

E.L.O., 7-8 (2001-2)

THE WOMAN WARRIOR - FACT OR TALE

*Sally Pomme Clayton**

PORTRAIT OF A WARRIOR WOMAN

The theme of the warrior maiden appears in several genres of Middle Eastern and Central Asian folklore: epics; legends; myths; folktales, and folksongs. Although many of these stories have been written down, they existed, and still exist, as oral performances. There are typical motifs associated with the warrior woman. She: is a virgin; is surrounded by a band of warrior maidens, most often numbering forty; is armed and fights in battles; disguises herself as man; will not marry unless she can be beaten at wrestling, fighting, or the singing of epics. Her story has various endings, when defeated she: loses her virginity; loses her power along with her virginity; falls in love with her vanquisher and stops fighting, or she marries and has children but continues to fight as a warrior. Not all these motifs appear together in one tale, but it is surprising how frequently many of these elements do appear together.

The character of the warrior woman appears so frequently that there are too many examples to mention all of them here. She can be found in Arabic, Turkic, Greek and Persian folklore. I will give a selection of examples from different parts of the Middle East and Central Asia. Then I will examine two epics in more detail, looking in particular at what the relationships might be between the deeds and roles of the warrior woman of story and the roles ascribed to women in the Middle East and Central Asia.

NARRATIVE EXAMPLES

The warrior woman theme abounds in Arabic epics and follows a variety of patterns with different emphases and endings. In the *Sirat Saif b. Dhi Yazan* there is an 'Island of Girls' surrounded by "three hundred and sixty magical guardians, which cry out a warning if a man approaches." (Lyons 24:1995). In the *Sirat 'Antar* a warrior Queen fights a battle with the hero 'Antar who defeats and deflowers her. In *Saif al-tijan* a warrior maiden fights with the hero and falls in love with him when her veil slips.

The historical epic *Dhat al-Himma* is the most remarkable example because the central character is a female warrior. The epic is long, an edition printed in Cairo in 1909 stretches to 7 volumes and the story spans three centuries of history. Remke Kruk (1993) gives a synopsis and analysis of the epic in her article on Arabic warrior women. She describes *Dhat al-Himma*, whose name means "wolf", as a "redoubtable warrior as well as devoted mother... leading character of the story, feared and respected by all, even her enemies." (Kruk 220:1993).

* 7 Westcott Road, Kennington, London SE17 3QY, U.K. Email: sallypommeclayton@hotmail.com

The epic contains many other stories which also feature women warriors. Like Dhat al-Himma these women: ride horses; go into battle; wrestle with both men and women; disguise themselves as men; are virgins or sexually free, and often use their beauty and body to weaken and dazzle their opponents.

There is Zayhab who will only marry a man who can defeat her. Princess Nura "who loves women and detests men" (Kruk 223:1993) Her wonderful story takes up one whole volume. The warlike Princess Malatya leads an army and founds a city which is named after her. Zananir is told by Jesus "in a dream, that she should only marry the man who defeats her in battle" (Kruk 224:1993). Zananir shows off her strength by hurling her spear like a javelin and jumping onto her horse without stirrups. The list of these warrior maids is long. Kruk describes how "Dhat al-Himma could virtually be termed...a collection of 'warrior women' stories, embedded in the framework of the story of Dhat al-Himma herself and to a certain extent following the same pattern." (Kruk 226:1993)

The warrior maiden appears in several stories from the Arabian Nights. Heroines dress up as men, play tricks, escape, seduce or become Kings. The warrior princess Al-Datma in the story of Al-Datma and Prince Behram will only marry the man who beats her in a fight. All who fail she brands on the forehead with the words "I fought Al-Datma and lost". She fights Prince Behram and he nearly wins, so during the battle she reveals her face, he loses his strength and she knocks him out of his saddle. Prince Behram tricks Al-Datma into marrying him and deflowers her by force. Al-Datma marries him and ceases to be a warrior.

Robert Irwin mentions in "The Arabian Nights: a companion" (1994) a collection of folktales Hikayat al- Ajiba Wa'l Akhbar al-Ghariba which contain the "Story of the forty girls". A man stumbles on a golden castle. At night forty warriors appear who remove their armour and reveal themselves to be women. They notice that some of their food has gone missing, and so each day one of the woman stays at home to guard the castle. Each woman then meets the man, and subsequently becomes pregnant.

