



## **CONVEYING NATIONAL AND CULTURAL IDENTITY THROUGH THE TRANSLATION OF LITERARY WORKS**

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### **Abstract**

This paper explores the representation of ethnocultural identity in Turkmen literature, focusing on the works of Berdi Kerbabaev, a prominent figure in Turkmen prose. Through a detailed analysis of Kerbabaev's novel *The Decisive Step*, the study demonstrates how national character, family values, gender roles, and hospitality are intricately woven into narrative structures. By examining the author's portrayal of Turkmen traditions, behaviors, and worldview, the paper highlights how literature becomes a means of preserving and transmitting cultural identity. The study also underscores the role of literary characters in embodying the collective consciousness of the Turkmen people, emphasizing the interaction between national values and universal human concepts. The research reveals that through the symbolic use of language, setting, and character development, Berdi Kerbabaev reflects the enduring ethical and spiritual values of the Turkmen nation.

**Keywords:** Turkmen literature; national identity; ethnocultural space; Berdi Kerbabaev; *The Decisive Step*; family values; hospitality; cultural symbolism; Turkmen traditions.

### **Introduction**

Ethnocultural identity has long been a cornerstone of national literature, serving as both a mirror and a guide for the collective consciousness of a people. In literary works, authors not only address universal human concerns but also express deeply rooted cultural norms, values, and beliefs. The ethnocultural space reflected in literature is a dynamic yet stable medium through which national identity is shaped, reinforced, and passed on across generations.

In the context of Turkmen literature, Berdi Kerbabaev stands as a pioneering figure whose narratives exemplify the essence of Turkmen national character. His novel *The Decisive Step* presents a vivid portrayal of Turkmen traditions, with particular attention to the sacred role of the family, the moral responsibility of the individual within society, and the symbolic significance of hospitality and gender roles. This study seeks to examine how Kerbabaev constructs a uniquely Turkmen ethnocultural universe in his writing and how his characters serve as agents of national ideology.

### **Main body**



In works of art, the ethnocultural space created by the author develops not only universal human concepts but also deep feelings of national identity. These works reflect concepts and behavioral patterns related to societal values, all of which are directed toward a shared cultural framework. In shaping national character, ethnic and cultural concepts play a fundamental role. The mentality of a people is crucial in defining the moral and existential truths inherent to them, as well as in portraying their prominent characters. The intellectual traits of various ethnic groups are often determined by their genetic characteristics. For instance, the conceptual worldview of the Turkmen people is characterized by hospitality, diligence, friendship, and endurance.

National consciousness is a stable phenomenon; however, it cannot be denied that it constantly evolves. Despite various transformations, it is important to emphasize that the national structure retains the core concepts of its own culture

Berdi Kerbabaev, the pioneer of the narrative genre in Turkmen literature, places the human being at the center of artistic perception, and on this foundation, he constructs a unique narrative text. His characters—particularly Artyk, one of the protagonists of the novel "The Decisive Step"—are portrayed as individuals who align with societal expectations not merely for personal gain but out of a desire to serve the interests of others.

One of the sacred values of the Turkmen people is the family. In Turkmen culture, the family occupies a respected and sacred place. From a historical perspective, the family serves as a key agent in the development of the nation and its national culture. Therefore, in Turkmen traditions, the responsibility for the family's well-being typically falls upon the male figure, and children are taught this principle from an early age. This notion is well illustrated in the works of Berdi Kerbabaev.

"Ilki bilen Myrally söze başlapdyr:

– Meniň owlak-guzy bakýan wagtymdy. Öýe gelemde, işim aşyk-topaz oýnamak bolardy. Garry enem bir gün maňa igendi: «Balam, men indi garrylyga ýüz urupdyryn. Maşgalany senden başga eklejek ýok. Sen, ýaşyň azlygyna garaman, öýüň garamatyny boýnuňa götermegiň gerek.» [Berdi Kerbabaýew. Saýlanan eserler. A.: Magaryf, 1992. Sah. 313]

"First, Myrally began to speak:

– It was the time when I was grazing the lambs. When I came home, I was playing ashyks (a small sheep's bone played by the boys). One day my grandmother said to me: "Sonny, now I became old. There is no one to keep the family except you. No matter how young you are, you have to take care of household."

The Turkmen people regard their home as a sacred entity. In a Turkmen household, guests are always welcomed with heartfelt hospitality. Whether invited or uninvited, guests are received with great generosity and respect.

Since ancient times, it has been customary among Turkmens for the family home to be inherited by the youngest son. As previously noted, this son assumes full responsibility for the care and well-being of his parents. The process of forming a family typically begins with the tradition of arranged marriage. The Turkmen people



follow a customary sequence of matchmaking rituals. Initially, the bride's family discreetly sends a representative to observe the prospective groom's household and environment. This is followed by the formal initiation of the matchmaking process and the establishment of kinship ties.

