual riddles all provide strong grounds for classifying this story as a Bald-type tale. The hero skillfully overcomes every trial, helps the enamored prince unite with his beloved, and eventually takes control of the entire kingdom.

Thus, all of Eloğlu's actions throughout the tale evoke the familiar image of the typical bald hero. He acts subtly, avoids provoking his rivals, and triumphs through intelligence rather than force — embodying the quintessential folk archetype of the Bald young man.

Meriç Harmancı, who analyzed the typological features of the Keloğlan image in Turkish oral tradition, examined the Anatolian version of the Köroğlu epic and the Azerbaijani version of the Eloğlu tale. According to her, these works reveal the initial stage of a gradual transition from epic to fairy-tale form.

In our view, the figure of Keloğlan—a modest and unpretentious character who seeks to right certain social wrongs and confront individual injustices—appears to have evolved from Köroğlu, the hero who avenges his blind and wronged father.

In many tales where the Bald (Kal) figure serves as the protagonist, he is portrayed as a skilled horse keeper and, at the same time, a perceptive observer or investigator (as exemplified in the tale “Sinchi Kal” [“The Bald Examiner”]). The motif of mastery in horse-tending also draws our attention in the Köroğlu epic. Likewise, in the Eloğlu tale, the main character gains fame precisely for his skill as a horse keeper. He is depicted as a figure who loves horses so deeply that he even sleeps among them in the stables. Notably, in the Köroğlu epic, the hero's father, Ali, is also described as a master horse keeper.

A second parallel can be observed in that, in both works, the protagonists' fathers are renowned craftsmen. In the Eloğlu tale, the hero's father is a swordsmith, a master who forged an unparalleled sword. In the Köroğlu epic, the stone found by the young hero is said to be a fragment of lightning, and the sword made from it is likewise portrayed as unmatched in the world. Similarly, in the Uzbek folk tale “Kal Nosir va Surxi Ayyor” (“Bald Nosir and the Cunning Surxi”), the bald hero's father is a potter who creates the world's most exquisite jars and other ceramic items.

In the Eloğlu tale, the protagonist's personal name is not explicitly stated, nor is there an explanation for why he is called “Eloğlu.” Considering that both texts were recorded in Azerbaijani territory, it is not implausible that Eloğlu evolved from Ali oğlu (“son of

Ali”), following a phonetic transformation from Ali oğlu → Aloğlu → Eloğlu. The fact that both characters embody typical features of epic heroes within the common Turkic cultural sphere further supports this assumption.

In both narratives, the fathers leave behind only one son. In the Köroğlu epic, Ali Kishi is blinded, and his son Köroğlu embarks on a struggle to avenge his father. In the Eloğlu tale, the unnamed father's seven-year-old son also becomes a hero. However, unlike Köroğlu, Eloğlu does not fight for revenge; instead, he achieves success through intelligence and cunning rather than physical force, as is evident throughout the tale.

It seems that Eloğlu, drawing inspiration from the Köroğlu epic, gradually paved the way for the emergence of the later Keloğlan type. The Bald (Kal) figure represented in fairy tales also reflects a socially modest and nameless persona, devoid of ambition or pretension. His struggle against oppressive forces and his sense of retribution are expressed covertly, in a calm and non-violent manner.

While the Bald figures appearing in epics display all the attributes of heroic valor, those in fairy tales—created by the people for other purposes—achieve silent and peaceful victories through wit and subtlety, without resorting to force or confrontation.

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