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Women in the shadows in the movies of yavuz turgul

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Abstract

One of the most basic aspects of storytelling is «conflict». This aspect is considered, while telling a story in a movie. The conflict between men and women is often used. However, even though there are many movies where the protagonist is a woman, usually the main part of the story and the conflict is a man. The movies of Yavuz Turgul, one of the most successful directors in Turkish cinema, both with their stories and the detailed characters in those stories, have earned are preferred by Turkish audience. Turgul generally portrayed subjects, such as a longing for the past, friendship, change in the society though his characters, who we can never forget and while doing this he has used a male main character in every movie, leaving the female characters more in the background. Since these are what come to mind when the movies of Yavuz Turgul are mentioned, the studies that have been made have been about this too. However, in addition to this, the existence of female characters, who try to make themselves heard thought their silence, play a big part in the broader story and must be also studied. This study will focus on some of the main topics of Turgul such as male friendship and manhood, and specifically on the cause of the silent women and through historical and feminist methods, using the movies Muhsin Bey, Eşkiya, Gönül Yarası, attempt to find out where women belong in the stories of Yavuz Turgul.

Keywords:

Yavuz Turgul, gender representations, feminist criticism, male friendship, social change

1. Introduction

In Turkey history, facts of military coups have been recorded. These coups have affected every aspect of life for the community and caused serious financial damages. The tense political atmosphere in the 1970s have affected every corner of life, mainly the streets, and cinema inevitably got its share too. As the streets became less crowded, movie theaters grew emptier. With the television becoming mainstream, the already diminished audience stayed in their homes. In these years the comedies of Kemal Sunal filled the theaters. These movies concerned a rising wave of erotic movies that were polar opposite to the oppressive regime of

the era. This stagnant state of the Turkish cinema continued to the 1980s and after the military coup of September 12, it hit a period of recession.

The large number of arrests and tortures conducted by the government to establish peace created an environment of depression, while the rising financial instability and the lower income fuelled this depression. It was in the period that the wave of arabesque swooped the nation and movies starring famous arabesque stars were released. People in the 1980s were drawn to these melodramatic movies, popularized by their songs, as they saw themselves in them. In the book *History of Turkish Cinema* (2016: 180), Esen says on this topic: “Movies, whose scripts were inspired by the lyrics of arabesque songs, where visuals were accompanied by plenty of singing and lead roles were played by arabesque singers, full of tears, prates and sexuality, were a branch that movie makers clung to. Arabesque movies drew as many people as possible to the theaters and reached even more through video cassettes in their homes.”

In addition to the popularity of the arabesque movies, films in which the problems of women are discussed and where the depression in the street is portrayed on the characters have also surfaced. Atıf Yılmaz had been called the director of women’s films, i.e. shot films on female sexual freedom and the fight of becoming a member of society. In this regard, the 1980s were the rising point of not only arabesque and covered up criticism for the coup, but also of movies about women and their problems. One of the biggest reasons was that women were only portrayed as the housewife, sister etc., as in Turkish culture, these are the defined roles for women. Actresses on the big screen, tried to act according to the woman that the Turkish audience wanted to see and because of this refrained from taking braver roles. However, in the 1980s this began to change, mainly due to the spread of feminism. Feminism was presented in cinema around the 1970s, while a decade late, from 1980 women held more important on the big screen.

Yavuz Turgul, who at this period began his directing career in addition to screen writing and shot his first movie in 1984; *Fahriye Abla* starring Müjde Ar, making his debut about the topics of the period. Turgul, who had written a film much like the comedies of Ertem Eğilmez and that touched on social issues, put a woman in the lead for the first time in *Fahriye Abla*. However, this film is the first and only one by Turgul with a female lead. In almost all his movies, he put the male characters in the centre of the story and limited the women to the romantic relationships of the men. Women are in the background and an even more distinct property of them is their silence. The silent woman motif can be found in most films by Yavuz Turgul.

