

# AN ECOCRITICAL APPROACH TO THE BOOK OF DEDE KORKUT AND BEOWULF\*

## Dede Korkut Kitabı ve Beowulf Destanlarına Ekoekleştirel Bir Yaklaşım

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### ÖZ

Throughout history the economies and industries have brought about a myriad of wealth and advantages to our modern world but these privileges and benefits have come at tremendous cost to our environment and nature. The third decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century has already started; however, the most fundamental challenges and problems of the planet such as environmental pollution, global warming, climactic changes, extinction of species, deforestation, and reduction of natural resources, which affect both human and nonhuman beings, have still yet to be thoroughly addressed and resolved. Thus, this is a very critical point in history since the world as we know it may be on the brink of an irreversible disaster. This is an environmental crisis and requires urgent and effective solutions because it has both social and cultural consequences. Having a strong understanding of ethical responsibility to our fragile planet, environmental literature confronts these challenges and promises to raise a local and global awareness. Basically, it seems that establishing an awareness around processes that concern eco-systemic issues and relationships through writing or literature is one of the major characteristics of ecocriticism which has brought an influential dimension to literary and cultural studies. With its broad and flexible scope, environmental literature or ecocriticism does not only raise an awareness but also undertakes the ethical responsibility to reduce problems and subtly create a change in global mindsets in terms of highlighting the human-nature and human-nonhuman relationships in literature. Initiated in this crucial framework, this paper examines two medieval epic narratives, The Book of Dede Korkut and Beowulf, in Turkish and Anglo-Saxon cultures and discusses the comparative potentiality of these literary works through the theoretical lens of ecocriticism. In this study, new perspectives on old texts is opened up because they can provide a rich source of material for the ecocritical study of literature, which can ultimately bring forward a deeper and broader understanding of both human and nonhuman. A comparative reading of The Book of Dede Korkut and Beowulf with a theoretical perspective of ecocriticism illuminates and confirms their immortality and relevance in our contemporary world as both epics present a close and symmetrical interaction between human, animal and nonhuman. Cognizant of the danger of imposing a universalist model that suppresses particular differences between two cultures, this study foregrounds that the literary worlds of Turkish and Anglo-Saxon cultures present a fundamental unity in terms of their approaches to environment. Highlighting the comparative relationships between literature, culture and ecology as well as building an ecocritical bridge between the west and east, this study aims to foreground the significance of maintaining and safeguarding both a sustainable planet and intangible cultural heritages.

### Anahtar Kelimeler

The Book of Dede Korkut, Beowulf, ecocriticism, epic, comparative cultural studies.

### ABSTRACT

Tarih boyunca ekonomiler ve endüstriler modern dünyamıza sayısız zenginlik ve avantaj getirmiştir fakat bu ayrıcalıklar ve faydalar çevremize ve doğamıza çok büyük maliyet de getirmiştir. 21. yüzyılın üçüncü on yılı çoktan başladı fakat çevre kirliliği, küresel ısınma, iklim değişiklikleri, türlerin yok olması, ormansızlaşma, hem insanları hem insan-dışı olanları etkileyen doğal kaynakların azalması gibi gezegenimizin en temel zorlukları ve problemleri hâlâ tam olarak ele alınmamış ve çözülmemiştir. Dolayısıyla, içinde yaşadığımız zaman dilimi, tarihte çok kritik bir noktadır çünkü bildiğimiz dünya, geri dönüşü olmayan bir felaketin eşiğinde olabilir. Bu çevresel bir krizdir ve hem sosyal hem de kültürel sonuçları olması nedeniyle, acil ve etkili çözümler sunulmasını gerektirir. Bu bağlamda, hassas olan gezegenimize karşı etik sorumluluk açısından güçlü bir anlayışa sahip olan çevre edebiyatı, bahsedilen sorunlarla cesurca yüzleşmektedir ve hem yerel hem de küresel bir farkındalık yaratmayı vadetmektedir. Temel olarak, edebiyat ve kültürel çalışmalara etkili bir boyut getiren eko-