In family and kinship relations, one of the most profound expressions of the Turkmen nation's cultural identity is reflected in its code of conduct. This includes respect for elders, interactions among close and distant relatives, between spouses, parents and children, as well as among representatives of different generations.

In Turkmen culture, one of the most emotionally resonant and revered concepts is that of the "woman." In traditional society, women are seen as symbols of renewal and the continuity of generations. A woman is considered the guardian of the home, the source of kindness, knowledge, and family prosperity. She is consistently devoted to the well-being of the family and the care of her children. This idea is vividly portrayed by the writer Berdi Kerbabaev in his novel "The Decisive Step":

“Şol wagtda, öýden çykan, elli ýaşlarynda, orta boýly, tegelek ýüzli, ak maňyz, peşeneli bir aýal:

– Artyk jan, süýt sowamanka, bir-iki agyz iýsene, guzym! – diýdi. Artyk alaşaň gerşini sypap, arkasyna pat-pat kakandan soň:

– Bolýar, eje, – diýip, içerik girdi. Ol ojagyň başynda aýbogdaşyny gurap, çörek iýmäge oturdy. Artygyň ejesi oňa saçak taýynlamak, süýt guýup bermek bilen meşgul wagtynda, goňşy çatmadan gelen aýal ojagyň gyrasynda oturyp, öýüň içine göz gezdirdi...” [Berdi Kerbabaýew. Aýgytly ädim. Roman A.: 1955. Sah. 12]

“At that time a round-faced, fair-skinned, attractive woman of average height in her fifties left home and said:

– Artyk jan, will you drink some milk while it is warm, my lamb! After gently stroking his horse and patting it on the back:

– Okay, Mom – he said. He sat cross-legged and began to eat bread. While his mother was busy spreading sachak (cloth which is used in eating) in front of him and pouring milk, a woman who had come from the neighboring hut sat on the edge of the hearth and saw round the house...”

As can be seen, the affectionate address of a loving mother—Artyk's mother—who calls her child “guzym” (“lamb”) reflects the essence of Turkmen national identity. The use of such tender expressions by parents toward their children—such as “guzym, läläm, köşegim, taýym, toklym” (“my lamb, my heart, my colt, my foal, my dear”)—astonishes scholars who study the ethnology of the Turkmen people. These forms of address are deeply rooted in the emotional and cultural fabric of Turkmen society.

The plot of the novel "The Decisive Step" also begins in the vast expanses of the Turkmen yellow steppes. “Gijeki maýdalap ýagan ýagyş daňa golaý diňdi. Çygly şemal asmanyň buludyny öz ugryna bakan kowup gitdi. Gögüň ýüzi çüýşe ýaly durlandy. Gün ýer ýüzüne gyk göz bilen garandan – kümüş nuruny seçip galdy. Garaňky ýorganyny üstünden serpip gara ýer ýeňillik bilen dem aldy. Ýer yüzünden goýry, çalyntyk bug göterildi. Ulgam-ulgam gumlaryň, aňnat-aňnat çölleriň



üstünden taýyp gelyän pessaý şemal çaly-çerkezleriň, çogan-ýowşanlaryň, gülligülälekli gök otlaryň çygly, ýakymly ysyny getirdi. Gündogardan günbatara bakan uzan agyr küren oba ilerli-gaýraly hatar gurap, asudalyk bilen ýaýnap otyrdy”. [Berdi Kerbabaýew. Aýgytly ädim. Roman A.: 1955. Sah 5]

“The light rain that fell during the night has almost stopped. The wet wind blew the cloud of the sky in its direction. The sky became as transparent as bottle. Sun radiated its warmth on the earth, it spread its silver light. The black earth breathed a sigh of relief as the dark blanket spread over it. A dark, thick mist rose from the earth. The gentle breeze blowing on the sands and plains of the desert brought the wet, sweet scent of grasses, sedges, and flowering herbs. Locating from east to west, a long, heavily populated village was lined up and spread out peacefully.”

This artistic portrayal is vividly felt in the characters’ personalities, speech, and behavior. Furthermore, the respect and authority of the elder generation within the family forms the core of familial relationships in the novel. The reverence shown by the younger generation toward the elders and their attentiveness to their words are clearly expressed throughout the narrative.

“– Seniň ýaly ýaş oglan, ýaşulularyň gürrüňini diňlä. Sen, gaýta, geçiň öň aýagy ýaly, özüňi öňe oklaýarsyň!” [Berdi Kerbabaýew. Aýgytly ädim. Roman A.: 1955. Sah 161]

“– A young boy like you will listen to the elders. But you are poking your nose into all affairs!”