In conclusion, the 1980 military coup affected the Turkish cinema in a profound way. As the erotic films that were on the rise by the end of the 1970s gave way for the arabesque, Yavuz Turgul stayed away from it, continued to write stories in which he portrayed social change and the east vs. west conflict. In addition to these topics which are the basis of storytelling, movies of Turgul are famous for telling these stories through men and their friendships. This makes it possible to study male friendship in the works of Yavuz Turgul, but the conflict of women is also one of the main aspects of his films. Despite the important place they have in the story, Turgul keeps his female characters in the shadows, and the reason for this is open to interpretation. Due to this, it is wise to first look into the place that women hold in Turkish cinema before looking into the place they hold in Turgul’s films.

1.1. Women in Turkish Cinema

Cinema arrived almost immediately after the Lumiere brothers invented the “Cinematographe”, which coincides with the last years of the Ottoman Empire. Foreign films were shown for a long while until Fuat Uzkınay shot “Ayastefanos’taki Rus Abidesinin Yıkılışı (The Demolition of the Russian Monument in Ayastefanos)” and the first Turkish film was screened. Three years after this, women were focused on for the first time in Turkish cinema in one of the first feature films of Turkish cinema, “Pençe (The Claw)” (Esen, 2000: 25). The movie directed by Sedat Simayi and inspired by a play written by Mehmet Rauf, it is about marriage and extramarital affairs. The actress in the movie, Eliza Binemeciyan, is a woman of Armenian descent. Another movie with a focus on women is the movie “Mürebbiye (The Tutoress)” in 1919 by Ahmet Fehim, which is about a French tutoress seducing every men in the mansion she works in and the role of the tutoress is also portrayed by a foreign actress. The 1922 movie “İstanbul’da Bir Facia-I Aşk(A Disastrous Love in İstanbul)” by Muhsin Ertuğrul, which was based on real events, tells the story of a femme fatale character, also played by a foreign actress. It is important, therefore, to note that the first actresses in Turkish cinema are not Turkish.

The first movie starring a Turkish actress is “Ateşten Gömlek” by Muhsin Ertuğrul. It is with this adaptation of Halide Edip Adıvar’s novel by the same name that the Turkish women made its debut on the silver screen. It is in this period, in 1934, “Aysel Bataklı Damın Kızı” by Muhsin Ertuğrul, considered to be one of his best work, gained Turkish cinema its first star actress in Cahide Sonku. The scarf she wore in the movie became famous by the name Aysel. «The first scene in Turkish cinema involving girls in bathing suites was in the 1933 musical movie “Karım Beni Aldatırsa”, the first feminist women, though only by name, was in the 1933 movie “Söz Bir Allah Bir”, the first scenes of female sexuality in levels of eroticism were in the 1940 movie starring Cahide Sonku “Şehver Kurbanı”.” (Esen, 2000: 28).

In the 1950s the traces of theatre began to disappear from cinema. These are also the years in which, with the influence of Hollywood, the star system started growing in Turkish cinema. Many actors and actresses have been gained in this period, especially from the contests of the “Ses” magazine.

Starting from this period, two main profiles are set for women in Turkish cinema. One is, in plainer terms, the housewife, mother of the children, always gives, represses everything and endures instead of managing her issues, seeming “noble” in the process. The other one is quite the opposite of this, seducing men with her femininity and sexuality, the homewrecker. One of the reasons for this is the unwillingness of the actresses to step outside of the boundaries set to them by society. The study by Uluyağcı, titled “1980 Sonrası Türk Sinemasında Özgür Kadın İmgesi” (The Image of Free Women in post 2980 Türküş Cinema), quotes Evren saying (2002: 3) “In the 1980s Türkan Şoray, Fatma Girik and Hülya Koçyiğit became the icon for ‘good’ women of the 60s and 70s. Şoray was the ‘lover’ of the people and Girik was the ‘sister’. Şoray symbolized the feminine women, while Girik embodied masculinity in addition to femininity.”. As stated, in these years in the Turkish cinema, the concept of the “masculine woman” started to surface too. The main character Nebahat from the 1960 movie “Şoför Nebahat” by Metin Erksan draws the attention not only with her manly attire but also her manly speech. Kaplan, who discussed this in İstanbul

Ticaret Üniversitesi Dergisi (İstanbul Trade University Magazine), put forth industrialization, modernization causing the production relations to change and turning the society into one of consumption as the reason for this. He stated that as this happened, the status of the women also changed and that this was hyperbolically portrayed on the big screen. These women, though acting very manly, are portrayed as very emotional and loving on the inside (2003: 155).

