

# Realism as a Tool to Develop Authenticity: Orientalism in Mustang

## Sahicilik Aygıtı Olarak Realizm: Mustang filminde Şarkiyatçılık

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### Abstract

*This study analyzes Deniz Gamze Ergüven's 2015 film Mustang in terms of the ways in which the film reconstructs orientalist imagery with its narrative, camerawork and editing. Mustang was well received in the Western mainstream media. It was praised for being a feminist film with a female point of view that draws attention to the oppression of women in Turkey. Yet, its reception was quite different in Turkey. This study explores film's reception in the Western media, the rhetoric of Ergüven on the realism aspect of the film and demonstrates the similarities between Ergüven's compositions and 19th century Orientalist paintings that depict the image of the odalisque. Its methodology is textual and discourse analysis. The theoretical framework regarding Orientalism is based on Edward Said's canonic work, Orientalism and Linda Nochlin's influential essay, The Imaginary Orient.*

**Keywords:** Turkish cinema, orientalism, odalisque, gender

### Öz

*Bu çalışmada Deniz Gamze Ergüven'in 2015 yapımı Mustang filmi, filmin anlatı yapısı, kamera hareketleri ve kurgusuyla şarkiyatçı imgeyi yeniden yapılandırma biçimleri açısından incelenmektedir. Mustang'in, Batı ana akım medyasındaki alımlanması oldukça olumludur. Türkiye'de yaşayan kadınların baskı altındaki hayatlarına dikkat çektiği ve kadın bakış açısıyla üretilmiş feminist bir film olduğu yönünde görüşler nedeniyle övgü toplamıştır. Mustang'in alımlanması Türkiye'de oldukça farklı olmuştur. Bu çalışma, filmin Batılı medyada alımlanmasını ve Ergüven'in filmin toplumsal gerçekçilik yönüne ilişkin söylemlerini inceleyip, Ergüven'in kompozisyonları ile 19. yüzyıl Oryantalist resimlerdeki odalık imgesinin arasındaki benzerlikleri ortaya koymaktadır. Çalışmanın metodolojisi metin ve söylem analizidir. Şarkiyatçılıkla ilişkin teorik çerçeve, Edward Said'in Oryantalizm adlı kitabına ve Linda Nochlin'in The Imaginary Orient isimli makale çalışmasına dayanmaktadır.*

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Türkiye sineması, şarkiyatçılık, odalık, toplumsal cinsiyet.

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## Introduction

Set in a remote Turkish village near the Black Sea region in Turkey, *Mustang* (Deniz Gamze Ergüven, 2015) revolves around the lives of five orphaned sisters who are raised by their grandmother and uncle. *Mustang* establishes itself as a “coming-of-age prison-break” film that is about female empowerment, resistance toward women’s subjugation and sexuality in the most general sense. The first scene of the film is bitter sweet; the class is dismissed and the summer holiday starts. Yet, we see Lale (Güneş Şensoy), the youngest of the five sisters, hugging her female school teacher in tears due to the heartbreaking news of her relocation to Istanbul. The teacher consoles Lale saying that she can come and visit and passes along a piece of paper with her address. After that painful goodbye, the five girls go to the seaside. There is a fresh lightness and joy in the air as they play in the sea with a bunch of boys from school. Later, they trespass into a neighbor’s garden, steal some fruit and run around in the village. Yet, when the news of what they have done that day reaches their grandmother, conservative rules of conduct and strict gender norms that regulate their sexuality are reinforced. The girls are immediately put on house arrest, taken to the clinic for virginity exams in fear that they might no longer be chaste. As the nexus of all-evil, the house where they are imprisoned stands in a particularly Hitchcockian style, on a hill isolated from the rest of the city with its high walls, iron fences and iron bars built into the windows. Throughout the film, we witness the different ways their grandmother attempts to correct the girls’ “deviant” behaviors. Their phones, computers and make up products are confiscated. The girls are forced to wear long shapeless brown dresses. The two oldest sisters are coerced into arranged marriages and before the same thing happen to the third sister, she takes her own life. A few hours before the arranged marriage of the fourth, two sisters flee to Istanbul.