The medieval Greek poem Diyenis Akritis contains an episode in the latter part of the poem where the hero Diyenis meets the virgin Amazon Maximou. She has never yet lost a fight, and when Diyenis overcomes her in battle and she offers herself to him. In some of the versions of the poem Diyenis is later ashamed that he has committed adultery, and returns to murder Maximou.

The Karakalpak and Kazak epic Qiriq Qiz "The Forty Maidens" tells of the warrior maiden Gulaim who lives with forty maidens inside an impregnable fortress with bronze walls. She instructs the maidens in the arts of war. Suitors try to win the hand of Gulaim but they can not get inside the castle.

Gulaim is in love with Aryslan. He has a sister who is also a warrior maiden. Gulaim and her maidens join forces with Aryslan and fight in a war and the two marry. But "this does not end her warrior-woman life" (Shoolbraid 84:1975) she goes on to fight more battles which result in the creation of equal nations.

In the Kazak epic of Alpamis the warrior maiden Barcin fights and wins the hero. Again the hero has a sister who is also a warrior woman. The woman who goes into battle to save her people and protect her land is a widespread theme that can be found in epics throughout the Middle East and Central Asia.

THE TRUTH OF A STORY

The warrior woman can also be found in narratives from Siberia, Mongolia, Russia and China. But she is not commonly found in Western European folklore. A comparative study of the existence of this theme in stories from other parts of the world is outside the scope of this discussion. However, it does seem that the motifs linked with this character have a specific relationship to the societies and cultures of the Middle East and Central Asia.

It is interesting that such a powerful female figure exists in Islamic societies where there are generally strictly defined gender roles. I would like to see what insights can be gained by looking at the relationship between the warrior woman theme and the societies who tell these stories. In particular how the figure of the warrior woman is popular in the segregated societies of the Middle East.

What do stories from the oral tradition represent. Are they based on historical fact? Or are they desires and dreams? In which case, whose fantasies are they? Are stories a reflection of the culture that uses them? And what aspects of culture do they mirror and how? Or are the stories evidence of a good night's entertainment? What kind of truth do stories carry. I will explore these questions through two epics which contain powerful warrior women. "Harman Dali" from Turkmenistan and the Ottoman "Dede Korkut". I have chosen these narratives because of the excellent translations that are available.

HARMAN DALI

The tale of "Harman Dali" is part of the "Koroglu" or "Gorogly" epic. Different versions of this long epic are found throughout Turkic speaking groups such as: Turks; Uzbeks; Karakalpaks; Turkmen and Kazaks. Koroglu / Gorogly is a bandit who fights invaders with the help of his band of warriors and magic horse Kirat. The epic is usually sung to the accompaniment of a stringed instrument.

Slawomira Zeranska-Kominek has translated a Turkmen version of the tale into English in "The tale of Crazy Harman" (1997). Her translation is based on transcriptions of a performance of the epic in 1937 by Turkmen bagsy (epic singer) Palwan. Zeranska-Kominek has spent much time in Turkmenistan studying and researching the performances of the bagsy and has produced several collections of recordings. She writes that "Harman Dali" is the "most favourite and most often performed epic" (9:1997) and most bagsys will have it in their repertoire. It takes five to six hours to perform. The bagsy accompanies themselves on the dutar, moving between spoken and sung narrative, prose and poetry.

HARMAN DALI - SYNOPSIS

The invincible Harman Dali proclaims that she will only marry the man who can beat her at wrestling and singing. If they fail she will cut off their head. "Three years later Harman Dali had a minaret built of three hundred heads of bagsys and warriors." (Zeranska-Kominek10:1997)

The bandit Gorogly takes up the challenge. When Gorogly and Harman Dali meet, Harman sings a warning.

They call me Harman Dali
I will gouge out your eyes!
I will eat your flesh raw!
Turn back your horse and ride off! (100:1997)

They fight fiercely. Harman lifts Gorogly off his horse "as if he was a little boy... quickly sat on him like a female camel, straddling him and locking his arms with her thighs. She drew the double-edged knife from the sheath and put it to Gorogly's throat." (101:1997) The fight is humorous and becomes increasingly erotic with descriptions of Harman's body and how Gorogly becomes inflamed with desire for her. Gorogly is not strong enough to overcome Harman, but when he sings to her she spares his life.