Turkish cinema, which was in a recession in the 1970s due to political and economic effects, saw women on the big screen in erotic films in roles that were polar opposites of this familiar look they previously had. The male audience, who until then were used to women in the roles of mothers or sisters, quickly accepted this new presentation and movie theaters in this period were mostly occupied by male viewers. In addition to this craze, there were also movies on social topics with no obvious change in how women were presented.

By the 1980s, the period where women had their real transformation, they started to appear less on the background and more up front as subjects such as the existential suffering, freedom and sexuality of women were focused on. It was Müjde Ar that became known in this period by gaining Turkish cinema the image of the free woman. In addition to this, many of the actresses broke free of the taboos they were afraid of, created by the reaction they assumed they would get from the audience and appeared on screen with entirely different looks. Especially Türkan Şoray broke the rules that made her “The Sultan (The Queen)” and appeared on screen with characters opposite to her motherly housewife roles in the 60s and the 70s. She says the following on this topic: «It is about the society changing. The tastes of the society started to change. Viewers used to like movies like that. Now they see foreign movies on the television, know good actors. This put cinema in a hard spot. People started not wanting the things we did in the old movies. For example, the things that were glossed over in a love scene started to stick out to the audience more. Before, the actors would hold hands and the scene would cut to flowers after that. As the audience grew more realistic, they started to want other things and we started to think about what we needed to do. If we did not keep up with these changes, we would be outdated. We would be forgotten if we remained the same. We needed to keep up with the times, innovation, change and the ones who managed that remained in Turkish cinema.» (aktaran Uluyağcı, 2002: 5).

With this change in how women are presented, especially with the character Berivan in the movie “Sürü”, the image of the silent woman entered into the Turkish cinema and it can be found in many films. It is possible to interpret this silence as both an acceptance and submission to the expectations of the patriarchal society and as a form of resistance to the patriarchy.

1.2. The Silent Women

Silence, or quiet, generally is associated with peace and calm. Most times, silence has been seen as a virtue and the people that chose to remain quiet have been dubbed virtuous and noble. Mani thinkers praised silence. The prophet Muhammed called “silence” the master of traits, while the Chinese philosopher Confucius said that “staying quiet” is a true friend that would never betray. On the other hand, there are many sayings showing the meaning behind

remaining silent. The author of the *Alchemist* book Paulo Coelho saw “silence” as not a reflection of approval but being incapable of reacting instantly. Stanislaw J. Lee, another author, stated that in order to make one’s voice heard, it is necessary to “be silent”. However, another thing about the act of silence that demands attention is on who it is observed on the most, as the act of silence has been most attributed to women and children. It has been seen as more a virtue for them. “In his 1979 research, Spender observed that women are expected to be silent when with men and that even if they speak less than men, the impression is that they speak too much. The study showed that it is not welcome for women to lead or participate in the conversation, that they are expected to listen quietly, approve what is being said and show interest in the topics spoken about by the men.” (König'den aktaran Öztürk ve Tural, 2001:104).

As this study shows, the act of silence has been considered as a behavior of women and seen as a necessity. A female figure who is more passive in masculine conversations, one that listens and approves, is the women profile that is considered as normal and expected in society. However, even though silence is mostly seen as a virtue for women and children, metaphorically, it can mean more. ...Even without tools like words, writing or signs to convey meaning, silence conveys as much meaning as it can be explained, interpreted and transferred. (aktaran Canar, 2017:90). In this regard, silence can be interpreted as many things, depending on the context. Fear, resistance or sometimes a desire to punish may cause the act of silence.

When we look at how the act of silence is portrayed in cinema, it is evident that it has been done mostly through female characters. Silverman states about this; “The prerequisite for women being turned into a passive object of sexuality is for them to be silenced in the narrative and be deprived of the opportunity to speak in a meaningful way. In classical Hollywood cinema, where the male character is seen as an active protagonist, leading the events in the narrative and the female body serves something to look at, the viewer is lead to identify with the male character, see the events through his point of view and interpret through his voice (aktaran Yüksel, 2003: 62).” With this in mind, another reason for women to be given a silent character is to complete her identity on screen as a sexual object. However just as there are many meanings of silence, there can be many reasons to create a silent character. In this regard, it is used sometimes to complete women’s place on screen as a passive object, to portray the resistance of women or as a method for her to punish the man.