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eleştirinin temel özelliklerinden biri, yazım veya edebiyat yoluyla eko-sistemik meseleleri ve ilişkileri ilgilendiren süreçler hakkında farkındalık oluşturmak gibi görünmektedir. Geniş ve esnek kapsamı ile çevre edebiyatı ya da eko-eleştiri sadece bir farkındalık yaratmakla kalmaz, aynı zamanda sorunları azaltmak ve edebiyatta insan-doğa ve insan-insan dışı olan arasındaki ilişkileri vurgulayarak küresel boyutta insan zihninde bir değişim yaratmak amacıyla etik sorumluluk da üstlenir. Böyle önemli bir çerçevede yazılmaya başlanan bu makale, Türk ve Anglosakson kültürlerinde iki Orta Çağ destan anlatısını, Dede Korkut Kitabı ve Beowulf, incelemekte ve eko-eleştirinin teorik merceği aracılığıyla bahsi geçen edebî eserlerin karşılaştırmalı potansiyelini tartışmaktadır. Bu çalışmada, eski metinler üzerine yeni perspektifler sunulmaktadır çünkü bu metinler edebiyatın eko-eleştirel açıdan çalışılması için zengin bir malzeme kaynağı sağlayabilirler ve bu da neticede hem insan hem de insan-dışı hakkında daha derin ve geniş bir anlayış ortaya koyabilir. Dede Korkut Kitabı ve Beowulf'ın eko-eleştiri kuramıyla karşılaştırmalı olarak okunması, her iki destanın da insan, hayvan ve insan-dışı arasında yakın ve simetrik bir etkileşim sunmasından dolayı, bu destanların ölümsüzlüğünü ve çağdaş dünyamızdaki meselelerle alakalı oluşlarını gözler önüne sermekte ve kanıtlamaktadır. Bu çalışmada, her türlü baskıcı merkezçiliğe karşı olan çok-boyutlu bir bakış açısı oluşturma çabası adına karşılaştırmalı bir metodoloji kullanılmıştır. İki farklı kültür için de kendine özgü farklılıkları bastıran ve evrenselci bir modelin dayatılmasının tehlikesinin farkında olan bu çalışma, Türk ve Anglosakson kültürlerinin edebî dünyalarının, çevreye yaklaşımları bakımından, temelde bir bütünlük arz ettiğinin altını çizmektedir. Edebiyat, kültür ve ekoloji arasındaki karşılaştırmalı ilişkileri, bunun yanı sıra, batı ve doğu arasında eko-eleştirel bir köprü inşa etmeyi vurgulayan bu çalışma, hem sürdürülebilir bir gezegenin hem de somut olmayan kültürel mirasın muhafaza edilmesinin önemini ön plana çıkarmayı amaçlamaktadır.

#### Key Words

Dede Korkut Kitabı, Beowulf, eko-eleştiri, destan, karşılaştırmalı kültürel çalışmalar.

### Introduction: The Comparative Method and Environmental Literature

This study examines two national epics, *The Book of Dede Korkut* and *Beowulf*<sup>1</sup> (believed to have been produced around the late 15<sup>th</sup> century and between the 6<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> centuries respectively) with a theoretical perspective of ecocriticism within a comparative framework. Inspired by the recent literary tendencies which approach to the old texts and open up new perspectives on them, this paper studies *Beowulf* and *The Book of Dede Korkut* because they can provide a rich source of material for the ecocritical study of literature, which can ultimately bring forward a deeper and broader understanding of both human and nonhuman and environment. Several scholars from Turkey have written articles or theses on the comparative study of *The Book of Dede Korkut* (henceforth *Dede Korkut*<sup>2</sup>) and *Beowulf*,<sup>3</sup> yet an ecocritical reading of these epics through a comparative methodology has not been employed in a study before,<sup>4</sup> and on this premise, this research has been employed to study *Dede Korkut* and *Beowulf*.<sup>5</sup> Presenting a working comparative study of these national epics requires an exploration of a methodological inquiry into comparative literature and environmental studies.

Why to undertake a comparative study between *Dede Korkut* and *Beowulf*? The real motive behind any ideal or equal comparative endeavour should be an attempt at knowing or learning from others, and underlining both similarities and differences in the world of comparison. This paper accordingly undertakes a comparison that is against any form of hegemonic centrism. Cognizant of the danger of imposing a universalist model that suppresses particular differences between two cultures, this paper has two methodical challenges: the first is to perceive the literary world of *Dede Korkut* and *Beowulf* in its fundamental unity. So this view provides us with a cross-cultural attitude by decontextualizing the epics, and it stresses the idea of literariness without feeling anxious about the cultural and historical specificities. This view will be beneficial in the analysis of similar generic aspects of the epics. The second effort is to discuss the differences between *Dede Korkut* and *Beowulf* because of the fact that each work is constructed differently in different con-

texts and different historical moments. Although seemingly contradictory, these two efforts will be adopted throughout the analysis of the epics as well because, as Bernheimer states, in a comparative project “the two modes [explicating the similarities and differences] are inextricably bound together” (1995: 16). As a comparative study of the epics of an Anglo-Saxon and a Turkish culture, this study is connected to some other discussions such as those on the notion of “national” literatures and cultural boundaries across nations and literatures. It aims to contribute to the kind of studies which seek to “develop new articulations of the connections among literatures and to give a sense of the ways in which literatures and cultures might be like and unlike one another” (Greene 2008: vii). The real motive behind any comparative endeavour seems to be “wanting to learn from ‘other’ experiences that are not one’s own” (Radhakrishnan 2009: 454).

