

The Legend of Karacaoğlan

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a contemporary depiction of Karacaoğlan

Karacaoğlan is not only one of the most famous ashiks [a poet-singer who writes, composes and sings love ballads, moving constantly from place to place] who lived in Anatolia, but is also considered the most esteemed representative of the “ashik literature.” The beauty of the nearly 500 poems he wrote is unmatched. They remain popular and continue to be read to this day. His masterful use of language, the purity of his vocabulary—uncontaminated with foreign words—and, especially, the highly imaginative analogies often featured in his poems have helped secure a special place for Karacaoğlan in the Turkish literature.

His poems have two main themes, love and nature, although some deal with the pain of separation, a longing for the homeland, and death. He is one of the most sentimental of the Anatolian ashiks, expressing his feelings sincerely and from the heart. Many ashiks and poets who lived after him were influenced by Karacaoğlan’s poetry, and his influence continues even today.

Above all, Karacaoğlan is a Turkmen [nomadic tribes that, for centuries, have been living on and around the Taurus Mountains in Southern Turkey], a man of passion, a nature lover, and a child of the mountains. In his poetry, he explores the relationship between the loved one and the mountain. In this two-way relationship, the loved one is like the mountain, and the mountain is like the loved one. The nature he describes in his poems is both what actually exists around him and, at times, a description of his imagination intended to help better express his thoughts and feelings. In reality, no matter what Karacaoğlan describes, he is describing the loved one.

From his poems, we learn that Karacaoğlan traveled abroad extensively, spending time in Egypt, several other North African countries, and the Balkans. Over the centuries, he has been admired so much that many places in Anatolia claim him as one of their own. However, there is no definitive proof of where he was born or where he lived. What follows is the most widely believed version—based largely on an article in the December 2011 issue of the ÇokBilgi website—of his legendary life story.

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Karacaoğlan's real name was Hasan. He was born in the early 17th century and lived in Kozan in southern Turkey, to the northeast of today's Adana. The Taurus Mountains, where most Turkmen tribes live, rise up sharply behind Kozan. Hasan's mother died before he was one year old, and before he turned five, his father was drafted as a soldier by Koca İlyas, the local ruler of Kozan, and never came back, leaving young Hasan an orphan. This little boy, whose mother used to lovingly call him Karaca (meaning darkish), was raised by Serdengeçti Osman Ağa, who became like a father to Hasan. At a young age, Hasan was nicknamed Karacaoğlan (meaning darkish boy).

When Karacaoğlan turned 18 years old, Serdengeçti Osman Ağa asked him to marry a mute girl who had no living parents or relatives. He did not want to marry this mute girl, but he dare not tell this to his adopted father, who was a stern man. Instead, while preparations were underway for his wedding, Karacaoğlan ran away from Kozan, never to return again.

He wandered through the valleys and mountains without stopping and without knowing where he was going. In his book *Three Anatolian Legends*, the famed author Yaşar Kemal describes Karacaoğlan's departure from Kozan:

"As he was leaving his entire village gathered around him and pleaded with him not to go. They warned him that suffering far away from home is more bitter than poison. They insisted that although he was an ashik, he must not leave. They tried to convince him that, in time, his feelings would blow over like the winds of poplar trees, and that he should not abandon his village. But he did not listen. His friends begged him saying no one could play the saz [a stringed musical instrument played by ashiks and folk singers in Turkey and in the wider Middle East region] or sing better than him, and they urged him to stay. But they could not stop him... Now, Karacaoğlan was standing fixed in the middle of an endless plain, thinking about all this. Who knows since when he had been standing there without any movement? Meanwhile, the sun began to rise. Soon, the mountains and the plains were all lit. The birds began to sing. He started to walk again. He could not think of anything other than walking. But he was young and in his heart were bright rays of light, burning fires, and branches covered with blooming spring flowers. He walked until noon."

When he got so tired that he could not walk anymore, he sat down under a mighty pine tree and immediately fell asleep. In his dream, a white-bearded old man gave him a jug full of water and said: "Drink this! Drink so that your thirst and sadness may end. Drink so that you may once again sing like a nightingale and your heart may fill with joy." He drank the water and woke up. After that, Karacaoğlan quickly came back to his senses and, indeed, he was no longer tired, angry, or sad. Yearning to play his saz and sing, he grabbed his saz and began to wander again.

Eventually, he reached a Turkmen tribe where Karacaoğlan once again played his saz and sang. As he sang, the members of the tribe formed a circle around him, and an old man pleaded, "Why don't you sing a few more ballads for us?" After that, Karacaoğlan's voice alone was heard everywhere, echoing among the mountains and in the valleys. Every member of the tribe—young, old, sick, disabled—rushed out of their tents and came to join the circle to listen to

Karacaoğlan. The circle kept growing. The shepherds left their flocks and came in from the mountains. The wolves and birds too came and joined the circle. Everyone was mesmerized with the beauty of his ballads. Then Karacaoğlan's saz abruptly fell silent, and his ballad ended although it continued to echo on the nearby rocks and in the fields for a while more.