Harman Dali promises that "if in a year or two you hear that Harman Dali was married, you may come back and I will serve you really well during one whole night" (144:1997)

Gorogly goes to Asyk Aydyn to get spiritual and musical training. Asyk Aydyn dreams of "three hundred and sixty gardens and a palace in the middle; in the palace a window, in the window a girl's face appeared, just as the moon out of clouds." (116:1997) Asyk Aydn consequently falls in love with Harman Dali. He sets out with his favourite pupil Kerem Dali to find out if she is "crazy or wise, whether she can tell the victor from the defeated, or perhaps she's simply mad?" (121:1997)

Kerem is sent to sing with Harman and although she finds him attractive and kisses him passionately, she still wants to "find a good reason to torment him"(121:1997) and breaks his dutar.

Asyk Ayden performs a magic spell which confuses and tricks Harman. When she enters a singing duel with Asyk Ayden he wins. "Harman Dali became immediately embarrassed, she bent at the master's feet." (131:1997) He is too old to marry Harman Dali, so he gives her to Kerem Dali. Gorogly returns and she allows him to spend the promised night with her.

Gorogly is with her with his soul and body.
No one is better at wrestling than me
into Crazy Harman's maiden bed
my loving heart sneaked." (150:1997)

DEDE KORKUT

Geoffrey Lewis's beautiful translation of this cycle of stories is based on two 16th century manuscripts from the period of the Oghuz Turks. It is difficult to know whether the stories of Dede Korkut are still performed today. Versions of the Dede Korkut epic are certainly known and in Central Asia. Korkut is an important figure in Kazakstan and his grave on the banks of the Syr Darya is still a sacred shrine, visited by poets in order to gain inspiration. During a visit to Kazakstan in 1996 I was told several folkstories about Dede Korkut which I have not seen written down. However these stories were told as anecdotes and not sung as epics.

The warrior woman motif appears in several stories in Lewis's translation. She appears as: a warrior maiden that the hero must fight with in order to marry; a determined mother searching for her lost son; a queen riding out with her "forty slender maidens" (35:1973); a courageous battle wife, and a "dark-eyed infidel girl" (89:1973) that so many heroes long to marry. The warrior woman is vividly portrayed in the following story.

KAN TURALI SON OF KARLI KOJA - SYNOPSIS

Kan Turali requests that his father find him a wife who "before I mount my well-trained horse she must be on horseback; before I reach the bloody infidels' land she must already have got there and brought me back some heads." Kan Turali's father responds "you don't want a girl; you want a dare-devil hero to look after you...finding a girl is up to you." (Lewis 117:1973)

Kan Turali sets off to try and win the hand of King Trebisonid's daughter Princess Saljan. He has to kill her three beasts: a bull; a lion, and a camel. So far no one has got past the bull, and thirty two suitors' heads have been cut off. Kan Turali succeeds in killing the beasts and marries Princess Saljan.

They set off together towards his home. But on the way Kan Turali falls into a deep warrior sleep. Princess Saljan is afraid that all her suitors will ride after them and so she "took Kan Turali's horse and saddled it, quietly she dressed herself for battle, she took up his spear and went up to

Sally Pomme Clayton, "The Woman Warrior"

some high ground, on watch." She calls to Kan Turali to wake him, then rides ahead to fight. "She routed their enemies" (Lewis127:1973).

She returns with a bloody sword and finds Kan Turali gone. His parents are grief-stricken and she points her whip at them and tells them to sit down and wait while she looks for him. "Wherever dust is falling and swirling, wherever the crow and raven dancing, there shall I seek him" (Lewis129:1973).

She finds Kan Turali has been taken prisoner and "like a peregrine falcon falling on a flock of geese, she drove her horse at the infidel; she smashed through them from one end to the other." Kan Turali doesn't even recognise her and thinks she is a male warrior. When she reveals herself to him he is concerned that everyone will think him weakling because his wife has saved his life. Princess Saljan is furious and says they must fight. "She spurred her horse and rode up to some high ground. From her quiver she poured her ninety arrows on to the earth...the girl shot an arrow at Kan Turali that sent the lice in his hair scuttling down to his feet." (Lewis131:1973) They embrace and forgive each other.

