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EDUCATIONAL AND CRITICAL DIMENSIONS IN TURKISH SHADOW THEATRE

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Abstract

The Turkish shadow puppet theatre form known also as *Karagöz* plays came to Anatolia from Egypt . Apart from entertainment, it served a number of very important social functions — both educational and critical. It was popular among the general public, who could easily recognise specific characters, both foreign and from within the state, represented by the puppets. The theatre thus created a melting pot of ideas on education, and a social critique directed towards authority at all levels of the public service, as well as at individual members of the Ottoman state, blamed for a wide range of vices from bribery to dishonesty and greed.

Extrait

Le théâtre des ombres et marionnettes turc, aussi connu sous le nom de *Karagöz*, est venu d'Egypte en Anatolie. Outre sa fonction de divertissement, il servait à de nombreuses fonctions sociales très importantes — à la fois éducatives et critiques. Ce type de théâtre était très populaire parmi les gens du peuple, qui pouvaient facilement reconnaître des personnages spécifiques, étrangers mais aussi venant du sein de l'Etat, représentés par des marionnettes. Le théâtre crée donc un *melting pot* d'idées sur l'éducation, et une critique sociale dirigée contre l'autorité à tous les niveaux de l'administration, ainsi que contre des membres individuels de l'Etat ottoman, critiqués pour un éventail étendu de vices, allant de la corruption à la malhonnêteté et l'avarice.

Resumen

La forma del teatro turco de títeres de sombra conocido también como los obras de *Karagöz* llegaron a Anatolia procedentes de Egipto. Aparte de ofrecer entretenimiento, sirvió para varias funciones sociales muy importantes, tanto educativas como críticas. Era popular entre el público en general, que podía reconocer fácilmente personajes específicos representados por los títeres, tanto extranjeros como del interior del estado. El teatro por lo tanto creó un crisol de fusión de ideas en educación, así como una crítica social dirigida a la autoridad a todos los niveles del servicio público, así como a los miembros individuales del estado otomano, al cual se le culpaba por una gama amplia de vicios desde el soborno hasta la deshonestidad y la codicia.

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Turkish shadow theatre, also known as *Karagöz* (literally meaning 'dark eye') plays, is a form of theatre which is believed to have been brought to Anatolia from Egypt in the sixteenth century; it originally came from south-eastern Asia. Although some claim that *Karagöz* is 'only' a puppet show, it was and is full-scale theatre, with curtain, scenery, plays and actors (shadow puppets). It served the need for theatre in the Ottoman state.

Each *Karagöz* play consists of four parts:

1. the prologue or introduction;
2. dialogue;
3. the main plot; and
4. epilogue.

The legend of the emergence of *Karagöz* in Anatolia is a sad one. The most widely believed story is that this theatrical form arose from the death of two construction workers, *Karagöz* and *Hacivat*. During the reign of Ottoman Sultan Orhan (fourteenth century), *Karagöz* was working as an ironmonger and *Hacivat* as a mason in the construction of a mosque in Bursa, the capital city of the state at that time. They continually distracted the other workers with their humorous and attractive dialogues, and so slowed down the construction of the mosque. Getting angry at this, the Sultan had them both put to death, which later caused him unending regret. To decrease the Sultan's sorrow, and to cheer him up, Sheikh Kusteri, 'the so-called inventor and patron saint of Turkish shadow theatre' (And 1975: 34) set up a curtain and behind it recited the humorous dialogues of *Karagöz* and *Hacivat* with yellow shoes in his hands. It is not known how much pleasure the Sultan got from this, but the public apparently loved it. As James Smith notes:

Karagöz became a popular art form in Turkey from the late sixteenth century on, coinciding with the rise in popularity of coffee shops. Islamic officials condemned both, but the poorer classes filled them. In Turkey, *Karagöz* shows were especially popular during Ramadan. Throughout the period of this observance, the most holy in Islam, there is no food or drink consumption during the day, and after sundown feasts are held. Typically, people would come to coffee houses for the feast and enjoy a *Karagöz* show at the same time, with a different show being performed every night of Ramadan. (Smith 2004: 187–88)