Berdi Kerbabaev employs the concept of uncertainty as a narrative technique. In this novel, the author presents the main characters—Ayna, Artyk, and his mother—with distinct individual traits and reflects on a tense moment that arises in the village. The writer's focused attention on the trio's storyline is not coincidental; through Artyk—who ultimately finds happiness in love and family—the author skillfully depicts, in artistic form, the underlying causes of future hardships both within this family and in others, particularly those struggling through difficult circumstances without the basic conditions necessary for human existence.

Attaining pure love and restoring the foundation of the family can be considered essential truths unique to the Turkmen ethnocultural space.

Artyk's determined pursuit of his goal is deeply rooted in national customs, symbols, and beliefs, which are intricately connected to the symbolic power of words and actions. This set of traditions represents a system of spiritual values, finds its place in everyday life, and exerts a positive influence on the life of the Turkmen people.

In Turkmen culture, the tradition of hospitality is one of the ethical codes that testify to the generosity of our people's behavior. When Turkmens receive guests, they often do not inquire about them for three days. This practice is based on showing respect and care for the guests for a full three days without interruption. Moreover, it is common for any Turkmen household to have a special room designated as the “guest room,” which clearly demonstrates the community's strong adherence to this custom.



A clear example of this is illustrated in the scene where Pökgi and Nobat, facing that door, are followed by a servant who calls after them:

– Myhmanlar! Myhman jaýy munda!” [Berdi Kerbabaýew. Aýgytly ädim. Roman A.: 1955. Sah. 204]

“So, Nobat and Pokgi went to that house. The servant shouted after them:

– Guests! The guest house is here!”

Another distinctive feature of the Turkmen people is their unwavering practice of welcoming guests into their homes at any time—whether during the day, evening, or late at night—without hesitation or refusal.

“– Siziň öýüňiz haýsy?

– Ho-al ýeke-çäk oturan garaja öý biziňkidir.

– Seniň adyň näme?

– Gül.

– Öýüňize barsak, myhman alarmysyňyz?

– Türkmen halkynyň henize çenli myhman kowanyny eşidemok.” [Berdi Kerbabaýew. Saýlanan eserler. A.: Magaryf, 1992. Sah. 318].

“– Which one is your house?

– That black house which stands alone is ours.

– What's your name?

– Gul.

– Will you receive us as guests, if we come to your house?

– Until now I haven't heard that the Turkmen people threw their guests out of the house.”

One of the distinctive features that demonstrates the Turkmen people's hospitality is the custom of preparing extra food for guests, known as myhman paý (guest portion). In ancient times, newcomers were invited to meals and treated generously, which served as a way to help them quickly adapt to the new environment. This tradition holds significant social importance within our community.

The emergence of hospitality among our people is closely linked to the customary economic lifestyle and is based on the principle of mutual assistance. The customs of hospitality are a clear expression of our nation's generosity and compassion.

According to Turkmen customs, a guest who comes to the house is never sent away without being offered hospitality. Refusing food is considered a sign of disrespect toward the hosts. Thus, within Turkmen culture, the phrase “Taste the salt of the bread!” has emerged as an expression of respect and honor. Moreover, no matter how many days a guest stays, a Turkmen host never asks them to leave; rather, they wish for the guest to remain for several more days. The guest, in turn, expresses heartfelt gratitude for this hospitality. Let us illustrate this with the following examples:

“– Balalarym, indi gaýdarys diýseňiz rugsatdyr. Allanyň kömegi bilen, oňat, agzyňyz hem birikdi. Baryň sag-aman boluň!

Japbak oňa jogap berdi:

– Işan aga, eden hyzmatyňa köp sag bol! Doganlara öwüt-nesihat berdiň,





agyzlaryny birikdirdiň, Alladan gaýtsyn! Her kimiň hem, elbetde, işi, aladasy bar. Seniň ýüzüňden geçip bilmän, senden rugsat sorap bilmän, on gün seniň çöregiňi iýdik. Hoş, sag otur!” [Berdi Kerbabaýew. Saýlanan eserler. A.: Magaryf, 1992. Sah. 219]

“– My children, if you want to leave, I allow you to go. By the will of Allah, now you became solidary. Go, may your trip be safe!

Japbak answered him:

– Ishan, thank you very much for your service! You gave advice to the brothers, you persuaded them to be solidary, may Allah bless you! Everyone, of course, has his own work. We ate your bread for ten days without being able to offend you or ask your permission. Bye, be healthy!”