After outlining the principle elements of the comparative method, it is significant to highlight what environmental literature or ecocriticism (ecocritical thought) refers to. Also, what does the ecocritical exploration of literary texts refer to? Tackling these questions requires one to offer a definition of ecocriticism and explore its role and purposes. Scholars generally tend to accept the beginning of environmental literary criticism with Joseph Meeker’s book *The Comedy of Survival: Studies in Literary Ecology* published in 1972 and William Rueckert’s essay “Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism” written in 1978. The institutionalization of ecocriticism in the west, however, only happened in the 1990s. Early ecocriticism was mainly concerned with the representations of such phenomena as wilderness and nature in literary texts at the beginning; however, today it is much more inclusive to which Slovic refers as his “open-door definition,” and he further argues that “ecocriticism is the study use of any scholarly approach to study artistic texts (not only literature) that foreground the human-nature relationship or, conversely, the scrutiny of this relationship (or the implications of its absence) in any text, even one in which nonhuman phenomena are not explicitly present” (2011: 462). Today ecocriticism, with its transdisciplinary and transnational qualities, has a broad and flexible scope and keeps expanding and developing so rapidly. Therefore, it seems that there is still the necessity of having a clear definitional and terminological understanding of ecocriticism, which might provide a common ground for future studies. As an attempt of proposing a definition of ecocriticism, Opperman, who is the first scholar who focuses on ecocriticism in Turkey, states that “ecocriticism [which] is a relatively new movement in humanist academia that investigates the [literary, historical, artistic and other cultural] relations between humans and non-human life” (2011: 459). Hence, ecocriticism has the potentiality to enable us to comprehend why and how we produce various sorts of expression to formulate and state our experience of a world which encompasses both humans and everything else. “Ecocriticism uses literature as a pretext to study environmental issues and evaluates relevant texts according to their capacity to articulate ecological contexts” (Opperman 2006: 111). As a very concise definition of ecocriticism, Estes asserts that “broadly speaking, ecocriticism investigates literary depictions of human engagements with the non-human world, as it both reflects and shapes cultures” (2017: 21).

Scholars of environmental literature think that an ecocritical study is not merely an aesthetics of reading but a political movement that is occupied with environmental challenges and responses to it in literary texts. Ecocriticism raises important questions which also reveal its own tenets as a critical discourse. It inquires about some longstanding philosophical and ontological questions like what nature and wilderness stand for, and when the dichotomy between humans and nature has emerged, and how humans’ actions affect more than just them and determine the planet’s past, present and future. In the same

manner, Huggan and Tiffin underline the “advocacy function” of ecocriticism by stating that ecocriticism “preserves the aesthetic function of the literary text while drawing attention to its social and political usefulness, its capacity to set out symbolic guidelines for the material transformation of the world” (2010: 14). Ecocriticism foregrounds the humans’ exploitation of and estrangement from nature through “progress” which has arisen from humans’ belief in their superiority to the natural world. Humans’ very severance from nature has been disrupting the complex equilibrium and the connectedness of a world ecosystem. Thus, Bunting claims that “*ecocritique* [the ecocritical reading] is both social and political intrinsically” (2015: 11).

Within a comparative framework, the ecocritical exploration of *Dede Korkut* and *Beowulf* brings literature of the Medieval Period into dialogue with the 21<sup>st</sup>-century theoretical formulations. As mentioned before, comparisons between *Dede Korkut* and *Beowulf* have been undertaken by Turkish scholars, mainly in Turkish; however, they did not apply an explicit ecocritical reading in their studies. For conveying a working analysis of the epics in the sections that follow, the idea concerning how Turkish and Anglo-Saxon people perceived, formulated and constructed environments, animals and humans, as reflected in the epics – similarities and differences between their approaches to these, if there are any – should be highlighted.

*Dede Korkut* is a collection of the heroic stories about the Oghuz Turks which reveals the lifestyles, worldviews, beliefs, and values of ancient Turkish people narrated by the narrator-character Dede (Grandfather) Korkut. As a part of Turkish oral narrative tradition, the stories are known and told by many different Turkish nations from Central Asia to Caucasus and Anatolia. The stories are significant due to their documentation of literary features and historical events from the Turkish perspective of the world in the Middle Ages. Consisting of twelve stories,<sup>6</sup> the Turkish epic – narrated mainly in prose but enhanced with verse too – presents a sense of unity through clichés, repetitions, shamanistic cults, rituals and performances, songs, reciting legends about heroes. The composition time of the epic signals the late 15<sup>th</sup> century, yet scholars believe that the time of the events narrated in the stories stretch from the 11<sup>th</sup> to the 15<sup>th</sup> centuries. Sümer et al. state that “whatever events in the epic are actually historical occurred in this area [original land of the Oghuz, now the Kazak, Uzbek, and Turkmen Republics], probably in the Syr Darya basin and probably in the tenth or eleventh century” (1972: xi). Likewise, the epic poem of *Beowulf*<sup>7</sup> narrates the heroic events, and historic and legendary deeds of Anglo-Saxon people that are believed to take place between the 6<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> centuries. According to Clanchy, “in the royal monasteries of Anglo-Saxon England, as in other parts of Europe, an original literate culture had been created which was distinguished especially by its illuminated manuscripts of parchment” (2013: 1). The journey from orality to written culture flourished in Anglo-Saxon England, and this was a very important stage in the history of literacy. “Consisting of 3182 alliterative lines written in alliterative verse” (Chase 1997: 29), the Old English epic displays how the protagonist Beowulf rises to be the hero of the many tribes of the Geats and Angles – which lay in what are now Scandinavian and English lands – by overcoming several extraordinary obstacles like killing the monsters, and it concludes with the depictions of Beowulf’s old age trials and his death.

As two great examples of the preservation of orally transmitted knowledge, *Dede Korkut* and *Beowulf* depict several cultural and other disparities; however, their cultures faced more or less similar environmental challenges of the Middle Age, which led their bards to produce various depictions of approaches to nature, animals, the human, and the nonhuman. While some of these approaches to ecological issues resemble one another,

others are completely different. An exploration of environment in literary works understandably requires one to pay attention to some entanglements that intertwine nature (in the forms of water, mountains, woods, meres, and marshes), animals (like horses, boars, wolves, and birds), culture, and humans.