It is possible, especially in Turkish cinema, to find many examples of the silent woman. As stated before, until the 1980s, women were on screen not as characters but as archetypes, two main ones in that: The angel, mother, the female bird devoted to the nest, or on the contrary; the homewrecker. In this regard, women being presented in these ways is nothing more than the roles that the society thrusts upon them. A good proof of that is that even actresses were hesitant to take roles that stood outside these boundaries. The effects of women being given such limited roles in the patriarchal order can be seen on cinema through many years. However, in addition to the image of women becoming free after the 1980s, the topic shifted also to women who did not want to live in the patriarchal order but could not oppose to it either. The common traits of these women were that they generally lived in or came from rural areas and that they were doomed to live a life they do not want. Their reaction to this is not to oppose but to submit and remain silent. For example, in the movie “Sürü”, the character of Berivan is given by her family to the opposing family as a token of peace. Berivan, who did not oppose this action of her family, expressed her reaction to the suffering she faced and

the death of her children through silence. This silence kept her from her duties at home and from being an ideal wife, drawing the attention of her father-in-law. Berivan accepted that she could not fight an order she cannot change with this attitude and silently waited for death.

However, in another interpretation, this silence is actually a form of resistance, for the woman is not fulfilling the roles that had been thrust upon her. This causes her to refuse the duty given to her by the patriarchal society, which is an example of resistance. This resistance of the woman then turns into a punishment. Keje did not resist marrying Berfo, who stabbed Baran in the back, but she fell into a long silence, never fulfilling the roles that society demands of women through the marriage. This way she did not bow down to Berfo, who loved her, disappointing him by not returning his love, thus, punishing him.

1.3. Male Characters and Male Friendship in Turgul Films

The concept of male friendship began surfacing in cinema particularly after World War II. In this period, the fears of the man fighting side by side on the fronts as well as their increasing frailty were the topic on the silver screen. Men, who understood each other attempted to deal with these issues together.

From the 1980s and on, Turkish cinema focused on female characters and portrayed the issues women faced becoming free individuals. This situation, caused by the rapid spread of feminism and its subsequent effects on cinema, pushed male characters into the background this time. The fall of the dominion that male characters had on the big screen, that decreased after the rising number of female stories that the feminist wave brought to cinema, would return in a different form after 1990. One of the primary reasons for this are the attempts to rebuild the male courage that was broken by the liberal politics. This would end up happening thanks to generally opposite male characters, who guide and help one another. Men, who before were on the big screen brandishing their gallantness (Tarkan Movies) or their charisma (movies of Kadir İnanır etc.), were this time portrayed as weak characters with fears who are just trying to belong in a changing world and their biggest support in battling this fear and the changing world order is again their brethren.

One of the directors that had the most contribution to these films that presented manhood to the audience again is Yavuz Turgul. Turgul, who used a female main character only in his directing debut, *Fahriye Abla*, chose as a topic for said film the existential fight of women which was one of the popular subjects at the time. After that, he made movies with male main characters, which make Turgul who he is. 3 years after *Fahriye Abla*, he wrote and directed *Muhsin Bey*, in which he started using subjects that created his style. Ali Nazik, who came from the city of Adana and wants to be a singer and *Muhsin Bey*, who takes him in and does all that he can to make him famous is the plot of the film and one of the most prominent themes throughout is male solidarity. Even though *Muhsin Bey* is the side that gets hurt in this duo, he helps Ali Nazik achieve his dreams as he promised. On the other hand, even though Ali Nazik causes *Muhsin Bey* to act opposite to his character in later scenes, he gives him the greatest help in the beginning by saving him from his tooth ache. Another property of these Turgul male characters that support each other is that they are of opposite personalities. While *Muhsin Bey* is attached to the past and closed off to change, Ali Nazik adapts to the

conditions of the new world and is open to change. Here, by change it is meant that morality takes a step back and personal gain is on the foreground. The changing social order is something Turgul touches on a lot in this context.