THE AMAZONS

Are the warrior women of Middle eastern narratives Amazons? Many of the writers who have collected or translated Middle Eastern narratives seem to think so. M.C. Lyons in *The Arabian epic* writes that "Dhat al-Himma is the most extended example of the amazonian fighter in the Arabic cycles, the motif is omnipresent" (350:1995) G.M.H. Shoolbraid describes the "Amazon-like existence of Gulaim and her entourage of forty maidens in their fortified retreat of Sarkop" (10:1975) in the epic of Qiriq Qiz. However Remke Kruk does not like to use the term Amazon to describe the woman warriors of Arabic folklore because she finds the term loaded with a "vast amount of connotations". (213:1993) Although she agrees that the Amazon myth exists in "traces of the 'warrior woman' theme." (226:1993)

The fearless Harman Dali certainly sounds like an Amazon. Her name means "both 'valiant' and 'crazy', suggesting valour of a daring, if not foolhardy kind." (Reichl 156:1992) The name Dali is usually given to a valiant man. Harman Dali's warrior spirit is crazy and daring, "when was it I last killed a man, when was it I last shed a man's blood?...It seems that if I don't keep killing a man every week, every month, any good-for-nothing vagabond, any villain will feel free to invade my privacy." (Zeranska-Kominek 110:1997)

There are many references to Amazons in classical Greek writing. Amazons were virgins who rode and fought in battles and cut off their right breast so they could use a bow more skilfully. In some stories they live with women, in others they are sexually liberated, in others they meet with men once a year to conceive children. Homer is the first to mention the Amazons, writing around 750 BC he called them "women the equal of men". The Amazon Penthesilea appears in the "Iliad" fighting at Troy. She is killed by Achilles, who lifts her helmet to discover who he has killed and falls in love with her face. One of the twelve labours of Hercules is to steal Hippolyta, the Queen of the Amazons', girdle. Herodotus, writing about 400 BC, called the Amazons "man-killers."

Lyn Webster Wilde's new study "On the trail of the women warriors" (1999) traces the Amazon myth through classical Greece and around the Black Sea looking for historical evidence for their existence. She describes the Scythian warrior graves found by Professor Renate Rolle in the Ukraine and Caucuses, dating from 750 - 300 BC. The graves had previously been assumed to belong to men because they contained swords, knives and arrows. However the graves also contained spindles and mirrors, and Professor Rolle discovered that some of the warrior graves belonged to women.

These were women warriors living in the steppe regions north of the Black Sea during classical Greek times. Some 25 per cent of the Scythian and Sauromatian warrior graves found in the Ukraine were of women. (Webster Wilde 63:1999)

The bodies of these female warriors tended to be very young or very old, suggesting that they were virgins, or past child-bearing. The women were buried in graves along side men and as they were often buried with gold it would seem that they had high status. The women were part of a mixed society and did not live separately from men, but fought along side them when necessary. As the women are buried with feminine objects as well as weapons, it does not seem to be a contradiction for these people that women could also be warriors. Neal Ascherson, in his history of the Black Sea, describes the contents of the graves.

Among the nomads of the Pontic Steppe, women...rode with armies into battle; they died of arrow wounds or spear-stabs; they were buried in female robes and jewellery with their lances, quiver and sword...Scythian graves all over southern Ukraine have revealed women soldiers, sometimes buried in groups, equipped with bows, arrows and iron-plated battle-belts to protect their groins. (Ascherson 111-112: 1996)

These graves are historical evidence that women warriors existed, and suggest that 25 per cent of Scythian warriors were women. Both Harman Dali and Dede Korkut describe in detail how women mount and ride, fight and use weapons. In Kan Turali son of Karli Koja Princess Saljan is described as drawing two bows at exactly the same time, "one to her right and to her left". (Lewis117:1973) The evidence of the graves suggests that the descriptions of women warriors in the stories are based on the actual roles that women played.

Webster Wilde's study emphasises a culture and religion that did not preclude women from taking a powerful role in society. It is a refreshing and positive approach, that is careful not to depict an idealised matriarchal society. Webster Wilde discusses how the Amazon myth might describe a period in history where social changes were taking place on a large scale.

"The patriarchal people who took over interpreted the old ways as a topsy-turvy distortion of the 'natural order'. The story of the Amazons that has come down to us is one expression of this moment when the religious gender roles were shifting." (Webster Wilde129:1999)

In this light it is possible to interpret many of the Amazon stories as the enforcement of a new social order, or of men wielding power over women. Peter Mackridge (1993) writes about Digenes and Maximou. "Maximou has submitted symbolically to Digenes' dominance after physically relinquishing her record of invincibility in combat. She has ceased to be an 'unnatural' wild Amazon free of male domination and has been tamed by being forced into her 'natural' category of women." (Mackridge157:1993)

However the emphasis in the Greek Amazon myth does seem to be slightly different from the woman warrior theme of the Middle East. The Greek myths often emphasise the Amazons hatred of men and their subsequent overpowering or rape. While the Middle East narratives often allow the woman warrior to continue fighting after she has lost her virginity and become a wife. The Middle Eastern woman warrior is desirable to men rather than terrifying. In Kan Turali son of Karli Koja, the skilled warrior Princess Saljan is so desirable that "any her glance falls on she inflames with love." (Lewis 123:1973) The Middle Eastern warrior woman is often given a positive role rather than a destructive one. She can be responsible for protecting her city, or like Princess Saljan, saving the hero's life.