On the surface, *Mustang* is the story of five sisters who resist the conservative codes that are imposed on them. They rip their long, shapeless brown dresses up, sunbathe behind bars, run around the house in their underwear, find ways to escape and have sex with strangers. All of these tactics -in Michel de Certeau’s term – are acts of resistance in order to overthrow these impositions. In addition, the film is told from the perspective of its 13-year old female protagonist which, according to Ergüven, is “a kind of mental gymnastics they [people of Turkey] are not necessarily used to” (The Sydney Morning Herald, <https://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/movies/in-director-deniz-gamze-erguven-mustang-five-young-sisters-fight-back-20160609-gpfb0.html> Access Date: 08.10.2020) When analyzed from this perspective, *Mustang* may seem to advocate for the emancipation of women, explore the dynamics of patriarchal oppression, and criticize conservative gender norms. It received rave reviews in the Western mainstream media and was selected by France to participate in the 88th Academy Awards and 73rd Golden Globe Awards. Yet, a deeper analysis would suggest that the political meaning that is embedded in the film is very different.

*Mustang* approaches patriarchy as tool of oppression that is limited to non-Western societies. That is, it suggests that these non-Western societies are oppressive for women because they have not yet reached the level of modernization that is typical of the West. These societies are oppressive and conservative because people are uneducated and unenlightened, and therefore, the East/ The Orient – rural Turkey - is a claustrophobic hell of place with irrational, illiterate and bigoted folk. Naturally in order to avoid their pre-destined futures, the girls need to find a way escape to the West – Istanbul, Turkey. In Ergüven’s words, in cities like Istanbul “people who freerer than free, and more modern than modern” (TheWorld, <https://www.pri.org/stories/2016-01-27/director-oscar-nominated-mustang-why-gender-politics-key-understanding-turkey> Access Date: 10.11.2020).

In the Western media, *Mustang* was promoted by orientalist vocabulary that objectifies women and invokes sensuality and eroticism. The paper will demonstrate how the film depicts its female protagonists similar to the ways orientalist artists depicted the odalisque in the European paintings of the 19th century. Hence after a brief exploration of the orientalist rhetoric of the aforementioned reviews, this paper will first demonstrate the construction of the dichotomy of Western urban secularism and Eastern rural conservatism. Second it will highlight the ways in which the film drifts drastically toward an orientalist perspective by associating its five female protagonists with unequivocal references to image of the odalisque in the 19th century orientalist paintings in terms of narrative construction, composition, use of lighting and context. The methodology of the paper is textual and discourse analysis. In order to analyze the film’s orientalist imagery, it is important to focus on Edward Said’s canonic work on Orientalism, as theoretical framework and equally important is to investigate orientalism in visual arts. For the latter, the study will rely heavily on Linda Nochlin’s(1993) influential essay, *The Imaginary Orient*.

## 1. *Mustang*, Its Reception and Orientalism in Film

### 1.1. On Reception

Ergüven calls the reaction to her film in Turkey aggressive and negative. The word “aggressive” brings to mind vicious and baseless attacks yet the majority of the reviews are well-founded critical readings that are based on feminist film theories,

postcolonial film theories and art history. Batu Anadolu (2015) highlights the weak dialogues, theatrical atmosphere and overall careless and amateur script (Filmloverss, <https://filmloverss.com/mustang/> Access Date: 09.10.2020). Kürşat Saygılı (2016) argues that it is not a surprise for Ergüven to collect many awards in Europe since “her look is a colonized one” (Cineritüel, <https://www.cinerituel.com/mustang-2015-somurgelestirilmis-bakisin-sasirtmayan-oscar-yolculugu/> Access Date: 07.10.2020). Şenay Aydemir (2015) argues that the film “feeds the image of Turkey in the Western psyche and shows what they [West] want to see” (Artful Living, <https://www.artfulliving.com.tr/kultur-ve-yasam/mustang-masal-mi-deney-mi-i-4084> Access Date: 08.10.2020). Ercivan (2015) labels the film as “a frustratingly orientalist work designed for the western world in an extremely affordable way” (Beyazperde, <http://www.beyazperde.com/filmler/film-228825/elestiriler-beyazperde/> Access Date: 08.10.2020). Zehra Cerrahoğlu (2019:532) criticizes Ergüven “for manipulating, ethnizing, and even orientalizing its subject matter because she approaches it as an ethnic and local issue”. And, Can Diker (2016: 159) argues that *Mustang* presents patriarchy as an issue of the non-western society”.