### The Water

The depiction of the water and the interactions between humans and the water in *Dede Korkut* and *Beowulf* can be analysed as a starting point for attending to the nature-humans entanglement. A comparison between these cultures' approaches to water is significant because for both epics, particularly in *Beowulf*, water is depicted as a geographical fact and a part of their daily actions, and defines who they are in terms of rising as heroes after challenging the water and its monsters. The representation of the water and the relations between the humans and the approaches to the water have some parallelisms and differences in the two epics. As a common point, it can be asserted that the water in both epics is depicted as a spatial actor in its own right. According to Estes, "sea is apparently a 'space' to be traversed rather than a 'place' to be occupied, yet subject to human intervention that characterizes as monstrous the 'natural' or original occupants to help justify their slaughter, for human convenience" (2017: 45). In both epics humans are depicted when they dare to fight and control water (and its creatures) to form an ego, prove their bravery and a well-deserved status in their society.

Anglo-Saxons, which were Germanic tribes, crossed the North sea and settled in the South and East of England after the end of Roman rule in England (around the 5<sup>th</sup> century). "It was Anglo-Saxons who felled much of the wildwood and introduced the habit of living in villages," argues Higham and Ryan (2010: 2). They built mead halls and cities in Anglo-Saxon England. Geographically, Anglo-Saxon landscape is surrounded by the mountains, forests, and seas. In Anglo-Saxon culture, the "descriptions of the sea-space mark out points of interest such as the force of water or the movement of people, ships, and creatures as they engage in journeys and battles" (DuBartell 2018: 8). Therefore, the water is an inescapable part of their lives: in the times of war and peace, for fighting and trade purposes, the transportation of goods and humans were done through the travels on board of ships. In Anglo-Saxon culture, the use of water is significant, and it seems that this is not different in the literary works of the same culture.<sup>8</sup> When King Hrothgar and his country are inflicted by the monstrosities and attacks of Grendel, the evil monster of the marshes in the epic, the hero of Geats, Beowulf, dares to travel to Heorot to slay Grendel and save the people. Beowulf takes this quest as a life purpose and opportunity to prove his strength and bravery, and consequently, to acquire prestige and honour in the society. He sets out to kill the monsters of the waters, and the *Beowulf* poet underlines the hero's fight with the monsters and his victory as follows,

'So those vicious monsters tormented me  
time and again. I served them in turn  
with my good sword, as was fitting.  
[...]  
shut by a sword: no more would they hinder  
the passage of sailors on the sea's  
broad highways.' (*Beowulf* 559-561, 567-569)

When Beowulf kills the sea monsters and saves the sailors from their attacks for good, he satisfies his urge to gain success and glory. As Lechmann states "in *Beowulf* the characters' honour depends on their ability to master the sea because of the danger of the waves and monsters which dwell in it" (2016: 68). Surviving and flourishing in a harsh

environment like the sea world is an ego-appeasing success and lurks the achievement-driven male psyche.

In the same manner, Korkmaz argues, “the water functions like a mirror to the heroes of *Dede Korkut* whose self-esteem and self-confidence are assured by defeating the water. By means of this mirror imagery, humans are able to formulate their world and culture” (1998: 95). The hero Basat defeats the monster-child called *Tepegöz* (or Goggle-eye) born as a result of a shepherd’s – whom they called Konur Koja Saru Choban – violation of a fairy from a spring called *Uzun Pınar* (Long Spring). *Tepegöz*, like Grendel, is loved by his mother who is a mythical water creature. The fairy warns the shepherd by stating “Shepherd, you have left something in trust with me. When a year has passed, come and take it. But you have brought ruination on the Oghuz” (*Dede Korkut* 141). Unlike the backstory of Grendel, which is thought to be a descendent of Cain from Hell, *Tepegöz* is born as a result of a man’s violation of a natural creature, a water fairy, which is a very common motif in different cultures. So, *Dede Korkut*’s monster attacks Oghuz people because, it seems that, a man harms nature; it is like a curse or punishment of nature inflicted on humans. Upon the violation of nature and the corruption of harmony and balance between humans and nature, a hero called Basat accepts the challenge and sets out to kill *Tepegöz*. “Basat drove the spit into *Tepegöz*’s eye, [the only flesh part in his body] which was destroyed. So loud did he scream and bellow that the mountains and rocks echoed” (*Dede Korkut* 146). Then the blind *Tepegöz* – like Grendel, who was mortally wounded by Beowulf, goes back to his mere – escapes and takes refuge in his lair called *Salakhana* where he tells his vile deeds to his rival Basat as follows “Many the dark-moustached youths I have eaten;” And *Dede Korkut* narrates, “Basat, enraged, rose up and forced him down on his knees like a camel, and with Goggle-eye’s [the translator choice of word] own sword he cut off Goggle-eye’s head” (*Dede Korkut* 149).