Perhaps these different emphases are reflections of two quite different social orders. The women warriors buried near the Black Sea would have lived nomadically, following their herds from pasture to pasture. The sedentary Greek lifestyle was very different, and would consequently have produced different ways of defining gender relations. Perhaps to the Greeks, the role that women had in these nomadic societies was unnatural. Nomadism began to disappear with Greek colonisation, and so did the woman warrior.

GENDER ROLES IN THE MIDDLE EAST

The stories of Harman Dali and Dede Korkut both existed in nomadic societies.

The independence of the warrior women portrayed in these stories is likely to be related to nomadic culture. Paula Michaels describes the lives of Kazak women (1998) and how their freedom is a result of nomadism. Nomadic society demands that everyone work together in order to survive, which requires flexibility between men and women. The values of Islam in Kazakhstan were freely adapted to fit nomadic life. "Nomadic life precluded seclusion." (Michaels190:1998) Kazak women have never worn veils, they ride horses, mix with men in public, and older women can have great authority in their community.

Ibn Battuta describes women's position in society during the historical period of Dede Korkut in his *Travels in Asia and Africa 1325-1354*. He writes about the honour that is accorded to women. "A remarkable thing which I saw in this country was the respect shown to

women by the Turks, for they hold a more dignified position than the men." Battuta describes a powerful Turkish princess who seems to have stepped right out of Dede Korkut. She is attended by about thirty maidens and "on her garments there were loops, of which each maiden took one, and lifted her train clear of the ground on all sides." (Gibb146:1929)

I am struck by my surprise and delight that the women in Harman Dali and Dede Korkut might assume such powerful and respected roles. My surprise reveals my own preconceptions about the roles I imagine Middle Eastern women might assume. The West has created, and consequently been given, images of Middle Eastern women as passive beauties. They might be powerful mothers, perhaps wise old women but certainly not warriors. However Middle Eastern women and men might have quite different interpretations of what it means to be female. Perhaps it is only shocking to a white Western woman that a warrior might also be a woman? My response reveals more about how femininity is perceived in the West, than the ways gender is distinguished in the Middle East.

Throughout the Middle East women have participated actively in war. Jane. I. Smith writes in *Women in contemporary Muslim societies*. "Historically Islam has allowed political and military participation of women in order to safeguard the ummah (community) against attacks from the outside" (Smith12:1980) In many Middle Eastern countries women have: carried arms and fought; hidden soldiers; taken provisions to fighters, and urged on the fight with battle cries.

The role of woman warriors in Dede Korkut and Harman Dali is not a surprising one for Middle Eastern audiences. Indeed the female warrior is attractive and desirable. Kan Turali tells his father "you'll go and get me some pretty dressed-up doll of a Turcoman girl, whose belly will split if I should suddenly lean over and fall on her." (Lewis117:1973) Both Kan Turali and Bamsi Beyrek in Dede Korkut make requests for wives "who before I reach my enemy will bring me some heads." (Lewis 65:1973) The Western definition of femininity is bland in comparison.

TELLERS AND LISTENERS

In the Middle East epics are predominately sung by men for male audiences. In segregated Muslim society it would be easy to assume that the women warrior theme was a product of male fantasy. However women also know these stories and tell versions of them in the privacy of their homes. These stories are about both men and women and belong to the whole community. Indeed several famous Turkish Asiks learnt their repertoire of epics from their mothers.

In Central Asia women are allowed to take on the role of epic singer and perform in public, although not many choose to do so. I have seen two female ziraus (epic singers) in Kazakhstan. Female ziraus perform in public to mixed audiences, though they are considered to have crossed-over a

gender divide. They are treated as honorary men and sit on the male side of the yurt.

What meanings a story has for its audience depends largely on what the individual storyteller does with the story. How does the storyteller manipulate the story to say what they want to say or what their listeners wish to hear? Unfortunately this area of research has been neglected in relation to Middle Eastern and Central Asian folklore and there are few references to what the narratives mean to the storytellers and listeners themselves.