Ergüven’s own rhetoric in interviews also has an orientalist tone. In an interview with Rachel Donadio (2015), Ergüven says that “the place of women in Turkish society is something that is completely objectified” (The New York Times, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/22/movies/with-mustang-a-director-breaks-free-of-cultural-confines.html> Access Date: 10.10.2020). She also believes that “for women in Turkey it is like the Middle Ages” (TheGuardian, <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2016/may/15/deniz-gamze-erguven-mustang-turkey-interview-rachel-cooke> Access Date: 10.10.2020). In the same interview, Ergüven tells that in Turkey “when you see a man, you should blush and look down” (Cooke, 2016). Ergüven’s ideas on women in Turkey seem to have been taken from an orientalist novel or travelogue. In order to make sense of these ideas, it is necessary to acquire some information about Ergüven. Her father was a diplomat in 1980s. When she was six months old, her parents moved to Paris, France. After nine years, they returned to Turkey but when her mother decided go back to France, Ergüven chose to go with her. She grew up and received her education in France. Beside limited visits, Ergüven has been living in France. During those visits, Ergüven says she could not live the life she wanted to: “I went by the rules of the game in Turkey and pretended, and then when I went back home (France) I just lived the life I wanted to” (Criterion, <https://www.criterion.com/current/posts/3852-deniz-gamze-erg-ven-on-her-feminist-fable-mustang> Access Date: 10.10.2020). Luckily, she could “go back to the other side of the World” when she “felt like taking a break [from Turkey]” (The Guardian, <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2016/may/15/deniz-gamze-erguven-mustang-turkey-interview-rachel-cooke> Access Date: 10.10.2020). For sure, this study is not a discussion of whether Ergüven is “sufficiently” Turkish or not. What is of significance however is how she uses little autobiographical stories from her childhood and mention her Turkish roots to authenticate herself as a subject who is capable of producing knowledge about Turkey both in her interviews and, as this study will demonstrate, in *Mustang*. This is the “reality effect”, the authenticating details, a concept which will be discussed further in the paper. No wonder she “detested the response [to *Mustang*] in Turkey” (The Guardian, <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2016/may/15/deniz-gamze-erguven-mustang-turkey-interview-rachel-cooke> Access Date: 10.10.2020).

## 1.2. Orientalism in Cinema

Even though cinema is often classified under the category of entertainment industries that is produced for contemporary mass society, it is not only an entertainment tool. It is also a political tool that creates stereotypes, provides truths and meanings about the world and hence can be very powerful at reshaping public opinion. One recurring discourse that has been shaping the imaginations and opinions about the East is Orientalism. Edward Said (1978:9) writes that in addition to being geographically adjacent to Europe, the Orient is Europe’s “greatest and richest and oldest colonies, the source of its civilizations and languages, its cultural contestant, and one of its deepest and most recurring images of the Other”. In this way, “Orient has helped to define Europe (or the West) as its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience” (Said, 1978: 9). As a discourse Orientalism, works like an institution for dealing with the Orient – “dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it” (Said, 1978:11). This is the job of the Orientalists; “anyone who teaches, writes about, or researches the Orient-and this applies whether the person is an anthropologist, sociologist, historian, or philologist” (Said, 1978: 10). Orientalists have been contributing to the construction of a series of stereotypical images of the superior, rational, developed and active West / Self and the inferior, irrational, backward and passive Orient / the Other. These statements however are not stable, for the West, constantly converts the Orient into something else other than itself. Said (2011:637) argues that “this process of conversion is a disciplined one- it is taught, it has its own societies, periodicals, traditions, vocabulary, rhetoric, all in basic ways connected to and supplied by the prevailing cultural and political norms of the West”. That is why, orientalism is not a value-free discourse and it needs to be questioned because according to Hande Tekdemir (2017:143) it “is designed to promote European imperialism and colonialism” particularly, in relation to the colonization and occupation strategies of the West after the 19th century. According to Lucy K Pick (1999), world history can be approached through an analysis of the Western understanding of civilization that champions the rational individual and focuses on establishing and globalizing nation-states with a capitalist mission to democratize the undeveloped one. This sort of legitimization of the cultural leadership and hegemony of the West is part of the oriental discourse. (Kahraman & Keyman, 1998: 75-76). Moreover, this approach

to history equates modern world history as the history of the Western epistemic and normative privileged subject position and the universal reference point of historical development.