In both *Dede Korkut* and *Beowulf* male protagonists fulfil their goals by killing the water monsters. So, it is evident that they need the presence and sustainability of the water – no matter how water as a rival is unpredictable, potent, and dangerous – because if they can dare to challenge the water and defeat it (with its monsters), their victory over the water would deem them as brave and glorious heroes in the eyes of the people around them. Thus, as a common motif index, both cultures configure and formulate masculinity and heroism as something revealed once it is opposed to the forces of the natural world, the water monsters in these examples. So, from the point of ecocriticism, it can be asserted that the medieval Anglo-Saxon and Turkish cultures attached great importance to and highly depended on the water phenomenon since it provided them with necessary tools to define such human values and concepts as identity, gender issues, heroism, and culture as a complex whole. Hence one can argue that for medieval Anglo-Saxon and Turkish people in the Medieval Period, the water, which influenced the humans’ values and beliefs, was not objectified; on the contrary, it was regarded as an indifferent or impartial potent phenomenon to humans.

The Turkish people, before converting into Islam, believed in the Sky-God belief (Tengrism) and Anglo-Saxons believed in Paganism before Christianity. In both epics, there is a co-existence of the pre-Christian/pre-Islamic and the Christian/Islamic faiths. After their conversion to monotheism (from the 8<sup>th</sup> to 10<sup>th</sup> centuries for the Turkic peoples and around the 7<sup>th</sup> century for the Anglo Saxons), their approaches to the water and its depiction in the literary works have reflected a similar thread, that is, in both epics the heroes who are believed to act like the warriors of God (both Christian and Muslim) can control the unpredictable sea, which had been associated with “Chaos” (Wilt 2014: 31)

and monsters or devils within pantheistic Pagan and Shaman beliefs. To illustrate, when Beowulf is fighting with the sea monsters, he mentions the divine intervention of God:

‘Light came from the east,  
 God’s bright beacon, the water grew wondrous calm  
 so that I saw windy sea-walls  
 and steep headlands. Wyrð often spares  
 the man unmarked by death if his courage holds.’ (*Beowulf* 569-573)

Beowulf here refers to the rising sun and calming water, which he describes as God’s beacon, and he interprets this as a sign of God’s will enabling him victorious against sea monsters. Also, his referral to Wyrð, fate or the principal power in old English, indicates his faith in an absolute power. Whether it is Christian or Pagan, Beowulf underlines the will and powerful influence of God in his victory. The *Beowulf* poet underlines the fact that Beowulf’s becoming God’s warrior allows him to defeat the sea monsters, and he is saved at the end of his ordeal. Likewise, another hero from *Dede Korkut* called Yigenek Son of Kazılık Koja is granted God’s permission to pass through the Black Sea, a common motif in medieval literature, when he commits himself to “the protection of God the Creator and gave praise to the Eternal” (*Dede Korkut* 137). Dede Korkut narrates how Yigenek overcame the perils of the sea in his dreams as follows,

‘I took counsel from Dede Korkut,  
 I climbed the black mountains that lay ahead.  
 I came upon the Black Sea that lies beyond,  
 I made a boat, I took off my shirt and hoisted it as a sail,  
 I passed through the further sea.’ (*Dede Korkut* 135)

The pantheistic or shaman myths and beliefs related to the water were re-interpreted or re-shaped after the conversion to monotheistic religion systems; so, the old and new beliefs eventually merged, constituting a very natural complex blend or a synthesis. Thus, the water turns into be a tameable and conquerable concept when nature and natural world is interpreted in the religious terms.

The distinction between humans and nature is not so clearly indicated in both of the epics. In other words, this divide is further blurred and problematized because of the existence of two super-natural heroes in the epics. Both Beowulf and Basat are more than humans with supernatural powers like ‘monsters’ they aim to kill.<sup>9</sup> Due to his physical power, Beowulf can cause a deadly wound to Grendel with bare-hands, and Basat, who is raised by a lioness in the woods, is the only hero capable of killing *Tepegöz* in *Dede Korkut*. These humans and their integration to human-society and power to confront monsters of nature<sup>10</sup> in combats deteriorate the so-called distinction between humans and nature by bridging the gap between them. Actually, they prove that there is not much distinction between humans and nature, and this emphasizes the interconnectivity and entanglement of humans and natural beings and things. According to Cohen, “collective identity is both shaped and shattered by cultural perceptions of ‘otherness.’ The Medieval-Age world was largely composed of difficult middles; these middle individuals and societies were hybrid in nature, much like many of the monsters that obsessed them” (2006: 2). At the end of *Beowulf* and Basat’s story in *Dede Korkut*, the question ‘who defeats who’ remains unanswered. The fact that Beowulf and Basat’s being two hybrid heroes points out the idea that humans and landscape are too intertwined to separate. But it is certain that neither of the epics assert the superiority of humans’ power to nature.

At the beginning and end of human life, there is water; it is a representation of an infinite circle. Lechmann states that “the pagan characters associate the sea with death, as

seen by the burial of Scyld [the great-grandfather of Hrothgar, king of the Danes during Beowulf's time] at sea. The sea thrashes the living, but peacefully accepts and swallows the heroic dead" (2016: 23). As a medieval seafaring culture, Anglo-Saxons paid their tribute to the dead by sending them off to sea as a part of their funeral ceremony. Likewise, Muslim Turkish people believed in the power of water (as a symbol of both literal and spiritual cleanliness, fertility, transformation, and infinity) at the beginning and end of life. In this sense, it becomes clear that medieval cultures believed in the importance of the humans' coexistence and connectivity with – the water in particular – the natural world in a harmonious balance within the ecological system.