Remke Kruk suggests that the warrior woman theme is a device used by storytellers to please their audience. Kruk does not give any information about how the theme is used by storytellers, or the meanings it might have to them. Bridget Connely (1986) discusses how the narrator of the Hilali epic manipulates the elements of the story. She maintains that the epic is preoccupied "with male-female power differentials" (Connely 273:1986) Connely describes how the narrator shapes the telling around "the power potential in the male-female interaction. He revolves each short episode...around female power, female judgement of tribal heroes, or a central interaction with a female character." (Connely199:1986)

The teller can use the story to highlight or subvert the ways that relationships between the sexes are understood. A story has the potential to express how gender is perceived and defined in a particular society and how the sex roles can be manipulated and inverted. Margaret Mills is one of the few folklorists who has approached folklore from this point of view. She discusses an Afghan variant of Cinderella (1982) where women take on male characteristics. She reveals that the story has complex meanings that differ with the gender of the teller and the listener. If the tale is told by and for women then the "acquisition of male characteristics by a female is a grotesque punishment." (Mills191:1982) While the tale has a different emphasis for male narrators, who "more frequently cast characters in roles which entail their acting like or appearing to be members of the opposite sex." (Mills189:1982)

During the telling of Harman Dali the bagsy describes the fight graphically between Harman Dali and Gorogly, delighting in detailed description of the action. When Harman Dali threatens to kill Gorogly she cries " 'you're seeing death!' and held the blade to his throat." (Zeranska-Kominek 102:1997) The bagsy's use of humour portrays the fight psychologically as well as physically. This is an everyday household battle between the sexes. Harman Dali says "God, I'll do everything I can so that he won't have another good answer." (Zeranska-Kominek 101:1973) The epic is full of witty exchanges which must be highly entertaining and cathartic for the audience.

Very little has been written about how storytellers manipulate the woman warrior theme, so it is not possible to say what meanings the theme

might have for tellers and listeners. This fascinating and rich area of study might explore what the stories mean in relation to the way gender is defined by a society. It might explore whether the warrior woman is a depiction of a society's ideal woman. Or whether the theme is a warning of what happens when someone crosses over a gender divide.

Is Harman Dali's behaviour traditionally female or male? Harman Dali's father wants a son and gets a daughter. The epic starts with him announcing "let the daughter be like a son to me." (Zeranska-Kominek 89:1997) Harman Dali then proceeds to act like a man, beginning with the decision to find a husband herself.

Slawomira Zeranska-Kominek's study does not discuss the meanings that the epic has to those who tell and listen to it. However she does discuss the cultural significance of the story in relation to Turkmen wedding practices.

A REFLECTION OF CULTURE

Karl Reichl describes Harman Dali as the motif of wooing the strong bride - a very common motif in Turkic epic poetry. "The motif of the cruel princess who kills her suitors if they are unable to fulfil the tasks imposed on them." (Reichl 158:1992) The hero undergoes marriage tests to prove that he is worthy of the bride and can win her. The tests might be: riddles; tasks; impossible feats, or the ultimate feat of overcoming the bride herself. The determined hero Kan Turali says of Princess Saljan "the beautiful one who puts out eyes and snatches souls, I shall kiss her throat" (Lewis 119:1973)

The tasks that the potential husband undergoes are usually ones of physical strength. But there is another motif in which the bride-to-be outwits her husband in the intellectual feat of asking and answering riddles. This motif is very common in Europe and was also part of European pre-marriage rituals. Perhaps the clever girl who can answer riddles is the European equivalent of the warrior woman?

Zeranska-Kominek also sees Harman Dali as a bride-wooing tale. Her study shows how the epic is filled with references to traditional Turkmen weddings. She describes how the structure of the epic follows the stages of a Turkman wedding: from matchmaking and courtship; to the formal handing over of the bride; and the toy (wedding party).

Zeranska-Kominek describes how ritual games are an important part of matchmaking and wedding celebrations. During a Turkman wedding party women from both sides of the family would represent the bride and bridegroom and stage a fight. "The bridesmaid's blocked the entrance to the yurt and initiated a ritual fight between the women representing the young couple...the mock fight would often turn into a real brawl." (Zeranska-Kominek 159:1997)

Pre-marriage contests were common throughout Central Asia. The bride was often chased by the bridegroom on horseback. Versions of qyz quu (kiss-the-girl) are still played in Kazkistan and Kyrgyzstan. Men chase women on horseback and try to catch and kiss them, if they fail they are chased and whipped. Harman Dali has three hundred and sixty maid servants who run through her garden like "wolves" chasing any men who enter it.

