KARAGÖZ: MASTER OF WORDS, PUPPET OF SHADOWS

Paulette DELLIOS

Abstract

This article aims to explore the manifold contributions of Karagöz – the illiterate anti-hero of Ottoman shadow theatre – to language creativity. Customarily, shadow theatre is subsumed in the fields of folklore studies or theatre studies, but this discussion shifts Karagöz into the linguistic limelight.

Keywords: shadow theathre, ottoman, folklore, linguistics, puppetry

Introduction: Moving shadows

Karagöz (literally 'black-eyed') refers to the main protagonist of Turkish shadow theatre and the shadow theatre itself. The ancestry of this technique of puppetry – using two-dimensional leather cut-out figures to cast shadows upon a screen – still generates scholarly debate, but most commentators agree that shadow theatre was established in Turkey in the sixteenth century (see And 1984: 127; Fan Pen Chen 2003: 39; Takkaç & Dinç 2005: 1).

Subsequently, Karagöz followed the territorial expansion and cultural penetration of the Ottoman Empire. Karagöz left his footprint (and often a corrupted cognomen) in the Arab and north African lands: Iran, Syria, Egypt, Tunisia, Algeria, and Morocco (known variously as Aragoz, Karakus, Garagousse, Caragousse). He also moved into the Balkan region: Greece (Karaghiozis), the former Yugoslavia (Karadjoz), Bulgaria, and Romania (see And 1984: 132; Danforth 1983: 281; Fan Pen Chen 2003: 39; Gorvett 2004: 62-63).

The diffusion of shadow theatre throughout the Ottoman Empire was assisted by the spread of coffee-houses (Öztürk 2006: 294). Although there were Ottoman court puppeteers who performed for the entertainment of the sultan and the aristocracy, it was in the local coffee-houses that Karagöz reigned and garnered a widespread following.

Words behind shadows

The Karagöz puppeteer had exceptional talents: he (since, puppeteers were invariably male) worked from memory – there were no scripts; he operated all the puppets single-handedly; and he spoke all the different voices, dialects, and accents (representing as stereotypes the diverse inhabitants of the Ottoman Empire). The comic core of Karagöz was a combination of slapstick humour and inventive language, expressed through double

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entendre, wordplay and the burlesque. The puppeteer's vast linguistic repertoire, according to Metin And (1979: 65-67), included the following:

… verbal gags … nonsensical cross-talk … different dialects and … defects of speech … puns … play upon words … rhetorical embellishment, comic elegant diction … verbal juggling … semantic speculation … ludicrous contrast in meaning … speech defects … quasi-meaningless sounds … verbal anarchy, a confusion of non-words, and empty phrases … malapropism … cacophonies, hyperboles, garrulity, bombast … learned twaddle, and … gibberish.

Much could be conveyed through this "verbal anarchy", for amusement was not the sole intent behind performances. Ottoman shadow theatre flourished in the coffee-houses, and in this socio-cultural milieu it was a vehicle of political satire in which nothing and no one was immune to criticism – neither high officials, grand viziers, nor the sultan himself (And 1984: 131-132).

Performances, characterised by political lampooning, ribald humour, and sexual banter appealed to the subaltern classes (Öztürk 2006: 292, 298), for they could identify with the anti-hero Karagöz, who was portrayed as uncouth, unemployed, and illiterate. Though he was an amusing buffoon, he was also a resourceful rascal and a talented trickster. For example, in the scenario 'The Public Scribe', the illiterate Karagöz finds employment as a public scribe in a haunted shop; in 'The Poetry Contest', Karagöz emerges the winner by dint of his violence and impudence (see And 1984: 131).

A pair of shadows

Karagöz is frequently described as the representative or voice of the common people (Öztürk 2006: 294; Takkaç & Dinç 2005: 4) yet, in fact, he was highly uncommon. Outrageous and outlandish, he was bound by no rules, neither in conduct nor in language. As Kırlı reveals:

Even when there is no political theme or figure, the performance has a subversive political character which expresses itself symbolically in the deliberate violation of officially held cultural norms, values, and *linguistic codes* (quoted in Öztürk 2006: 296, emphasis mine).

In order to fully appreciate the linguistic licence of Karagöz, it is necessary to introduce the other main protagonist, Hacivat, who is Karagöz's companion or, more appropriately, his foil. Whilst Karagöz is impetuous, crude and uneducated, an outspoken laymen, who speaks rough Turkish, the character of Hacivat is depicted as his polar opposite. Hacivat is reflective and "superficially erudite" (And 1984: 129). Hacivat aspires to be viewed as an Ottoman gentleman; pompous and pretentious, he imitates Ottoman Turkish (Turkish intermixed with Persian and Arabic) in a flowery form, which is largely unintelligible to Karagöz. The verbal exchanges between these two main characters (and the inherent misinterpretations, misunderstandings and mishaps) were a source of much hilarity.

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Lewis (1999: 8) underlines that ordinary people were baffled by the Ottoman language – a medium of literary expression and a tool of the administrative elite –but humour was their ally, as was Karagöz who spoke a language they could comprehend, and who was so adept at mocking the speech patterns of the higher classes.