The water can symbolize various dimensions in Anglo-Saxon and Turkish epics, whether it takes on anthropomorphic attributions, accommodate monsters, or a location for heroic deeds. In both *Beowulf* and *Dede Korkut*, it is true that the water is the 'Other' – in Lacanian terminology of psychoanalysis – according to which the humans build a boundary between themselves and their habitat; however, it is also incontrovertible that it is the water as a part of natural world that helps human beings define themselves. In other words, their relationship is based on a mutual-survival connectivity, and this quality of the water<sup>11</sup> shows human beings' connectivity to the natural world.

### **The Nonhuman Animals**

It seems that nonhuman animals are at the centre of both *Beowulf* and *Dede Korkut* because both reflect the animals as an important element for humans' lives because of their practical and symbolic uses from an anthropocentric perspective. However, the representations of nonhuman animals in both epics also highlight the fact that there is a more complex network of interactions between humans and nonhuman animals, and in this network, natural and social relations were intertwined.

Naming in the medieval societies, like in our own, was very important. The heroes in both epics are named after animals which are deemed strong, wise and powerful. Thus, they try to make a bond between animals and humans. Beowulf's name is a combination of two animals, bee and wolf, which indicates the wolf of bees, being a kenning<sup>12</sup> for a bear. The reference to an animal, to the natural world, remains a constant tendency in *Dede Korkut* as well. Boghach,<sup>13</sup> the hero of "The Story of Boghach Khan Son of Dirse Khan," is given this name by Dede Korkut upon killing a bull. Combating against a strong animal or an enemy in the context of the Turkish epic enables the young man to acquire a name, as a part of his rite of passage or coming-of-age. Because Boghach proves that he is worthy of being powerful and as strong as a bull, he earns his name. Killing a wild animal to earn a name might seem strange to contemporary audiences, however, as a part of the shamanistic ritual, it should be regarded as a part of the period-specific set of customs and traditions.<sup>14</sup> Thus, it seems that according to the animistic Turkish people, animals were so important and respected beings that humans and animals could unite in a mystical dimension of existence; a promise of infinity. In this respect, killing was not considered as destroying the animal but being one with it in constant permanence. Thus, the man who kills a wild animal in combat carries in himself the strength and spirit of the animal.

As depicted in the epics, the nonhuman animals are not considered as passive, mindless and mute victims, or inferior beings to humans. They are not always metaphors for abstract thoughts and feelings. They are sometimes narrated as just being animals as a part of natural world. Characters are narrated while speaking to and consulting the nonhuman animals. Also, animals are presented while they are 'talking' to each other in their own way. At the end of *Beowulf*, after Beowulf's death "beasts of battle" (Magoun 1955:

81) raven, eagle and wolf are depicted to talk to each other, which hints the certainty of the mortality of living creatures.<sup>15</sup> Thus, the *Beowulf* poet's ending the epic with the talk of animals after the hero's death can be interpreted in eco-centric terms because the presence of the nonhuman animals around the funeral of the hero signifies that the ecology (not humankind) is at the centre of all things. It seems that this scene foregrounds the fact that human-centric mentality or anthropocentrism is defeated by the eco-centric worldview. All species are interrelated and humankind is not superior to any other species. At the end of *Beowulf*, this humility-advising note in relationship with the human and nonhuman resonates to a similar approach in *Dede Korkut*. To nomadic Turkish people, the nonhuman animals like wolf, horse, camel, bull, and deer were very significant for some practical and symbolic reasons. Apart from these qualities of animals, *Dede Korkut* is full of warnings to humans who should not hurt or despise the nonhuman beings or see themselves as superior to the others. To illustrate, Salur Kazan goes hunting for fun, but when he comes back, he finds his house was pillaged. Killing animals for fun is a shameful act which is punished in the story. In his dream, he sees the pillage and tells it to his friend Kara Göne: "It was a terrible dream. I saw my falcon dying in my hand. I saw a lightning bolt strike down my tent with the golden top. I saw a black cloud descending upon my camp. I saw mad wolves attacking my house. I felt the black camel biting my neck" (*Dede Korkut* 27). Killing animals for fun is a shameful act which is punished in the story because, to Turkish people in the epic, the nonhuman animals are the reflections of god. Another story depicts how a hero is punished when he acts irresponsibly due to his arrogance. Begil is proud of his riding skills in hunting, and when Salur Khan states that "if the horse did not play its part, the man could not vaunt himself; the skill belongs to the horse" (*Dede Korkut* 152), Begil feels offended. Because this arrogance of Begil, he falls from his horse and breaks his leg. Hence, these stories of *Dede Korkut* function as warnings to all readers who violate the harmony of nature by regarding themselves superior to natural world including the human and the nonhuman beings.

### **The Mountains and Forests**

In *Beowulf* and *Dede Korkut*, nature (in the forms of mountains and forests, and humans' search for their place and role in nature) influences the form and message of the epics. Mountains and forests have greater and deeper meanings; that is, their existence in the epics have more functions than mere settings for heroic deeds. This section explores the delineation of territorial boundaries in the forms of the mountains and forests as representatives of nature, and mead halls and tents as those of culture.

