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### Women and Turkish Cinema: gender politics, cultural identity and representation

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## BOOK REVIEWS

### **Women and Turkish Cinema: gender politics, cultural identity and representation**

EYLEM ATAKAV

London, Routledge, 2013

150 pp., filmography, index, £80.00 (cloth)

There is a significant increase in the number of English language monographs on Turkish cinema. Savaş Arslan's *Cinema in Turkey* (2010), Asuman Suner's *New Turkish Cinema* (2010) and Gonul Donmez-Colin's specialized volumes (*The Routledge Dictionary of Turkish Cinema*, 2013; *Turkish Cinema: identity, distance and belonging*; 2013) attest the emergence of this new proliferation. Eylem Atakav's book focuses on women and Turkish cinema in the context of politics, cultural identity and representation. The book's central claim is that enforced depoliticization introduced after the coup of 1980 is responsible for uniting feminism and film in Turkey. Atakav claims that feminist movement is not perceived as politically significant during that decade, thus it was allowed to flourish. These films focused on individuals, on women's issues and lives trying to avoid being perceived as overtly political.

Atakav moves from the precept that the personal is political. This falls well with the individualist film-making of the 1980s Turkey when Turkish cinema came to terms with the trauma of the 1980 coup through cinema. Political film-makers chose to focus on women (Atif Yılmaz) and as a result 'a more human woman' is created. Although the narrative and representation shifted, the style and codes remained the same. These films continued to objectify and limit options for women. Previous studies on women in Turkish cinema were broad and they neglected the link with feminism. Scholars like Hasan Akbulut stressed the need to study the image of women in Turkish film melodramas as they commented on the effects of modernization and visibility of women in public sphere. Atakav's book, however, approaches feminism and film at a textual level with a social and political background and a basic premise: enforced depoliticization helped unite film and feminism in Turkey. Here an older study that categorized and commented on these films was omitted from the study. Dilek Cindoglu's 1991 dissertation is aptly titled 'Re-viewing women: images of patriarchy and power in modern Turkish cinema,' from the State University of New York at Buffalo, and covers some of the issues mentioned by Atakav. Also, a recent study by Selen Gökçem titled 'Never satisfied: dissatisfied women, hysteric men in 1980s Turkey' deals with films made by

female directors in the 1980s and shows that they have achieved in reversing male gaze into female gaze.

Atakav's claims that early reforms in Turkey during the 1930s left women 'emancipated but unliberated' until the 1970s feminist movement is a well-known argument among feminist social scientists in Turkey (see Deniz Kandiyoti and Yeşim Arat). According to this train of thought, women in Turkey could only form groups to pursue their ends in the 1980s. With the establishment of the Turkish Republic in the 1920s, women were handed certain political freedoms (hence the phrase 'emancipated but unliberated' by Kandiyoti). The cinema reflected a modernist male-oriented control up until the 1980s. This decade created a democratic, a secular and a pluralist setting, a socially essential fact, which is described as a precondition for feminist film-making by Atakav. This approach can be limiting as Atif Yılmaz, a male film director, has been celebrated as the most feminist film-maker of the 1980s in Turkey.

Historically, the cinematic representation of women in Turkey has been as silent, inactive subjects and as objects of male desire until the 1980s. Hence the narratives on Turkish women on screen were about exploitation and sexuality. Female characters are shown as servants and dutiful wives, and they are punished if they left the patriarchal way. Family, marriage, housework and loyalty have been presented as primary duties of women mostly in melodramas. Few minor examples outside the mainstream such as *Açlık* (*Hunger*, 2008) by Bilge Olgaç, first prominent Turkish female film director of the 1970s, provided pity for the characters and let the audience have a critical stance on patriarchy.

Turkish cinema produced female characters along the lines of stereotypes such as rich/bad/seductress, good/poor/innocent child-like woman throughout the 1960s. These characters were later replaced by sex kitten personas during the production of erotic comedies in the 1970s. Later, only in the 1980s could these social issues be explored in films directed by prominent auteur male directors like Akad, Kavur and Duru. In these new films, women were not types but people with everyday problems in a patriarchal society. This shift from one-dimensional to multi-dimensional female characters in Turkish cinema in the 1980s is the primary concern in Atakav's book. Atakav also mentions the entrance of female directors into the film production scene. These women had an unconventional approach and an individual focus on women's sexuality and social problems. By representing women for who they are for the first time, these female directors critique the status quo on women in Turkish society. Atakav claims that the depiction of women's issues in cinema raises consciousness in the public sphere. In an interesting observation, Atakav also mentions the influence of foreign soap operas such as *Dallas* having a positive effect on sexuality of the audience. Through exposure to the intricate extra-marital sexual relationships of American television series, Turkish female audiences are prepared for female film-makers.

Atakav's discussion of four types of women in protest constitutes the bulk of her analysis: career women, rural women, prostitutes and widows. Career women experience the dilemma of choosing a profession or quitting their jobs for home chores. There is always competition among women, as wives who have to fight to keep their husbands who might be tempted by younger women. In the new feminist films by Turkish female directors in the 1980s, the former male-centered

narrative equilibrium is disturbed. The film now starts with the unhappy woman who is married and ends with a happy divorced woman. The new Turkish feminist film transforms and challenges traditional patterns of narrative pleasure by strategically formulating a feminist discourse and a critique of patriarchal culture.