On the other hand, Turgul pushes the male friendship up a notch in the movie *Eşkiya*. The friendship of Baran and Cumali turn, over time, to a father son relationship. When one considers that fathers protect their sons at all times, it is not wrong to say that male solidarity in Turgul films continue at all times as well. Baran risking death for Cumali or Muhsin Bey scamming people for Ali Nazik are actions that require a great sacrifice. In this way, Male friendship in Turgul films develop with great sacrifices and without expecting something in return. In the movie *Gönül Yarası*, such a big sacrifice is not present, however, the characters of Nazım and Atakan are riddled with opposition. While Nazım is earnest and calm, Atakan is excited and outgoing. The friendship of two opposite characters can also be seen in this movie. Nazım is able to get a house and a job thanks to Atakan. During this time, Atakan is even more active than Nazım's son Mehmet or his daughter Piraye.

One of the most prominent things about movies on male friendship is that women take up important roles in connecting the two men together. (aktaran Yüksel, 2003:52). The main plot revolves around social change and male friendship in Turgul movies too, while women are usually in the background, presented as the heroine of the romantic side of the male characters. On the other hand, it is possible to find a silent woman in almost every Turgul movie. In this way, the most prominent attribute of women in Turgul films is their silence.

1.4. Female Characters in Turgul Movies and Their Place in the Story

In studies on feminism in cinema, the focus is usually on women presented on the big screen as sexual objects. Feminist cinema theorists opposed the development of the female identity through male identity and discussed on the presentation of women. Another thing about the representation of women is that they are presented as passive and are in the back seat in the story compared to men.

All of Turgul's films also develop around male characters. Women in these stories exists as much as their romantic connections to the men allow. On the other hand, the existence of a silent woman in almost every Turgul movie draws more attention. Ulusay says on this; "... the most striking metaphor in male films is created by women who refuse to talk or that cannot talk because they do not know the language. Movies that cannot entirely throw women out of the narrative, are thus able to "mute" them (aktaran, Ertem: 2016)." This definition would lead to resulting that male movies mute women to marginalize and throw them out of the story. However, another opinion on silence is that it is a form of resistance. Especially in *Eşkiya*, the silence of Keje is presented to the audience as a resistance. Keje, after Baran gets thrown in prison, is sold to Berfo and never spoke a word for years to punish Berfo, who loved her so much that he betrayed Baran. Keje's story, which begins with her submitting to the notion of being sold, turn into a resistance with her silent punishment towards Berfo. The Movie *Gönül Yarası*, which tells the story of the strange meeting of the retired teacher Nazım and Dünya, who works in a night club and Nazım's attempts to protect her from her abusive husband. In this movie the silent character is a little girl. Dünya's daughter Melek witnesses the abuse her father put on her mother and is so scared that she cannot speak any more.

Melek, who never utters a word through the movie, starts speaking in the finale, surprising both Nazım and the audience. Melek witnesses her father kill her mother and commit suicide yet remains quiet until she starts living with Nazım. Her speech happens after the death of her father, which had been a constant source of fear in her life. Her father's existence is an important aspect, leading her to both speak and fall silent. Keje in *Eşkiya* again falls silent because of a man, Berfo who she was forced to marry, and started speaking again thanks to another man, Baran who she loves. In this regard, the reason for the women's silence in Turgul films as well as the reason for their speech are men. Men, just as they are the authority of the story in these films, are actively responsible for the speech of the women in the background.