In *Beowulf* mountains and forests (like the water) represent the wild native lands with the potential of housing the evil so 'deserving to be used' from the pragmatic point of view. Thus, a great hall is erected in Heorot which is opposed to the forests and mountains. The great hall as an opposition to the mountains is especially seen as an Anglo-Saxon way of nation-building and establishing its boundaries. According to Michelet, "to secure a territory and to prosper is a recurrent concern of the *Beowulf* poet, thus, testifying to the importance of spatial control and of land possession" (2006: 75). The great hall, which is depicted as "decorated with jewels" (*Beowulf* 167), in the epic stands for the centre of their community. *Beowulf* puts forward not only the opposition between forests and great halls of kings in terms of nature-culture dichotomy, but it also reflects how trees play an important role in building great halls and ships, and thus, establishing greater and deeper bonds and alliances among the members of the community through the meetings, feasts, and celebrations in the halls. From an ecocritical perspective, for Anglo-Saxons, forests and mountains or barrows are marginalized places which necessitated humans to

approach nature cautiously not to offend or violate its dwellers. In this sense, the approach to forests and mountains in *Beowulf* hints at a warning indicating the potential of disrupting the harmony by bringing an ecological disaster.

In *Dede Korkut*, however, the society does not define itself in terms of nature-culture binary opposition because of their old and nomadic ways. Instead of building permanent shelters like great halls in Anglo-Saxon tradition, the nomadic Turkish people lived in tents which were easy to use. So, forests and mountains did not pose an opposition to their tents. As reflected in the epic, forests and mountains help humans strive, and therefore, they are considered glorious and sacred. So, unlike castles or mead halls, which symbolize the ‘organized/ordered’ city life, tents, due to their mobility function and material features, are less detached from the ‘chaos’ of the wilderness. To nomadic communities like the Oghuz Turks, there is not a clear divide between nature and culture because wherever they settle with their tents, there are natural phenomena around them such as bodies of water, forests, mountains, animals, and other humans. The animistic nature cults and customs, glorification of mountains and forests, have survived in many Turkish cultures. It is implied in the epic that harming trees and mountains, according to Oghuz Turks, would bring disasters to humans. Believing in the harmonious existence of humans among forests and mountains (as well as the water and nonhuman animals), Dede Korkut recites the same prayer at the end of several stories, which can be taken as an environmentally-conscious insight: “may your firm-rooted black mountain never be overthrown, may your great shady tree never be cut down, may your lovely clear-flowing river never run dry, may the tips of your wings never be broken, may your grey-white horse never stumble as he gallops” (*Dede Korkut* 40). In *Dede Korkut*, mountains and forests are considered as living creatures from an anthropomorphized perspective. According to M. Meeker, “in all probability the *Dede Korkut* stories do not address the implications of the *real* time and places of pastoral experience. They feature an *idealized representation* of person and society that is derived from pastoral experience but presented as a cultural heritage” (1992: 396, emphases added). Heroes and their fights against enemies are depicted to enlighten and disseminate a moral message for the future generations. From an ecocritical point of view, the representation of an ideal society in *Dede Korkut* entails a harmonious coexistence in nature. Mountains, trees, rivers, and horses are mentioned in Dede Korkut’s prayers for people’s wellbeing, which means that as long as the natural world with nonhuman animals are kept away from harm, human beings can survive and flourish.

### **Conclusion**

The idea of the reconsideration of the human and nonhuman relationship in texts has inspired this study to turn to literary study as a source of attending to environmental issues. Zapf argues that “the literary works of the past appear, to a number of ecocritics, as anticipating the ecological knowledge of modern times. [...] Literature, from its very beginnings, has contrasted alienating structures of civilization with alternative forms of life embedded in concrete forms of a culture/nature exchange” (2006: 54). So, an ecocritical reading of classical literary texts is an act of thinking about the contemporary through the old times.

An ecocritical exploration of *Beowulf* and *Dede Korkut* in such a transnational and comparative framework has problematized the contemporary assumption that environmental sensitivity is a new thought or a recent development. This study has foregrounded that medieval attitudes as reflected in *Beowulf* and *Dede Korkut* constitute a crucially

important environmentally-conscious mindset that foreshadows on our current environmental debates with regard to the abuse, corruption, and sustainability of the natural world.

The Anglo-Saxon and Turkish approaches to the bodies of water, the nonhuman animals and mountains and forests as reflected in *Beowulf* and *Dede Korkut* have been analysed. At the end of each section above, it became obvious that there was a more heterogeneous complexity and interconnectivity between the humans and the natural world in their mindsets than what our suppositions – concerning the relationship of people and natural world in Medieval Ages – are now. This reading has come up with the idea that in spite of depicting the heroic actions and deeds in terms of content, *Beowulf* and *Dede Korkut* demonstrate a relationship between humans and nonhuman nature which is based on humility; a relationship which involves an elaborate web of entanglement emphasizing environmental sensibility and the connectivity of the human and the nonhuman.