The tradition of Turkish shadow theatre has been a melting pot of Turkish culture, world views, beliefs, religion, written and oral traditional heritage (including literature, folk lore, social and economic structure), art, and other types of drama and music. Thus the reflection of these concepts in shadow plays has met an important need in the field of art. *Karagöz* has always kept its characteristic features and stayed true to the nature of the original shadow theatre, with a threefold role of enjoyment, teaching and social criticism (And 1977: 80). This is in fact an inherent part of this particular theatre, as may be seen from what is said at the beginning of each play:

Before the opening of the curtain, the nature of goodness is stressed; the viewers are informed of the importance of thinking properly, behaving properly, being reasonable, not being the slaves of temporary things but obeying the rules of absolute truth, working and earning honestly. They are also warned to see not only the surface of the reality but the inner part. The reality is not on the outer surface but within, it is in the core. (Çapanoglu 1977: 28–29)

Main characters

Each *Karagöz* play includes two main characters, *Karagöz* and *Hacivat*, and often other secondary characters. The character of *Karagöz* can be defined as a teacher, whose social function — though uneducated himself — is to make people think while making them laugh. This role started from the time of the Ottoman state, which had a long history of puppet theatre, and continues to the present. Those who played *Karagöz* have always assigned it this educational and critical role because they have accepted Sheikh Kusteri, who cared for these issues, as the founder and protector of this tradition (And 1977: 250).

As for *Hacivat*, he is on good terms with everyone around him, a go-between who concludes the bargain, solves disputes and establishes peace himself. He is thoughtful and moderate; he can take part in any company, and has a flexible tongue and temperament. He listens to all individuals, gives advice and directs; he gains the confidence and love of everyone he comes across. As well as his wide acquaintanceship, he has knowledge of everything including music and literature — if not fully, at least partially. He reflects every sign of being a well-bred individual. He is a skilful coordinator of some gatherings. If a young man and a young girl come to him with the intention of marriage, he says flattering things to the girl's family about the man and to the man's family about the girl. He knows how to talk indirectly: instead of telling *Karagöz* 'Your wife is betraying you', he says 'Strangers are picking the fruit in your garden' or 'Your nightingale is singing in someone else's garden' (And 1977: 300–01). These characteristics are attributable to the concept of

'learned behaviour' because the essence of mutual relationships in a society is based on a system that will facilitate shared life in a neighbourhood.

In addition to these main characters, others frequently seen are Celebi, Tiryaki and Beberuhi; tough guys like Kulhanbeyi and Efe; individuals from various cities of the state in Anatolia and Thrace; non-Turkish characters like Arabs, Persians and Albanians; non-Muslim characters like Jews, Armenians and Greeks; disabled characters like Deaf, Mad, Hunchback and Stammerer; amusing characters like Kavuklu, Pisekar, Little *Karagöz* and Little Hacivat; supernatural beings like Witch and Gin; and Zennes (women).

The educational and critical dimension

The question of how *Karagöz*, an uneducated person, can enlighten the public properly is one that has been raised many times with regard to the educational role of shadow plays. The answer to this question might be provided when one takes into consideration the nature of *Karagöz* plays and the ultimate moral aim of each play. Many of the plays contain scenes related to educational issues pertaining to the lives of citizens during the time of the Ottoman state. For instance, in *Ters Evlenme* (The False Bride), *Karagöz* tries to keep a drunken man away from alcohol, and in *Kanlı Nigar* (The Bloody Nigar) he spends all his energy in an effort to direct women to the true path (Alptekin 1998). In *Kirginlar* (The Offended Ones), *Karagöz* kills Hacivat's three brothers and does not want to be seen by Hacivat's son. This traditional mind-stimulating aspect of Turkish shadow theatre was witnessed and recorded by European travellers in the Ottoman state (for accounts of European travellers on Turkish shadow theatre, see And 1975).

Any *Karagöz* scene is a place of learning, and its philosophy — embellished with a peculiar mystical meaning — is unique. In the scenes presented to a sultan, despite the fact that the sultan is praised as first, he is reminded of the fact that he too is among those created by God. The beauty of the universe, the power of God, the meaning of life and existence, and related notions are reflected behind the curtain with a slogan: 'What you see is a curtain, but what you should see is the reality reflected behind it.' (And 1977: 274) What Sheikh Kusteri created was a curtain representing the outer shape of the world. When the candle is lit, the hearts of mature individuals are intended and expected to grasp the inner, not the outer, self of the characters behind the curtain. Those in search of pleasure get what they want, and those who are there to see reality see it.