The girls went after him...their hair flying away with the wind. Mirim ran in zigzags but they followed him everywhere. After all, three hundred and sixty is not a small number...they were well-fed, strong girls. Even a dog would be lost if they closed in on it. After much poking and prodding they lifted Mirim off the ground and carried him to Harman Dali. (Zeranska-Kominek 110:1997)

Fighting was obviously an important part of the marriage ritual. Fighting in this context is not a violent activity, but a symbolic action. The ability to fight does not eliminate femininity, but is instead an attractive and necessary attribute for a bride. Fights are not just held between bride and bridegroom, but involved all the family. "Dhat al-Himma fights (and defeats) a future daughter-in-law, thus laying down the pattern of their relations in the future." (Kruk 227:1993) Ritualised fighting was a way of establishing status and power between the new relations.

When the hero fails to win the fight, Kruk explains that they "often excuse themselves for their defeat by saying that it is the woman's beauty that has defeated them rather than her strength." (Kruk 227:1993) The male-female power relations are debated in a conversation between Princess Saljan and Kan Turali. Kan Turali is alarmed that other people might think him weak when they hear how his life has been saved by a woman. He tells Princess Saljan, "You will stand there and boast, you will say, 'Kan Turali was helpless; I led the way on my horse and he followed after.' " But Princess Saljan cleverly replies "For women to boast is scandalous. Boasting does not make a woman a man." (Lewis130:1963) The conversation is humorous and touching. It captures the very human and universal struggle to achieve balance and flexibility between the sexes. Perhaps this struggle is at the heart of the symbolic fight.

Zeranska-Kominek's work gives the story of Harman Dali a vital place in Turkmen culture. The story is not the product of male fantasies, but a deep expression of the dynamic of male-female relationships contained within the marriage ritual. Zeranska-Kominek's study goes on to discuss the story from a psychological view point. The story is full of very mysterious beautiful imagery. Harman Dali is frequently referred to as the moon and her maidens as the stars. Zeranska-Kominek's interpretations

are tempting. She links Harman's craziness with the moon and the cure for madness with music. Zeranska-Kominek sees the story as a metaphor for the "social and psychological maturation process of a young

man." (282:1997) Although her analysis includes much historical and cultural background, her interpretations owe more to Jungian psychology and comparative religion, than to conversations with the tellers and listeners. Ultimately Zeranska-Kominek cannot say what the story means until she lets those who tell and listen to it speak for themselves.

A FACT IS A TALE

The warrior woman, unexpectedly, turns out to be one of the stock characters of Middle Eastern and Central Asian folklore. She is as popular as the hero, the witch, or the evil ruler. And as well known in these countries as Cinderella is to the West. That I should find this surprising is a reflection of Western assumptions about the roles that women might play in the Middle East.

Many stories with women warriors at the centre of the adventure are still being told in the Middle East and Central Asia. Dhat al-Himma and other stories with warrior women in them were "widely appreciated by Arab audiences from ... the eleventh to the twentieth century" (Kruk 226:1993) The response from and interaction with the audience is primary to storytelling, and is what keeps a story alive. Consequently storytellers must serve their audience, and can only tell what the audience wish to hear. The warrior woman theme will continue as long as audiences request it and it has meaning for their lives.

In order to really answer the questions brought out by this essay it would be necessary to spend time with the tellers and listeners. To discover what their attitudes are towards the warrior woman theme and what meanings the story has for them.

There is strong evidence, both historical and cultural, that the figure of the woman warrior is not a fantasy but based on the lives of real women. The warrior woman theme seems to be a case where a fact is a tale, and a tale is a fact.

To a Western woman the warrior woman theme is unusual and powerful. I want her to exist, I want her to be based on the truth. The woman warrior theme appears to carry layers and layers of different kinds of truths that are not obvious or even visible at first. The story reflects cultural practices and social constructs. It is also evidence of the storytellers ability to entertain, which in turn mirrors the desires of the audience.