Film history is full of examples from every genre - from science fiction to melodrama- that make statements about the East/Orient by depicting it in a certain, uncontested fashion. East is a foreign land away from the “center/ the West. Whether it is the depiction of Tatooine in *Star Wars: Phantom Menace –Episode I* (George Lucas, 2000), as a deserted planet in the *Outer Rim Territories* of the Galaxy, or Cairo, Egypt (*The English Patient*, Antony Minghella, 1996), East is depicted as a vast space with yellowish deserts, sandstorms and pre-modern architecture. In the East, there is no law that can be “considered” as rational and civil in Western standard, rather there is chaos. It is also a lesser civilization for it has not yet reached the “proper” capitalist means and relations of production and hence a product’s worth can only be determined by irrational logic of bargaining (*English Patient*, Antony Minghella, 1996). There are no factories or signs of any sort of technology to “improve” people’s lives. East is a where people sell carpets, livestock, ceramics and spices at street bazaars. In the East, it is not possible to differentiate one person from the other, for the way they walk, dress and behave are almost the same, except when one of them picks up a ridiculously giant sword to fight Indiana Jones in *Indiana Jones and the Raiders of the Lost Arc* (Spielberg, 1981). Perhaps, most importantly, amidst all the protesting and yelling in front of the American Embassy in *Rules of Engagement* (William Friedkin, 2000) or shouting and running inside an Iranian airport in what can only be described as “irrational” frenzy (*Argo*, 2002, Ben Affleck), what these characters are trying to communicate does not matter, for they are rarely “granted” with subtitles. The same is also true for gender stereotypes in cinematic images. Even though gender identities are multiple, diverse, performative and fluid, in terms of cinematic representations, particular identity constructions seem to have frozen in time. Film audiences around the world witness how the Western white male heroes rescue the civilized law-abiding Westerners and/or liberate the uneducated, exotic and obedient sexualized female victims from dark-skinned, barbaric, irrational and sexually aggressive Eastern male antagonists for decades. Yet, perhaps, among the many fictionalized devices that the theme Oriental sexuality deploys in its arsenal, such as the public bath, the harem and the slave markets, the image of the odalisque (*odalık*) holds a significant place.

## 2. Analyzing *Mustang* through Orientalist imagery

### 2.1. Heritage and Fashion

One of the recurring motifs in the Orientalist paintings and literature is the figure of the odalisque (*odalık*). The word odalisque comes from *oda* (room) and means literally “woman of the room,” implying a general servant status (Croutier, 1989: 30-32). It is the common name given to all the girls who were either brought or sold to the harem from all parts of the Empire. After they are brought to the Harem, they were given new names and left their given-family names behind. Alev Croutier (1989:30) writes that once a girl “is confined within the Seraglio, her “Christian name would be changed to a Persian one that suited her particular qualities”. In a way, their heritage become a matter of the past, and their future lay in the harem with a new name and an identity. Parallel to this, in *Mustang*, there is no background information about the girls. Just like the odalisque in the Ottoman Harem, there is no record of their heritage. Their last names, birthdates and birthplaces are unknown. There is no record about any of them. The only information is a brief dialog about an accident, which took the lives of their parents.

Alev Croutier (1989:76) writes: “the extravagant beauty of the women in the harem and their elaborate costumes were concealed in public, where they dressed with uniform drabness”. Parallel to Western imagination, the female protagonists in *Mustang* are coerced into wearing –in Lale’s words, a shit-colored dress-; a long, brown, shapeless dress their grandmother sews for each one of them. After their short shorts and miniskirts are confiscated, that brown dress is the only clothing that they are allowed to wear outside the house. Just like how outside the harem, women were “dressed in the feradge, a long, square tunic with loose sleeves, hanging nearly to the ground, like a shapeless black cape, falling from the shoulders to the feet, concealing everything” Croutier (1989:76), the five sisters in their brown dresses became ghosts of their former beauty.