Karagöz himself provides a critical backdrop: he comes from the lower class, he is uneducated and unemployed. He has to accept all jobs offered to him regardless of his personal suitability for the job. In *Yazici* (The Public Scribe), *Karagöz* becomes a public scribe in a haunted shop, where he writes nonsensical letters for his clients.

Karagöz plays are designed to enlighten the audience about the issues involved in their lives. Each detail of the plays created by the 'imaginative minds of their creators' (Sakaoglu, 2003: 69) is designed to serve this purpose. This includes even the choice of words in the dialogues between *Karagöz* and Hacivat. Hacivat uses extensive vocabulary to show off his knowledge, and *Karagöz* misunderstands most of the words uttered by Hacivat. Hacivat even tests *Karagöz* by questioning him and proving in public that he does not have enough knowledge for a man of his age. This is done purposely to represent *Karagöz* as a lay person who is pure, who can grasp the comic side of events with great skill, who is intelligent but not trained, and who is far from being a scholar but not far from refinement (Banarlı 1977: 61).

One example of *Karagöz*'s choice of words is an inspiring dialogue intended to serve an important critical function concerning education. In a performance in the presence of a sultan, Mahmut, *Karagöz* focuses on education through some symbols he includes in his conversation regarding the overall conditions of the primary schools of the age. *Karagöz* is a student, and Hacivat tries to teach him how to read and write. However hard Hacivat tries, *Karagöz* cannot manage what is required. However, with some tricky words, he manages to get three golden coins from the sultan. This dialogue includes the teaching of the vowel point indicating the sound of 'e' in phonetic symbol. When Hacivat says *üstün* — an Arabic word to indicate that sound, *Karagöz* says *altın*, a Turkish word which seems to be the opposite of the word *üstün* in Turkish but which also means 'gold'. When the sultan says that he is not going to give him any more golden coins, the puppet player says that his sole aim is to attract attention to the conditions of schools. Although humour is a natural aspect of the dialogue in this theatre, the sultan takes this seriously and he decrees that the conditions of schools should closely be considered, and children should not be sent to work before they learn how to read and write (Bey 1977: 23). The occurrence of such a change also indicates that 'some minor things can be instantly arranged or inserted into the main story during the performance, depending on the circumstances and the taste of the audience' (Yerebakan 2002: 12).

The nature of the spectators is a fundamental aspect of the choice of subjects and vocabulary for dialogues and exchanging ideas in Turkish shadow theatre. If the performance is for children, *Karagöz* is careful not to use obscene words; if it is for adult males, there is no such a limitation; if there is a disabled person among the audiences, he avoids using words that might make that person remember their condition; again, if some members of the ruling class are present, words are chosen appropriately.

Social commentary

Karagöz represents the understanding of morality and common sense of ordinary people. Spectators

tolerate his mistakes. He expresses his thoughts directly, without thinking of possible undesired consequences. He is poor, which is a humbling aspect of his behaviour and a facet of his educational deprivation. His poverty and fear of losing his life force him to help brigands, but his sense of right and wrong will surely cause him to report those brigands disturbing him to the legal forces. He is fearless, brave; he is in opposition even to tough guys. Unlike Hacivat, he does not turn a blind eye to the happenings in his neighbourhood. He assigns himself the role and duty of protecting the honour of his locality. He is not a liar, and is strictly against double standards. He, as a realist, does not favour a life in a dream world or a life based on artificiality or dishonesty. Even if he loses opportunities due to the fact that he hates showing a face that is not his, such as paying extravagant compliments or being too intimate in return for something, he still keeps his integrity and becomes an exemplary individual. This trait brings him rewards at the end of the performance. His praiseworthy bravery saves his life and, despite all the hardships he faces, he is able to keep himself honourable, which plainly indicates that he is a spokesman for the public, allowing people to define themselves and also criticising the upper classes and public servants.