On the other hand, female characters being left in the background is not only due to their silence. Women have a place in the Turgul movies depending on how much they can touch the lives of the male characters. In *Eşkiya*, the audience sees Keje for the first time when Baran finds her. Up until that point the audience is not presented with any scenes of Keje's life, only her name. When Keje's importance to the story is considered, it is thought provoking that she is presented to the audience this late in the film. Keje is the main source of the conflict between Berfo and Baran. It is his desire to find Keje that pushes Baran to start the journey that will start his character transformation. In this regard, Keje's impact on the story is very big. However, despite this grand impact, she is barely given scenes where she is alone, as almost all of the scenes where she's on screen is with Baran. In *Gönül Yarası*, Dünya is on screen with Nazım for most of her screen time. However, Dünya has more of an active role than Keje in *Eşkiya* or Sevda Hanım in *Muhsin Bey*. The movie about Ali Nazık, who came from Adana to get famous and Muhsin Kanadıkırık, the old timer İstanbul gentleman who tries to get him famous, Sevda Hanım is the woman Muhsin Bey loves. Just like Keje, she is mostly on screen with Muhsin Bey. The other reason that Sevda Hanım is not seen alone on screen all that much is because she was set out to be a character that can only sustain her life with the existence of a man. The character of Dünya, though grateful to Nazım for his help, has the strength to take up this journey to begin with. Much like this, Keje, though living a life she does not want, has not accepted Berfo's rule over her and managed to create her personal space, while Sevda Hanım is more passive compared to these characters. The architect of the job she has is Muhsin Bey. Even though Sevda Hanım is an untalented singer, her employers do not fire her for Muhsin Bey's sake. Sevda Hanım, who gets by with this shadow that watches over her, finds salvation in the protection of Ali Nazık after Muhsin Bey goes to prison. In this regard, the reason Sevda Hanım has barely any scenes where she is unaccompanied is not just Turgul wanting to keep the male characters in the foreground but that Sevda Hanım was written in a more passive way than the others.

Another property of female characters in Turgul films is that they are a factor that damage the male friendship. Baran and Berfo are close friends before they fall in love with the same woman. When Berfo also falls for Keje, things escalate and Berfo does not hesitate to betray his best friend for his love. In *Gönül Yarası*, Nazım, who helps Dünya without expecting anything in return, and Atakan are sometimes seen arguing over this. With Atakan constantly warning Nazım about Dünya and seeing her as a threat, a woman is again presented as a divisive factor. In the movie *Muhsin Bey*, Şakir, a rival organizer, and Muhsin Bey are alluded to once have been good friends but drifted apart over Afitap Hanım, who meets the audience in her silent state in the retirement home. Again, in the same movie, Sevda Hanım,

who Muhsin Bey loves, turns to Ali Nazik after Muhsin Bey is sent to prison. This is another blow on Muhsin Bey. Here the woman again gets in between two men and affected their friendship.

For many years the presentation of women stayed two dimensional and, in this regard, they were portrayed as far removed from existential problems. Even though this two-dimensional presentation of women was slightly broken in Turgul films, the existence of female characters with certain differences is noteworthy. For example; in *Eşkiya*, Keje, even though she cannot fulfill the expectation of society like having children and being a housewife, fits the definition of a “pure” woman. However, Cumali’s neighborhood love Emel, unlike Keje, seems a jade. Emel uses Cumali to get to her boyfriend in prison and as a result is punished by being killed by Cumali’s hands. Though there is not a definite difference in *Gönül Yarası*, the different lives of Dünya and Piraye has its contrasts. Dünya is an uneducated nightclub singer while Piraye is an educated woman who can stand on her own two feet. While Dünya swears and curses a lot, Piraye is an elite woman who never does so. In this regard, it can be said that Turgul builds women around their opposite qualities in his films.

2. Conclusion

Womanhood and the roles of womanhood are topics that are still discussed to this day. These roles that the patriarchal society thrusts upon women are present and open to question in all corners of life. To question them in the form of art and through the representation of women in cinema, which is considered to be the seventh art, is possible. With feminism becoming widespread, women being left in the background in the silver screen just as in society, women being given a passive image and the attempts of putting the focus on their sexual identity are topics open to discussion. In addition to this, women generally being in the background of the story and only finding place in the narrative through their effects on the male characters is a noteworthy aspect of the representation of women in cinema.

Yavuz Turgul is one of the important directors in Turkish cinema and it is evident that he did not take a different stance than many of the world cinema in the subject of the presentation of woman. In his movies where he mostly talked about the male friendships and the effects of social change on people, Turgul kept male characters on the foreground and only gave room to women in regard to their relationships with the men. In Yavuz Turgul cinema, women are a divisive factor in the relationships of the male characters while also drawing attention for their silence, sometimes due to a resistance, sometimes due to fear.

In conclusion, when contemplated in reference to the movies *Muhsin Bey*, *Eşkiya* and *Gönül Yarası*, women in Turgul movies has an image in shadows. It is possible to say that the reason of this is that the male characters were kept in the foreground and that the stories that were told are their stories.

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