### 2.2. Idleness

Another aspect of oriental identity that is particularly related to the colonial aspirations of the West is idleness. The concept has been constructed to explain the lack of work, industry and technology in the East. Linda Nochlin (1993:123) argues that “the vice of idleness was frequently commented upon by Western travelers to Islamic countries in the 19th century” in terms its associations with the absence of work and industry. Idleness of women go hand in hand with the concept of passivity. Odalisques are depicted as passive objects-to-be-looked-at rather than subject who think, speak, and produce meanings. Moreover, Eastern women have been constructed by the Orientalist gaze as oppressed and sexually exploited which according to Emily M. Weeks (2008:61) is “one of the longstanding justifications for intervention by Britain in the

affairs of Egypt and the Middle East in the mid-nineteenth century". In this sense, "the harem in particular was seen as a microcosm of all that was wrong with the region: it epitomized its sexual excesses, its "barbaric" gender prescriptions, and it acted as a metaphor for the unjustness of its local governments" (Weeks, 2008: 61). These stereotypes have been widely debunked. By reassessing Henriette Browne's harem paintings of 1861, Reina Lewis (1993) argues that harem was a space where women interact socially among each other. The image of the harem women as people who have no power or influence is also refuted strongly. Tsipoura (2012: 15) opposes the assumption that women had had little power. Rather, she provides examples from historical facts that in the harem women "exercised direct political power forming domestic alliances and negotiating with foreign ambassadors and rulers". Tsipoura (2012: 15-16) also denies the assumption that women were kept as slaves by highlighting the fact that "unlike their European counterparts, [women in the harem] had the right to have property". Yet, in *Mustang*, the five sisters are represented in accordance to the Euro-centric definition of Oriental femininity. Nochlin (1993:123) argues that attributing idleness and laziness to the East has another subtext. She emphasizes the broken tiles that needs repairing in Jean-Leon Gerome's *The Snake Charmer* and suggests that they produce a moralizing undertone. Nochlin (1993:123): "The lesson is subtle: these people – lazy, slothful and child-like, if colorful- have let their own cultural treasures sink into decay to the barbaric insouciance Moslem peoples, who quite literally charm snakes while Constantinople falls into ruins".

When analyzed from this aspect, another parallelism between the representation of the odalisque in European arts and Ergüven's film can be drawn on the issue of passivity, boredom and idleness. In the European paintings, we see women lying idly on the sofas, smoking pipes and cigarettes, bathing themselves and hanging around the courtyard idly. Doing any sort of work is limited to carrying baskets of food, choosing fabric and clothes, doing cleaning, bathing or playing games. In *Mustang*, the girls spend their times in their rooms lying on their beds, on sofas and on the floor, or in the segregated courtyard of the house, idly sunbathing. Most of the work they do is limited to cleaning the windows, vacuuming the house and learning to cook. Just like how "most of the games the odalisques played seem extremely unsophisticated and simpleminded, intended more for small children" Croutier (1989:46), the games the girls play are limited to tickling each other and mimicking their grandmother and uncle.



Image 1. The Snake Charmer (Jean-Leon Gerome)

Source: <https://www.amazon.com/Jean-Leon-Gerome-Charmer-Poster/dp/B00MJCHBS>

### 2.3. The Female Body

In the Western media, the film's depiction of femininity was well-received and championed as feminist (see Zoladz, 2016; Philips 2016; Kroenert: 2016). Maureen Medved (2016) writes that Ergüven "portrays the five girls as strikingly beautiful and as entangled like a garden of wild roses – to the point where they strike awe at the glory of the natural world". Alice Guiliani (2015) finds in *Mustang* a "light and delicate depiction of young femininity, which is conveyed through an aesthetic of dreamlike intensity... with a common use of soft-focus and pastel colours" (Dispatch: Feminist Moving Image, <https://www.dispatchfmi.com/single-post/2018/04/05/Mustang-2015-and-Girlhood-as-an-act-of-Resistance> Access Date: 10.10.2020). Associating the depiction of femininity in *Mustang* to Renoir models "with their free-flying hair and sunlit sensuality" Yonca Talu (2015) praises Ergüven for filming their [female characters'] blossoming bodies. Definitions such as "dream-like" or "a fairytale" (Ulaby, 2015; Bunbury: 2016, Mejia, 2016; Guiliani, 2015) are commonly used. Some critics even associate the film with "fairy-tales like Cinderella, Little Mermaid and Rapunzel" (The Take, <https://the-take.com/watch/how-is-mustang-influenced-by-fairy-tales> Access Date: 10.10.2020). Jordan Hoffman (2015) writes about how "breasts and buttocks in rainbow-coloured underwear are a recurring motif" and how "light pouring in as they [sisters] rumble about on some fabulous Oriental carpets" (The Guardian,

<https://www.theguardian.com/film/2015/may/19/mustang-review-the-virgin-suicides-in-istanbul-is-a-turkish-delight> Access Date: 10.10.2020). Despite the apparent orientalist tone in almost all reviews which eroticizes and mystifies femininity, Ergüven disagrees. When one of the hosts of FR2's "N'est pas Couché suggests that her film "is sensual and quasi-erotic", Ergüven says that "the girls are beautiful, intimate but she did not intend to be erotic".