In the process of reflecting a critical point from a moral perspective, such considerations as a character's physical appearance, way of speaking, behaviours and other people's thoughts about that character are worth considering. Turkish shadow theatre contains a good many examples. Since the last capital city and centre of culture of the Ottoman Empire was Istanbul, characters from other cities and states tended to be reflected critically. However, this critical discourse on individuals in Turkish shadow theatre was not directed at any particular religion, race, social status, residents of a geographical district, or sex as a whole. Muslims, Christians and Jews, men and women, and individuals from various cities of the state were individually open to criticism without any discrimination or prejudice against the whole. Karagöz is especially careful when he handles the concept of religion. He never criticises religions — in fact, religion is a sacred institution for him. However, Karagöz is ruthless in his criticism of the vices of men of religion. Those who use religions for their own objectives are a special target for Karagöz. It is the same with race. Turks, Jews, Armenians, Arabs and Persians are among those members of races criticised for their individual behaviour in one way or another. Yet Karagöz is careful not to include the whole race, only some members who are brought to the stage to convey a message. It is always certain that those who deserve to be criticised are unsympathetically reflected behind the curtain.

Morality and gender

Turkish shadow theatre has served as a mirror to show people their lives. Some men are presented as individuals without anything useful to contribute to the society they live in. Even worse are the men who are disobedient to the country's laws. The choice of names for male characters reflects certain personal aspects. Of these, Tiryaki (Karagöz also calls him 'Sleeping Gentleman' or 'Opium Father') uses opium; Beberuhi earns his living with the money he gets from women; and Matiz has killed before and often threatens to kill Karagöz. Such characters are presented to the audience to show the meaning and significance of their own behaviour.

Women are also treated critically in Turkish shadow theatre. Karagöz's wife and Hacivat's daughter are disapproved of because of their desire to spend more money than their family earns. Another fault found with women is presented through the inclusion of prostitutes, portrayed as women renting a house in the vicinity and receiving men into their house. Some women are also shown to be fond of women, not men. They do not hesitate to express their sexual preference publicly, although the society they live in rejects this and they are said to lower the moral values of the society. Some women seek to live in luxury at any cost. Some of them give birth on the day they get married. They recite love poems and serve alcoholic drinks to the men with whom they make love.

The moral perspective of *Karagöz* plays requires that the society as a whole should be shown the good and the bad in order for the educational function of the theatre to serve its purpose. That is why *Karagöz* shadow theatre reflects all sorts of women, so that the spectators can reach a logical conclusion about what is decent and what is not. The fact that Karagöz uses even his wife for this proves that he is not prejudiced against women because they are women; his sole aim is to teach while making people laugh. This indicates that, while the tradition of shadow theatre may have originally come from the Nile valley, the character of Karagöz seems much more home-grown and characteristic of Turkey (Gorvett 2004: 62–63).

The content of Turkish shadow theatre is sometimes claimed to be obscene, and spectators are said to enjoy this. Even when performances were held in a sultan's presence, they retained their coarseness as a way of presenting critical ideas concerning the conditions of the society. Sultans mostly had sympathy for issues portrayed by shadow theatre, however much it criticised them and reflected unpleasant social issues. The main reason for the tolerance of sultans was their belief that actors (shadow puppets) of shadow theatre were not real people (And 1977: 86).

Effects of Karagöz plays

Some researchers suggest that Karagöz in fact did not include issues concerning the state and religion into his critical issues behind the curtain in the Ottoman State, implying that Karagöz had a kind of inviolability in state and religious circles. But other sources demonstrate that he directed his critical ideas to those occupying important positions in the state for their attitudes, behaviours and applications. Even the Sultan

was not an exception in this regard. In a dialogue between Karagöz and a young man, when the young man says that he is looking for a job and asks for advice, Karagöz replies that he should join the navy but should be an admiral. He adds that the young man does not have any ability, which is enough to occupy a position as an admiral. Similarly, the janissaries (a group of soldiers in the Ottoman state) are said to have lost their traditional courage and prominence. *Karagöz* also informs the sultan of the bribery of governors. Taking all these into consideration, it should be noted that, despite the system which had an absolute control within the country, *Karagöz* had absolute freedom. This feature of *Karagöz* was both impressive and functional. The highest man below the sultan is brought to the curtain, blamed for his deeds, and sent to a cell because he cannot defend himself properly. Somewhere else in the state, if somebody repeats even a line of what Karagöz pronounces, he is sure to be punished, but nothing happens to the actors, who represent persons from every layer of the society and every profession including pashas, scholars, bankers and tradesmen. Some European researchers noted that the criticism of the state affairs reminded them of an uncensored newspaper which was more aggressive than those in England, France and America. Being an oral and not a written newspaper, it was more functional than its counterparts in the West (And 1977: 345–48).