In an accordance with the nature of their literary genre (epic), the purpose of both *Beowulf* and *Dede Korkut* is to reveal the experiences of heroic people, their actions and societies; their function is to educate morally and present an ideal reflection of their societies as cultural heritage for next generations. Accordingly, as reflected in the epics, it is observed that Anglo-Saxon and Turkish people's view of nature is rather sophisticated, and this sophistication, in large part, is a direct result of their pagan and pantheistic beliefs. Niles, similarly, argues that "the essence of animism is the belief that the world is alive in all its parts. [ . . . ] Human beings are a part of this animate world; they are not souls, exiled from God, who temporarily inhabit and make use of it" (2013: 132). Niles's argument signifies that those works like *Beowulf* and *Dede Korkut* emphasize the some deeply rooted values and beliefs about the natural world and reflect a strong desire to hold onto these values and beliefs.

#### NOTES

1. From the outset of my discussion, it is important to emphasize that there is the risk of taking the ancient worlds of classics anachronistically and imposing our own standards and concepts on societies with different standards and concepts. Therefore, my attempt here is to offer a re-reading of classical works from an ecocritical lens that respects both their time of narratives (or *zeitgeist*) and their own indigenous worldviews and backgrounds. It is possible to reread several Medieval literary works comparatively and with contemporary critical theories. To illustrate, Banu Akçeşme studied *Le Morte D'Arthur* along with *Dede Korkut Stories* within an ecocritical framework (2018). In this paper my attempt is to study medieval literary narratives that has not been studied comparatively with an ecocritical approach.
2. See Nevzat Adil's "A Critical Analysis of the Theme of Heroic Ideal in *Beowulf* and The Book of *Dede Korkut*" (1990); Hülya Taflı's "A comparative study of the belief systems in *Beowulf* and *The Book of Dede Korkut*" (2006); Harun Doğruyol's "The Epic in Middle Ages: A Comparative Study of the Anglo-Saxon *Beowulf* and Turkish *Oğuz Khan*" (2007); Funda Tunçdöken's "*Dede Korkut Hikâyeleri* ile *Beowulf* Destanında Yer Alan Toplumsal Hayata Ait Motiflerin Karşılaştırılması" (2009); Huriye Reis' "*Dede Korkut Kitabı* ve *Beowulf* Destanında Yaşlılık ve Yaşlanma" (2011).
3. Scholars from different countries, apart from Turkey, have not undertaken a comparative study between *Beowulf* and *The Book of Dede Korkut* yet.
4. See Hilal Erdoğan's MA thesis "Relationships between Nature, Human and Space in *The Book of Dede Korkut*" written in Turkish (2014) in which an ecocritical exploration of *The Book of Dede Korkut* is put forward.
5. For ecocritical studies regarding *Beowulf*, see Andy Orchard's book *A Critical Companion to Beowulf* (2003), Heide Estes's *Anglo-Saxon Literary Landscapes: Ecotheory and the Environmental Imagination* (2017), Zathia Cantu's "Ecocriticism in Anglo-American Literature: The Resilience of Nature from *Beowulf* to *The Garden of Eden*" (2019).
6. Until the discovery of what is referred as "The Günbed Manuscript" on 12 December 2018 by Veli Muhammed Hoca in Tehran, scholars were only aware of the presence of two copies of *The Book of Dede Korkut*; one (with 12 stories) in the Royal Library in Dresden, Germany (1815) and the other (with 6 stories) in the Library of Vatican (1952). This new-found 13<sup>th</sup> story is called "Salur Kazan's Slaying of the 7-headed

- Dragon” (Ekici 2019: 5). However, because the new manuscript of the epic requires a more thorough exploration by Turkologists, this study deliberately excludes it and focuses on the 12 known stories of *Dede Korkut*, which was translated into English by Geoffrey Lewis (1974). Through the theoretical lens of ecocriticism, a further discussion on the new manuscript will be surely the subject of the new scholarly studies.
7. Today there is only one version of the *Beowulf* manuscript (The Nowell Codex) which is in British Library.
  8. Consisting of both first-hand eyewitness accounts of the life and an idealized portrayal of Anglo-Saxons and Oghuz Turks, *Beowulf* and *Dede Korkut* were composed to spread culture and presented as a cultural heritage.
  9. Underlining *Beowulf*’s this quality, Ann Marie Martinez calls him a “hybrid” hero (51) in “The Medieval Green Age: Environmentalism and English Literature in the Middle Ages” (2014).
  10. It is important to note that Grendel and *Tepegöz* themselves are hybrids too; Grendel as the offspring of a man (Cain) and beasts, and *Tepegöz* of a shepherd and a female spring fairy.
  11. For the water cult in Turkish culture, see Nagihan Baysal’s book titled *Türk Kültüründe Su* (2020).
  12. A kenning is a much-compressed form of metaphor. In a kenning, an object is described in a two-word phrase, such as ‘whale-road’ for ‘sea’.
  13. The young bull.
  14. See Prof. Dr. Metin Ekici’s article called “Oğuz Kağan’dan Boğaç Han’a Türk Kültüründe Boğa” (2015).
  15. “The bestiary as a genre consists of a series of brief accounts of particular animals, birds, and fishes, ranging from the actual or likely to the mythical or utterly fantastic” (Andrew 1984: 29-30).

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