The National Gallery of Art in Washington, DC, USA held a Henri Matisse exhibition that covered his early years in Nice (1916-1930). In its catalog Jack Cowart and Dominique Fourcade (1986: 35) cited the artist himself. Henri Matisse: "Look closely at the Odalisques: the sun floods them with its triumphant brightness taking hold of colours and forms. Now the oriental décor of the interiors, the array of hangings and rugs, the rich costume,"



Image 2. Girls of the Harem (Fabio Fabbi)



Image 3. Still image from *Mustang* (Gamze Deniz Ergüven, 2015)



Image 4. Still image from *Mustang* (Gamze Deniz Ergüven, 2015)

(cont.)... the sensuality of heavy, drowsy bodies, the blissful torpor in the eyes lying in wait for pleasure. In this atmosphere of languid relaxation, under the torpor of the sun washing over people and objects, there is a great tension brewing".

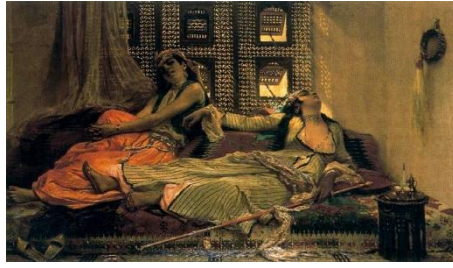


Image 5. Interior of a Harem (Eugene Pierre Francois Giraud)



Image 6. Harem Beauties (Daniel Israel)



Image 7. Still image from *Mustang* (Gamze Deniz Ergüven, 2015)



Image 8. Still image from *Mustang* (Gamze Deniz Ergüven, 2015)



Image 9. Grande Odalisque (Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres)



Image 10. Still image from *Mustang* (Gamze Deniz Ergüven, 2015)

It is argued there that the use of light and composition in the above paintings are similar to the ways *Mustang* depicts its female characters. Ergüven, herself, says that in “all the scenes where the five girls are together are bathed in warm sunlight or the light of the magic hour before sunset. And the actresses generated their own solar radiance as well” (The Sydney Morning Herald, <https://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/movies/in-director-deniz-gamze-erguens-mustang-five-young-sisters-fight-back-20160609-gpfbo0.html> Access Date: 08.10.2020). In order to refute this argument of mystification and erotification of her subject matter, Ergüven says that the audience watch the film from the eyes of a 13 year old girl which apparently what makes her film feminist. Lale is the narrator of the film and the audience are encouraged to identify with her especially because Ergüven wows her narrative around what Lale sees, does and feels. Yet, being the narrator does not necessarily mean being the bearer of the look. Following Laura Mulvey (1975:11), it can be argued that “in a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/ female”. Women are presented as objects-to-be-looked at and men are the bearers of the look. Lale’s gaze is absent in the still images of the film that are presented above. Lale is there, as an actor, in the scene, but her gaze is missing. In these instances, when Lale’s point-of-view is no longer present, “the determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female figure which is styled accordingly” (Mulvey, 1975:11). Therefore, these scenes become examples of what Mulvey (1975:4) calls “fetishism”. Looking at Sternberg’s films Laura Mulvey (1975: 14) writes that Sternberg’s camera present woman as “perfect products, whose body, stylised and fragmented by close-ups, is the content of the film and the direct recipient of the spectators’ look. In the scenes that are full of close-ups to the girls’ legs, arms and faces, we also sense a visceral bond, a physicality in their behaviors. The girls giggle on the carpets as they tickle each other, and wrap their arms and legs to each other. They hold and caress one another as the camera pans and tilts over their bodies with a typical soft lightning in various orientalist paintings. The use of camera movement such as tilts from the ankle to their waist, cuts to their arms, legs and lips that defragment their bodies, objectifies them. Perhaps, Gillmore (2016) sums up how both orientalist and the male gaze come together when she writes how “the girls alternate between fierce teenage intensity and languid laziness, lolling away hot afternoons in their bedroom, a tangle of hair and long limbs”. Apparently, “if you are not aware of the male gaze that approaches the female body with the aim of exploiting and consuming it, male gaze can also be constructed through the eyes of a female director” (Amargi, <http://www.amargidergi.com/yeni/?p=1700>, Access Date: 08.10.2020).