Karagöz has always been a satirist: ' *Karagöz* plays are not intended for children: they are the voice of the public, they handle political issues when needed, and they must.' (Akdemir 2003) The rulers of the Ottoman state had to take him into consideration in their public responsibilities and duties. They had to remember the fact that *Karagöz* would reflect, in a critical way, the actions and decisions not liked and approved by the public (And 1969: 311). They had to keep in mind the point that *Karagöz* was 'a political weapon with which to criticise local political and social abuse' (And 1975: 83). Yet it is also a fact that from time to time some authorities felt obliged to hold a meeting to come to a decision about this function of the theatre. They even banned the exhibition of some concerns in order to protect their traditional respectable positions (Kudret 1968: 38) . Yet it would be a misconception to claim that the court and Islamic leaders were against shadow performances; they consistently encouraged the public to see *Karagöz* plays because these plays gave the lower classes a sense of power and a feeling that they also had a say in the affairs of state.

Here, it may be claimed that this extent of freedom for only *Karagöz* but not for anyone else is not substantive, since nobody else has the same rights. However, it can be noted that Karagöz was not considered by rulers to be a living being. Nevertheless, there were times when they tried to keep *Karagöz* under official control. For instance, in the nineteenth century, the satirical and coarse style of *Karagöz* received some negative reaction from the state. Efforts were made to prevent plays from including issues of education: because of the peculiar nature of teacher–student relationships, and because of the fact that interfering in this relationship is regarded as improper, religious authorities felt that they had the right to determine what issues were not to be included in the dialogue behind the curtain (And 1969: 22). However, the coarseness of the plays was intended to be a way out from a rigidly closed society and public inability to act. The plays had the duties of distinguishing the good from the bad, and warning the public against evil, injustice and tyranny.

Karagöz plays point towards the problems of daily life in the country, like the lack of means in people's lives and the ill-management of those in administrative positions. In this reflection of the conditions with a focus on the needs and expectations of the public, traditional urban settlements and their realities are shown behind the curtain, including some aspects of Ottoman culture. Karagöz questions both traditional values and social problems originating from them. He frequently draws attention to sex, violence and bribery. He also reflects instances of lesbianism, hermaphrodites and multiple marriages. Throughout this process, sexuality — like violence — was presented in a way that was outside the norms of typical Islamic society (Smith 2004: 188). Sokullu draws attention to this issue, revealing the point that Turkish shadow plays could be described as a mirror reflecting the society at large:

Poverty, unemployment and illiteracy, among the basic problems of daily life may be said to constitute the main theme of each play. In *Karagöz* plays, following the opening, the introduction section generally is about these problems resembling the acknowledgment section of a film. Although it is not the main theme of the dialogue, poverty takes place as an implication and a complaint. For this reason, in the development of the subject matter it emerges as the core problem. (Sokullu 1979: 92)

Karagöz is the symbol of poverty and illiteracy, and in almost all shadow plays he is unemployed. This must have been deliberate to give a sign of the critical idea that unemployment as a result of the ignorance of the state is a grave problem which ultimately leads to dire consequences. Not having been trained in a craft, he cannot earn his living in an urban settlement like most citizens of the state: ' *Karagöz* reflects the lives of ordinary people. While describing the daily life and traditions in the forefront, he makes the spectators feel the deep problems of the society as a whole.' (Sokullu, 1969: 268) This generalisation involves the issues of education on the one hand, and criticism of the rulers on the other, since they do not perform their public duty properly. The contrast between the well-to-do citizens of the country and the poor ones is reflected behind the curtain as a clear sign of inequality resulting from administrative fault. Karagöz is forced to work in professions he does not like because of his lack of training, just like numerous settlers in the capital city coming from different parts of Anatolia and Thrace. Almost all of the characters belonging to different races passing in a parade behind the curtain are poor.