In ancient times within Turkmen culture, a young woman entering her husband’s house would stand before the threshold, bow her head respectfully to the elders, and lightly bend her left knee in greeting. She would similarly greet her husband’s relatives. A tradition preserved to this day in Turkmen upbringing dictates that when a young woman greets elders, she slightly bows her head, places her right hand near her abdomen, and lowers her gaze. This custom is widely reflected in our folk tales, epics, and traditional creative works.

Let us refer to an example from Berdi Kerbabaev’s works: “When Jonnuk Batyr was handed a cup, Tulpar licked it with his long tongue and then bowed his head as if to thank his master.”

[Berdi Kerbabaev. Selected Works. Ashgabat: Magaryf, 1992. p. 285]

One of the customs that has been preserved from ancient times to the present day is the giving of a pata (blessing). Initially, it had a religious tone, but over time it expanded in usage. Typically, a pata is given by elders. The person giving the pata recites a prayer and then rubs their hands over their face. A pata can be given on various occasions: when someone is setting off on a long journey or facing an important challenge. Berdi Kerbabaev skillfully incorporates this in his novel Aygytly Ädim (Decisive Step):

“The short, multicolored-robed, light-eyed Jelil Ishan with his long, streaked beard raised his hands and gave a pata. His long, striped beard quivered in the starlight, and his voice came out trembling with emotion.”

– Ýoluňyz ak, ýoldaşyňyz Hak, işiňiz şowly, murtuňyz towly bolsun! Tüpeňiňiz atgyr, gylyjyňyz kesgir bolsun! Zarbyňyzdan daglar-daşlar döwülsin! Demeňiz düşen ýerinde duşman gurşun ýaly eresin! Gaýduwsyz batyrlar! Din ýolunda ölseňiz şehit, ýeldirseňiz, kazy bolarsyňyz! Baryň, men sizi bir Allaga tabşyrdym!

Eziz han atyny şähre bakan öwrende, Jelil işan onuň yzyndan gygyrdy. Emma bu sapar onuň sesi şatlykly çykdy.” [Berdi Kerbabaýew. Saýlanan eserler. A.: Magaryf, 1992. Sah. 268]

“Short, brown-eyed Jelil ishan with a striped robe and long brown beard raised his hands and blessed them. His long brown beard shook in the starlight and his voice broke into a sob:



– May your road be safe, may Almighty protect you, may your work be successful! May bullets in your gun hit the mark and may your sword be sharp! May your blow shatter mountains and rocks! May the enemy melt like lead where you breathe! Brave heroes! If you die on the path of religion, you will be a martyr, and if you are wounded, you will be a judge! Go, Almighty be with you!

As Eziz Khan turned his horse to the city, Jelil ishan shouted after him. But this time, his voice sounded cheerfully.”

In the works of B. Kerbabayev, the above-mentioned features of the Turkmen mentality and the realities that reflect them play a significant role, as they demonstrate the cultural and national characteristics of the Turkmen people.

The realities found in the writer’s works are rendered by translators using the descriptive method of translation. The features of customs and traditions are conveyed through compensation, with the addition of explanatory words to make up for cultural gaps.

In general, every ethnic group possesses a unique national language. A person’s behavior in specific situations is shaped by the cultural norms of their society. Each ethnic group is characterized by its distinctive manner of speech. As an emotionally impactful means of communication, language clearly reflects the unique aspects of different ethnic cultures and their communicative nature within a visible framework. The Turkmen language is distinguished by its rich and emotionally nuanced vocabulary. In Turkmen culture, artistic language devices—such as metaphors, idiomatic expressions, and figurative language—hold special importance in expressing emotions and feelings.

When translating ethnocultural realia, translators apply various translation transformations: general substitutions, addition method, descriptive translation, pragmatically determined modifications, grammatical substitutions of the original text, functional analogies, generalization, differentiation techniques, and specification of meanings.

## **Conclusion**

The works of Berdi Kerbabaev, particularly *The Decisive Step*, embody the cultural, moral, and emotional fabric of the Turkmen people. Through his artistic use of setting, character, and dialogue, Kerbabaev captures the ethos of a nation, articulating its core values—hospitality, respect for elders, family devotion, and spiritual resilience. His narrative provides a literary platform where national customs and traditions are preserved and conveyed to future generations.

Kerbabaev's characters act not only as individuals within a fictional world but also as symbolic figures representing the Turkmen worldview and its ethical imperatives. The novel reveals that the pursuit of love, family unity, and moral responsibility is central to the Turkmen identity. As such, literature becomes both a creative and a cultural space, nurturing a sense of national belonging and moral continuity. Ultimately, Kerbabaev’s writing serves as a testament to the enduring significance of ethnocultural values in the construction of national consciousness.



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