#### 2.4. Education

Contrary to the distorted European imagination, the harem was an educational space with its own set of rules and female hierarchy (Karaduman: 2014, Sümertaş: 2008, Crotiuer: 1983), which applied to all of its female occupants. Women in the harem underwent strict and rigid formal education and training in the various forms of art, ranging from music, poetry, history, calligraphy, gilding, drawing, and domestic skills to protocol and imperial etiquette. In the film, the girls are educated on being a housewife through cooking classes and lectures on decent behavior. They are also banned from attending school. Yet, we never see them resisting or challenging the idea of missing formal education. We do not see them reading any books or having a discussion about any issue. They are portrayed as having no intellectual interest in any particular topic.

Women’s status and education in any society has long been associated with and considered as a determinant of civilization of that particular society by the Western dominant hegemonic thought. In addition, women’s oppression is also commonly linked to Islam. Fiona Handyside (2019) explores French approach to the idea of modern global girlhood and writes “ the film takes the empirical fact of the girl’s body and creates it as an object that can only be in one of the two ways: as either liberated or oppressed, modern or traditional, secular or Muslim”. One can find a similar approach toward education in the early-Republican era of the Republic of Turkey. Shortly after the foundation of the Republic of Turkey in 1923. Mustafa Kemal Atatürk introduced most of women’s civil rights through reforms toward the secularization of the state and the equality of sexes. This was a form of State Feminism that allotted women’s right in a gradual expansion of civil rights. The



Civil Code reform in 1926, the Suffrage reform in 1934 and the Education Bill of 1924 which made it mandatory for girls to get a formal state education in mixed classrooms are among the most significant ones. According to Şirin Tekeli (1995:12) Kemalist feminist believed that the oppression of the peasant women in Turkey was related to their lack of access to education and information about legal rights. In this sense, they “had the illusion that education was the key to everything, and that they were “emancipated” and beyond patriarchal domination and control” (Tekeli, 1995:12). Here it is important to acknowledge that education may lead to better life prospects and opportunities and pave the way for women to take higher positions in both public and private sector where they can more vocally advocate issues such as gender equality and equal pay. Yet, without critically deconstructing patriarchy and its working dynamics, an assumption that women are oppressed because they are not educated would be limited. Atatürk’s reforms on women’s rights elevated women’s status in a great deal, but they did not alter the patriarchal norms of morality. In fact, the Republican reforms of the 1920s maintained the basic cultural conservatism about male/female relations (Durakbaşa, 2000: 140). In other words, even though the new Republic severed its bonds with the Ottoman Empire in terms of political, economic and social infrastructure, social values on gender remained patriarchal. The transition, therefore was from an Islamic patriarchy to a secular patriarchy. Therefore, an analysis on the reasons of women’s oppression would be incomplete without understanding the working dynamics of patriarchy in Turkish society, especially if that patriarchy remained intact even during the westernization reforms were made. Even after the westernization / modernization reforms, the main normative categories of patriarchy which are *seref* (family reputation) and *namus* (honor) were fully preserved and women were expected to conform to appropriate sexual behavior (Durakbaşa, 2000:149). Frequently in cinematic forms, chastity became the locus in which the ideas of patriarchy were defined. This type of paranoia over female sexuality is a reminiscent of the anxieties of the modernization period of the early republic where female sexuality was provided as the boundary of how much the new Republic needed / was supposed to westernize. It is not simply an issue of the so-called backwardness of the East. It is more about the power and influence of patriarchy that lies deep within not just in Turkey, or the East but in all around the globe. Perhaps, this framework would open up a more historical and socio-political reading toward the virginity tests in the film rather than simply associating it with crude gender norms in rural Turkey.