As for feminist films dealing with rural women, Atakav discusses *Mine*, the pioneer film from 1982 dealing with a village woman's search for independence. Here Atakav establishes the link between representation and real life action united to help feminist movement. The film chooses to make the oppressed women become sexually active, hence rebelling against forced marriage in disgust. For Atakav, this is a new type of subjective cinematic pleasure produced for the female audience.

In discussing the representation of prostitution, Atakav debates the fact that previously fallen women were present in early Turkish films as victims to be pitied. The film *Asiye Nasıl Kurtulur* (*How to Save Asiye*, 1986) by Atif Yılmaz depicts the social and economic problems that lead to exploitation of women. The film is a musical that narratively reframes its female character breaking the reality frame in and out several times. This self-conscious intertextual play is new for women's cinema (p. 86). Atakav comments that the film presents a new paradigm on how to deal with prostitution as a feminist issue, a subject previously omitted by male film directors.

The book also mentions the concept of controlling a woman's body through violence and through male gaze. Violence and male gaze find their representation in widowhood and sexuality. To make this point, Atakav studies the film *Kurbağalar* (*Frogs*, 1985) by Şerif Gören. The female character played by Hülya Koçyiğit tries to build a new life at home and at work but finds resistance from men. The physical control of the female body and its control through male gaze are exposed in the new feminist cinema. The detailed discussion of *Frogs* lets Atakav expose how the male dominant world tries to push women down and look them as flesh to be had for pleasure. Here the concept of a woman's honor (*namus*) is explored by Atakav. In traditional Turkish cinema, women's honor can be tainted by gaze or by physical violence such as rape. It is a man's duty to protect a woman's honor by death if necessary. Women are presented under males' strict surveillance. Atakav identifies the imprisonment metaphor of frame within a frame present in the new Turkish feminist cinema. The fallen female character collects frogs to survive, a job normally attributed to men. Silence as a feminist film strategy presents her as the spoken subject not the speaking subject.

Atakav's thoughts on New Turkish Cinema, independent Turkish cinema after 1997, are twofold. On the one hand, she reminds us of the silence of female characters in new Turkish cinema. She comments that directors like Zeki Demirkubuz and Nuri Bilge Ceylan do not give voice to female characters. She presents emerging female directors who can freely deal with women's issues. Directors like Eylem Kaftan question the concept of honor (*namus*) and challenge patriarchy at its heart through a *cinéma vérité* approach in her documentary *Vendetta Song*. Atakav also celebrates the 2012 film *Kurtuluş Son Durak*, which depicts a gang of women who create a collective for women and eliminate men who stand on their way. Atakav makes the connection between film and memory in new Turkish cinema. These films presents memory and a nostalgic longing to a distant past and try to deal with today's issues from a fresh perspective. Yet Atakav claims these

films deal with murder and rape of women problematically from male directors' perspectives.

Atakav's book explores the relationship between women's films and feminism in Turkish cinema. It confesses to be a more textual analysis than a theoretical showcase. Atakav mentions two female directors in the period and analyzes Nisa Akman's film, yet she ignores major female directors Mahinur Ergun and her *Med Cezir Manzaraları* (*Scenes of Ebb and Flow*, 1989), Canan Gerede's *Robert'in Filmi* (*Robert's Movie*, 1992) and Seçkin Yasar's *Sarı Tebessüm* (*Yellow Smile*, 1992). There are also factual omissions, such as Bedia Muvahhit being the first Turkish woman in 1922 to play in a film, whereas previously she has been acting in films since 1917, and Neyyire Neyyir who was also as present a female co-star in *Shirt of Fire* (1922). Finally, Atif Yılmaz as a male director who made feminist films in the 1980s is a phenomenon that needs to be explained. Atif Yılmaz was not alone in his feminist quest, as screenwriters such as Ümit Ünal and Barış Pirhasan also wrote feminist screenplays. Atakav mentions the 2012 film *Kurtuluş Son Durak* (*Kurtuluş Last Stop*) as a feminist film and it is written by the very same screenwriter who wrote *Asiye Nasıl Kurtulur*, which is analyzed in the book, a fact she forgets to mention. Militant feminist actors like Müjde Ar and Nur Sürer pursued film projects that focus on the women's issues in the 1980s, an important performative aspect not mentioned by Atakav. Having attacked new Turkish cinema for silencing women, she excludes expat directors such as Kutluğ Ataman (*İki Genç Kız/2 Girls*, 2005) and Fatih Akın (*Duvara Karşı—Gegen die Wand Head-On*, 2004) who present complex female characters.

Overall, the book's thesis that a new socially constructed representation of women is achieved in the 1980s Turkish cinema holds well. Her claims, that these films empowered women by dealing with women's issues, and produced complex and contradictory effects in terms of transition from authoritarianism to democracy in Turkey, have great insight. Finally, Atakav herself accepts that her job was exhaustive and merely a first step towards further study. It is a significant contribution to the study of women's cinema in the Middle East, with solid case studies and a detailed introductory discussion of feminist film theory.

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### **Equivocal Subjects: Between Italy and Africa—constructions of racial and national identity in the Italian cinema**

SHELLEEN GREENE

New York, Continuum, 2012

xii+315 pp., illus., \$120.00 (cloth)

In this book, Shelleen Greene sets out to analyze 24 Italian films, produced in half a century (1914–2008), that are supposed to mirror changes in the construction of racial and national identities in Italy. Readers may feel skeptical about such a complex subject, especially because it is tackled by a foreigner who may be unable