Unemployment — a natural consequence of poverty and illiteracy, closely associated with despotism and the lack of a proper establishment — is reflected as reducing the quality of life in the country. In *Karagöz* plays, there are signs of injustice behind the colourful life of the neighbourhood brought to the stage. While honest members of the young generation are very few, there are many intimidators who try to change the system to serve their purposes. This is intended to put the blame on those responsible for the organisation of a proper order in the society (Kudret 1968: 17). It also reflects the general anxiety, and Karagöz criticises both the emergence of such oppressors and their actions. Even Karagöz becomes an intimidator: he tries to get rid of or beat those he does not like, or is beaten by them if they are stronger than him. Karagöz doesn't always get rid of the problems he meets, but he is always rebellious and creative in the face of them. In this atmosphere of intimidation, moral values seem to have lost their significance. In *Mandıra* (Dairy Farm), when his wife leaves the house taking the goods, Karagöz marries the first woman he meets. This woman accepts men into the house. Ironically, Karagöz asks for money from those men, which is 'a clear indication of a critical view of the social life' (Sokullu 1979: 97–100) — how poverty can lead a just man to behave in an unjust way.

Karagöz today

Karagöz theatre's glory days have passed. The decrease of the popularity of shadow theatre in Turkey started with the introduction of Western theatre in the first half of the nineteenth century. The educated class wanted to establish an understanding of Western culture, law, individuality and society, and playwrights and critics of the period were eager to support this undertaking. There was also a strong claim that shadow theatre caused moral degeneration. Some famous dramatists of the period, like Namik Kemal, wanted the state to totally ban shadow puppet theatre. There was some validity in their attacks. Shadow theatre in the period was not in the hands of those who utilised it as a cultural means, but in the hands of those who used it to earn their living by exploiting the obscenity and immorality reflected by *Karagöz* plays. Since there was no effort to keep this traditional heritage in proper hands, there was a preference to destroy it.

The decrease in puppet theatre in Turkey continued through the twentieth century. The changes in every sphere of the society also impacted on theatre. The dominant trend was Western-style theatre, and *Karagöz* was neglected. Another factor impacting on the loss of interest in shadow theatre in the Republican period was the introduction of television and cinema. With the coming of television in particular, this theatre form further lost prominence. As shadow performers retired, there were no trained apprentices to replace them. Although there have been individual efforts to make *Karagöz* theatre a focus of interest, there is no popular move to restore it. The Ministry of Culture and Tourism supports the activities of this traditional theatrical form, and some shadow puppet plays are performed both within Turkey and abroad, but this is not enough to re-educate and familiarise the entire public about the importance of this long-rooted tradition. It is interesting that today *Karagöz* is a theatre performed mostly at children's festivals. The original content and goals are preserved, although the coarse language is no longer used.

Conclusion

The aim of satire in Turkish shadow theatre is to warn the spectators about vices and to force them to take measures against those involved in vicious acts. Stressing the irregularity resulting from ill- management in the country through the 'political content' (Ayça 1974) of some plays, Karagöz notes that the results may be expected. By including in his narration undesirable behaviours resulting from social conditions, he aims to teach moral lessons. He is especially meticulous in his effort to help people to evaluate logically and acceptably the concerns related to their lives. As he reveals the vices in the society and the nature of those involved in such actions, his comic and satirical dialogues urge the need for proper training for individuals belonging to all segments of the society. This need includes examples like 'preventing Karagöz by wardens from cutting trees' (Mutlu 2002: 9) in *KanlıKavak* (The Bloody Poplar) — which is surprising, coming from an age when protection of nature was not on the agenda of the nations of the world.

In conclusion, Turkish shadow theatre documented stories that could still captivate the imagination of the audience. From the beginning of the sixteenth century, it was a main component in the court celebrations of the Ottoman Empire, and became a popular performing art form in Turkey in a short time. Its function was to hold a mirror up to a society in which the public deeply felt the need for betterment and justice. It only wanted to be a mediator, not a destroyer. Karagöz especially stresses this point, apologising to the audience at the end of each performance for any inconvenience caused during the presentation.

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