The scenario known as 'The Swing' provides an illustration of the language gulf between the Turkish-speaking Karagöz and Hacivat with his exaggerated Ottoman phraseology. Lewis (1999: 8) prefaces their dialogue:

… Karagöz keeps hitting Hacivat. Hacivat asks him why, but receives only nonsensical answers ... Eventually he asks … 'What is your ultimate object in hitting me?' To which Karagöz replies … 'The turncoat at Aksaray is your father'. … A rough English parallel would be, 'Explain your bellicose attitude.'—'How do I know why he chewed my billy-goat's hat?'

The subversive attributes of Karagöz theatre have been amply documented, (see for example, Öztürk 2006; Smith 2004), but the subversion of language has received less attention. An exception is Kudret, who states:

… words and names are coined and the language, freed from its logical bonds, is directed towards the 'meaningless' and the 'absurd', and, thus, language, which is supposed to be a means of communication among people, becomes an independent entity in itself (quoted in Özdoğru 2002: 867).

This linguistic liberty was a definitive characteristic of Karagöz theatre, where shadows spoke and meanings held no privileged position. Moreover, as glimpsed in the scenarios of 'The Scribe' and 'The Poetry Contest', the power of words could be subverted by the powerless.

Dark shadows fall

In the late nineteenth century the previously unbridled Karagöz theatre became subject to censorship: its sexual and political content was sanitised to some extent but, as Öztürk (2006: 298) observes, what had earlier been explicit then became communicated by metaphorical means.

The most dramatic change to Karagöz theatre and the character of Karagöz himself occurred after the establishment of the Republic of Turkey in 1923. Shadow theatre was enlisted to play its part in the modernisation process of the new Republic. Karagöz performances were held in government-run community centres, where scripted Karagöz plays were contrived in order to promote government policies and ideologies (see Öztürk 2006: 299-303).

In this new role Karagöz became a reformed character, a transformation accelerated by language reforms introduced in the late 1820s and early 1930s. The first reform was in 1828 when the alphabet was Latinised; in the early 1930s vocabulary was scrutinised:

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thousands of Arabic and Persian words were expunged from the Turkish language (for details, see Aytürk 2008; Lewis 1999). The metamorphosis of Karagöz is eloquently expressed by Öztürk (2006: 304), whose comments merit full inclusion:

When Hacivat spoke in Arabic during the Ottoman Empire, the coffeehouse clientele laughed because his language belonged to the palace. Karagöz, the person who represented the ordinary person, could not understand what Hacivat said. The duty of defending the status quo was given to Hacivat in the traditional play, and in Karagöz viewers laughed at but acknowledged their inferior status. In the modern [Republican] play, Hacivat fell behind the language revolution. Suddenly the duty of linguistic status quo is the responsibility of Karagöz, for the new state adopted Karagöz and his language as part of its revolution… By the end of the play Karagöz's efforts to get Hacivat to speak in Turkish, purified and modernized by language reform, succeed—even Hacivat joins language reform! Their roles have been reversed.

Thus, the foul-mouthed, anarchic, anti-authority figure of the Ottoman past is remodelled into an upright Turkish citizen, who becomes the mouthpiece – literally – of authority. This symbolic inversion, whereby a symbol of the powerless was appropriated and reshaped into a symbol of the powerful, sapped the potency of Karagöz theatre. The reformers of the Republic probably hastened the demise of shadow theatre, a demise which was already inevitable, given the new and competing forms of mass entertainment which emerged in the second half of the twentieth century.

Karagöz lingers into the twenty-first century, but as a shadow of his former self. The puppet masters have dwindled; performances are infrequent, limited to special events, tourism promotion, or attempts at cultural revival. Karagöz is now a kind of folkloric fossil. No longer the voice of the commoners in the Ottoman Empire, no longer the voice of the early Republic, he has become voiceless.

Conclusion: Out of the shadows

Nevertheless, he still gives voice to some lexical victories. In Turkish the noun *karagözlük* means tomfoolery or comical behaviour; the compund term *karagözlük etmek* expresses the idea of amusing others with comic imitations; and *karagöz oynatmak* means to do something comical. Thus, one aspect of Karagöz's identity has remained intact in Turkey, as it has elsewhere. For instance, 'Karaghiozis' in Greek is not only the name of the shadow theatre and its principal figure, but also a metaphor for someone who is a comedian, or is deemed to be ridiculous or carnivalesque. Similarly, in Romania the word *caraghios* owes its etymology to Karagöz (Morison, 1941: 247), and once again it carries the same spectrum of meanings: funny, amusing, comical or ridiculous.

The character Karagöz was uneducated and illiterate, but his creative manipulation of language remains unsurpassed, and perhaps the most apt tribute is a phrase which is still

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current in contemporary Turkey, and which brings Karagöz and Hacivat out of the shadows. The expression 'Karagöz and Hacivat' is invoked to describe a conversation of mutual incomprehension, in the nature of 'your bellicose attitude' and 'my billy-goat's hat'. At such times, Karagöz, master of words and puppet of shadows, is remembered for his madcap escapades and his articulate mastery of the inarticulate.

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