When a child has really enjoyed listening to a story and got quite lost inside it, they can not help asking "is it true?" Russian storytellers know best how to answer this paradoxical question

A fact is a fact
and a tale is a tale,
but where no one passed by
there runs no trail,
what was not planted

Sally Pomme Clayton, "The Woman Warrior"

bears no seed,
what did not happen
no rumours breed.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- ASCHEPSON, Neal. *Black Sea*. Vintage.1996.
- BATTUTA, Ibn. *Travels in Asia and Africa 1325-1354*. (trans) H.A.R. Gibb. Routledge. 1929.
- BEATON, Roderick. *The medieval Greek romance*. Cambridge University Press. 1989.
- BURTON, Richard. (ad) Jack Zipes. *Arabian Nights: a selection*. Penguin Books.1997.
- CANARD, M. "Dhu'l-Himma." *Encyclopaedia of Islam*.Vol.2. Luzac and Co.1965.
- CHADWICK Nora, K and Victor Zhirmunsky. *Oral Epics of Central Asia*. Cambridge University Press.1969.
- CONNELLY, Bridget. *Arab folk epic and identity*. University of California Press.1986.
- EL SAADAWI, Nawal. "Women's resistance in the Arab world and in Egypt." In Halen Afshar (ed) *Women in the Middle East*. Macmillan Press.1993.
- FRIEDL, Ernestine."The position of women: appearance and reality". *Anthropological Quarterly*. Vol 40 no 3. pp 97-108.1967.
- FLUEHER-LOBBAN, Carolyn. "The political mobilisation of women in the Arab world." In Jane.I. Smith (ed) *Women in contemporary Muslim societies*. pp. 235-252. Associated University Presses.1980.
- IRWIN, Robert. *The Arabian Nights: a companion*. Penguin.1994.
- KRUK, Remke. "Warrior women in Arabic popular romance: Qannasa Bint Muzahim and other valiant ladies." *Journal of Arabic Literature* 24. 1993.
- LEWIS, G. (trans) *The Book of Dede Korkut*. Penguin Books.1974.
- LICHTENSTADTER, Ilse. *Women in the Aiyun Al-'Arab*. The Royal Asiatic Society. 1935.
- LYONS, M.C. *The Arabian epic*. Vols1 &2. Cambridge.1995.
- MACKRIDGE, Peter. "None but the brave deserve the fair: abduction, elopement, seduction and marriage in the Escorial *Digenes Akrites* and modern Greek heroic songs." In Roderick Beaton and David Ricks (ed) *Digenes Akrites. New approaches to Byzantine heroic poetry*. pp.150-160.Variorum.1993.
- MICHAELS, Paula. A. "Kazak Women: living the heritage of a unique past." In Hubert.L. Bodman, and Nayereh Tohidi (ed) *Women in Muslim Societies*. Lynne Rienner Publishers.1998.
- MILLS, Maragret. "A Cinderella variant in the context of a Muslim women's ritual." In Alan Dundes (ed) *Cinderella*. University of Wisconsin Press.1982.
- REICHL, Karl. *Turkic Oral Epic Poetry: Traditions, Forms, Poetic Structure*, New York : Garland 1992.
- SAUNIER, Guy. "Is there such a thing as an 'Akritic song'? Problems in the classification of modern Greek narrative songs." In Roderick Beaton and David Ricks (ed) *Digenes Akrites. New approaches to Byzantine heroic poetry*. pp.139 -149. Variorum.1993.
- SHOOLBRAID G.M.H. *The oral epic of Siberia and Central Asia*. Indiana University Press.1975.
- SMITH Jane. I. (ed) *Women in contemporary Muslim societies*. Associated University Presses.1980.
- WEBSTER Wilde, Lyn. *On the trail of the women warriors*. Constable 1999.
- ZERANSKA-KOMINEK, Slawomira. *The tale of Crazy Harman*. Dialog.1997.

RESUMO

O tema da jovem guerreira aparece em todo o folclore do Médio Oriente e da Ásia Central. Porque é este tema tão popular e o que poderão estas histórias representar? O artigo examina duas épicas túrquicas (um ramo da família de línguas altaicas, incluindo o turco o tatar, etc): Harman Dali, do Turquemenistão; e o conto de Kan Turali, filho de Karli Koja, de Dede Korkut (Otomânia). Baseando-se em evidência histórica e cultural, o artigo examina a relação entre os papéis da mulher guerreira da narrativa, e os papéis atribuídos às mulheres no Médio Oriente e na Ásia Central

ABSTRACT

The theme of the warrior maiden appears throughout Middle Eastern and Central Asian folklore. Why is this theme so popular and what might these stories represent? The paper examines two Turkic epics: Harman Dali from Turkmenistan; and the tale of Kan Turali son of Karli Koja from the Ottoman Dede Korkut. Drawing on historical and cultural evidence the paper examines the relationship between the roles of the warrior woman of story, and the roles ascribed to women in the Middle East and Central Asia.