## Conclusion

In *Mustang*, the East is constructed through orientalist imagery and stereotypes. The cinematography, use of mise-en-scene and lightning are reminiscent of the 19th century European Orientalist paintings and all these cinematic apparatus treats the female protagonists in the same fashion as the Orientalist artists treat the image of the odalisque. The ending is problematic in the sense that it offers two options for women. They can either find a way to escape to the big, modern city of Istanbul / the West or remain in this hellish nightmare of oppression in the rural East with a very bleak future. In the final scenes of the film, we see Lale and Nur reach Europe, literally, as they cross the Bosphorus Bridge that connects Asia to Europe. The sun dawns on their faces as they look outside the window.



Image 11. Still image from *Mustang* (Gamze Deniz Ergüven, 2015)

In the city of the civilized and modern, in front of the black door of with white birds which signify freedom and peace, *Mustang* makes its finale when Lale reunites with her “liberated,” “educated” and civilized female school teacher.

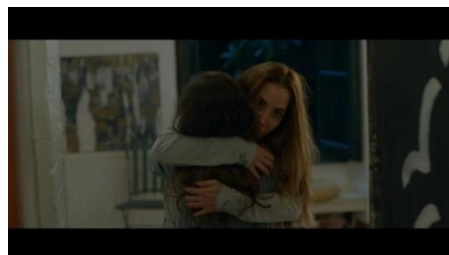


Image 12. Still image from *Mustang* (Gamze Deniz Ergüven, 2015)

Highlighting the important role women played in the Turkish War of Independence, Şirin Tekeli (1995:12) argues that the dominant ideology (nationalism) of the 1920s, “developed a new role definition for women”. In this sense “pre-Ottoman Turks wanted to end women’s domestic confinement and give them new responsibilities in the development of modern Turkey by opening careers to them like teaching” (Tekeli, 1995:12). Ergüven opens and ends her film with Lale and her teacher; a heavily ideological image of the “secular teacher as liberator”.

Here, it is important to go back to Linda Nochlin and the issue of realism. Nochlin (1993:123) emphasizes the “carefully executed Turkish tile patterns”, “the Arabic inscriptions that can easily be read”, “later repair on the tile-work” - in Gerome’s painting and argues that the insistence of these moments of accurate details is to achieve a sense of authenticity. In other words these details are “signifiers of the category of the real, there to give credibility to the “realness” of the work as a whole, to authenticate the total visual field as a simple, artless reflection” (Nochlin, 1993: 123). For Nochlin (1993:123) those particular tiles are what Roland Barthes called reality effect”. *Mustang* is full of such “reality effects” such as virginity exams, arranged marriages, and football games which are played to an all-female crowd. Ergüven tells that “the girls’ abusive and overbearing uncle is a “figure of exactly what you have in Turkey” (Criterion, <https://www.criterion.com/current/posts/3852-deniz-gamze-erg-ven-on-her-feminist-fable-mustang> Access Date: 10.10.2020). She even refers to the games boys and girls play in the sea at the beginning of the film as something she experienced and hence adds an autobiographical aspect. On FR2’s “N’est pas Couché” Ergüven describes her film as a fairytale which is filled with little real stories that she experienced, listened to or heard. This persistence to authenticate and hence validate herself and her subject matter while at the same time insisting on the dream-like fantasy aspect of the narrative brings forth a problematic method and approach to reality. The East / rural Turkey is not a fantasy, it is an actual place. Women’s oppression is not a geographical issue but a global one and can not simply be fixed by educating women or advising them to escape to the West. Arranged marriages and virginity tests do not only take place in non-western societies. In this sense, *Mustang* fails to critically analyze its very serious subject matter down to the very simple point; the scene where the girls go to see a football match that is played to an all-female crowd has nothing to do with gender segregation.

The final note on the film is about its name. *Mustang* is a nod to the horses that roam the plains of the Western US. The name calls to mind the colonialist strategy; the organized subjection of racialized groups through animal figures; forming “contextual comparisons between animals” (Ahuja, 2009: 557). Frantz Fanon (1963:7-8) writes: “When the colonist speaks of the colonized he uses zoological terms... all is part of the colonial vocabulary”. For Ergüven, there is nothing colonial about the name. She chose it because just like how the wild horses run about untamed and free in the wild, so do the girls in *Mustang*. And according to Ergüven, hopefully they run all the way to the liberated West...

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