His head bowed, Karacaoğlan rose and began to walk. The circle opened slightly to let him pass through. He came out of the circle and, with the deepest of love, embraced every creature in the world: the trees, the birds, the bugs, the people—every creature. He was full of love, down to the marrow of his bones, and it was directed toward everything on Earth: the rain, the cold, the warmth, the thunderstorm. Karacaoğlan was well again!

The members of the tribe enjoyed his performance tremendously and grew fond of him. They comforted him, saying, "Ashik, don't worry about anything. Consider our tribe your own. You may stay here as long as you wish and bring us joy through your playing and singing." So Karacaoğlan decided to stay with the tribe.

With his childlike eyes opened wide, Karacaoğlan looked at everything, even the smallest and most apathetic of objects, with amazement. His singing was always rapture, exultation, a celebration of the world and everything in it...

As days passed, Karacaoğlan fell in love with his new tribe's chief Boran Bey's only daughter Elif, who was beautiful and educated. At an early age, Elif was taught to read and write. Sadly, like Karacaoğlan's adopted father Osman Ağa, Boran Bey was a stern man, and Karacaoğlan could not open up to him. Instead, he buried his love for Elif deep in his heart and quietly left the tribe. He spent several months walking through many mountains and pastures and eventually arrived at the Karaman district. There, he miraculously came across Boran Bey's tribe once again, which was also on the move, migrating to the highlands for the summer. Karacaoğlan was both surprised and very happy. In the months since he had left the tribe, Elif too had been burning with longing for Karacaoğlan.



a contemporary depiction of Karacaoğlan and Elif

One night, Karacaoğlan and Elif secretly met, and they decided to leave together. They sought refuge far away, at Tuğrul Bey's tribe. Tuğrul Bey and everyone in his tribe welcomed them warmly and treated them with kindness. From then on, they stayed there. Tuğrul Bey arranged a magnificent wedding for Karacaoğlan and Elif, and they were married. Thereafter, Karacaoğlan entertained Tuğrul Bey's tribe as well as other neighboring tribes by playing his saz and singing while Elif took care of the other chores. Their days were filled with happiness.

After a while, Köse Veli, a man who lived in the area, fell in love with Elif. One night while Karacaoğlan was performing at a wedding in a tribe a day's walk away from theirs, Köse Veli sneaked into their tent and forced himself on Elif, who was alone. Elif was shocked and did not know what to do. What could she do? She was worried about someone hearing or seeing what was happening, and she did not want to bring shame to her husband. She decided not to scream and kept quiet.

At that precise moment, while playing at the wedding, Karacaoğlan's saz's strings suddenly broke. Surprised, he got up and raced like the wind back to their tribe. He arrived in record time, just before dawn, and found Köse Veli sleeping in his bed. Meanwhile, Elif was clinging to the edge of the bed. Devastated, he threw a cover on both, and Elif immediately understood that Karacaoğlan would leave and never return. But it was too late to do or say anything. Karacaoğlan left as quickly as he had arrived.

Desperate, Elif told Tuğrul Bey's wife everything who became enraged and killed Köse Veli. When Tuğrul Bey heard about what happened, he too became sad and angry. He sent some of his men to search for Karacaoğlan. They searched for days, but could not find him. Years passed with no news from Karacaoğlan. At different times, there were small leads about him being here or there. Once it was said he was in Antep playing his saz; then it was said he was in the Akkoyunlu highlands. Later, it was rumored that he had moved on to Arabia and was seen playing his saz in Hama.

Every time one of these rumors surfaced, Tuğrul Bey immediately sent his horsemen to search for Karacaoğlan, but they always came back empty handed. The only things they found when they searched for Karacaoğlan were the beautiful ballads he had composed being sung by other ashiks. Tuğrul Bey confided in Elif that, if he died without finding Karacaoğlan, it would be a sad end for him.

He did indeed die without finding Karacaoğlan. Elif confined herself to her tent and very rarely left it. She hoped that one day Karacaoğlan would learn what really happened and return. Looking forward to that day, she waited patiently. Once the most beautiful bride of the tribe, in time, Elif became an old woman.

Many years later, Karacaoğlan did learn the truth and set out to look for Elif. He looked in many places, but could never find her. Eventually, some tribesmen pointed him to a graveyard on a peak, where they said Elif was buried. By now, Karacaoğlan was also an old man. With the help of a few young lads, he climbed the peak where Elif's grave was. A young mulberry tree was planted next to it. He sat near the grave and, squeezing his saz to his chest, began to play and sing:

"Since arriving in this false world,
I drank bowl after bowl of poison.
Cruel fate grants none of my wishes.
Once a purple hyacinth garden,
Now I am nothing but a ruin!"

After finishing his ballad, he hung his saz on a branch of the mulberry tree and said, "This saz will remain here until eternity." Then he collapsed and died.

Karacaođlan was buried on a peak across from the one where Elif was buried. They say that every spring a green light and a blue light rise from those peaks and, just before reaching the sky, join together, becoming one.

When it comes to Karacaođlan's saz, it hung on the branch where he placed it for many years. When it rotted, they replaced it with a new one. When the mulberry tree grew old and died, they planted a new one in its place. It is said that, for centuries, whenever the wind blows, Karacaođlan's saz, still hanging on the mulberry tree, plays his ballads all by itself.

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