THE FACE OF THE OTHER IN YEŞİM USTAOĞLU'S FILMS (1999-2016): AN ALTERNATIVE READING THROUGH LEVINAS'S CONCEPT OF RESPONSIBILITY

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Abstract

Yeşim Ustaoğlu, one of the most prominent auteur directors in New Turkish Cinema, has generated significant debate through her films concerning how "the Other" has been represented in Turkish society past and present—from the fall of the Ottoman Empire through the establishment of the Republic of Turkey and on to the political and cultural environment of today—and the question of responsibility as it relates to such representations. The aim of this paper is to stress that the themes in Ustaoğlu's films cannot be limited to those of identity, journey, and belonging. In contrast to other treatments of Ustaoğlu's cinematic work, the present study argues that the narratives of her films are built around the concept of responsibility for the Other, which grants them a uniquely broad perspective on Turkey's relationship to its diverse "Others." In this respect, this study examines identity, a central concept in New Turkish Cinema, within the context of relationships with the Other, as depicted in the films of Yeşim Ustaoğlu (1999–2016). In doing so, it addresses the Other from a novel perspective: not that of the usual historical and gender-oriented viewpoints, but rather that of Levinas's theory of ethics and the Other, which appears as the central source of a change in the constitution of subjectivity, as seen in the trajectories of several main characters in Ustaoğlu's films. This study thus aims to discuss how the selected films can be read in light of this concept of responsibility.

Keywords: Yeşim Ustaoğlu, identity, the Other, Levinas, New Turkish Cinema.

YEŞİM USTAOĞLU FİLMLERİNDE ÖTEKİNİN YÜZÜ (1999-2016): LEVİNAS'IN SORUMLULUK KAVRAMI ÜZERİNDEN ALTERNATİF BİR OKUMA

Öz

Yeni Türkiye Sinemasının önde gelen auteur yönetmenlerinden Yeşim Ustaoğlu filmlerinde Osmanlı İmparatorluğu'nun çöküşünden Türkiye Cumhuriyeti'nin kuruluşuna kadarki dönemde ve bugünün politik ve kültürel çevresi ışığında sorumluluk kavramı bağlamında "Ötekiyi" nasıl temsil ettiği ile kayda değer bir tartışma yaratmıştır. Bu çalışmanın amacı, Ustaoğlu'nun filmlerinin yalnızca kimlik, yolculuk, ve aidiyet gibi kavramlar ile sınırlandırılamayacağını ortaya koymaktır. Ustaoğlu sineması üzerine yapılan birçok incelemenin aksine bu çalışma filmlerin anlatılarının ötekiye karşı olan sorumluluk hissi üzerinden inşa edildiğini ve böylelikle daha geniş bir perspektiften Türkiye'nin çeşitli "ötekileri" ile ilişkisini gösterdiğini savunmaktadır. Bu bağlamda, bu çalışmada Yeni Türkiye Sinemasının ana kavramlarından biri olan kimlik konusu Yeşim Ustaoğlu filmlerindeki (1999-2016) öteki ile olan ilişkisini üzerinden incelenmiştir. Ancak burada başka bir ötekinin temsili sunulmaktadır. Ötekinin temsili tarihsel ve toplumsal cinsiyetçi görüşler üzerinden değil, aksine ötekinin Levinas'ın öteki ve etik anlayışından yola çıkarak ana karakterlerin kendi kimliklerini oluşturmalarında merkezi bir rol oynayan bir karakter olduğu ortaya konmuştur. Böylelikle de bu seçili filmlerin sorumluluk kavramı üzerinden nasıl okunabileceği tartışılmıştır.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Yeşim Ustaoğlu, kimlik, öteki, Levinas, Yeni Türkiye Sineması.

Introduction

Cinema is a very powerful instrument for reflecting the new identity politics and cultural shifts in society. It can function as a mirror of society, bringing to light how society deals with the Other. In order to explore the theme of the representation of the Other, specifically within the context of Turkey, this paper looks at Yeşim Ustaoğlu's films through the lens of Emmanuel Levinas's ethical philosophy (1961/1991, 1991/1998) and discusses the relationship between Turkey and its minority groups from this broader perspective.

The history of Turkey's relationship with its minorities and ethnicities sheds light on the political and social background of Ustaoğlu's films. As a relatively young republic, Turkey has been undergoing political, social, and cultural reforms for the most part of the past one hundred years. After the end of the multi-national and multi-religious Ottoman Empire, the emerging Kemalist modernization process centered on the idea of a single nation-state towards transforming the traditional Ottoman society into a new, Western model, reuniting people under a single nation: Turkey (Altınay, 2007, p. 19-25). However, this transformation was accompanied by challenges. The efforts to build a Turkish identity between 1923 and 1946 resulted in the exclusion of non-Muslims and ethnic minorities. The Kurdish rebellion in 1925 and the religion-based revolt in Menemen in 1930 were the first rifts resulting from the government's politics in those years (Kadıoğlu, 1999, p. 21; 26; 52). This history might have created a background for the upcoming conflicts in the 1980s between the PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party), recognized as a terror organization in Turkey, and the Turkish government.

During the 1980s, the project aiming for Turkification throughout Anatolia in order to create a shared sense of belonging began to be questioned in the public sphere. The 1980s' cultural mood was shaped amidst an atmosphere with strict prohibition of free speech and the explosion of discourses, such as those about different identities and gender (Gürbilek, 2001, p. 13-20; 21-28). Many people were prisoned after the military coup in 1980, and censorship was implemented on television, radio, and cinema. Then, with the neo-liberal politics of the second half of the 1980s, feminist organizations, environmentalist associations, and LGBTI communities found the opportunity to raise their voices in the public sphere.

Especially in the 1990s, different ethnic, cultural, and religious

groups began criticizing the way Turkey had undergone modernization, a process they claimed had silenced their voices, which propelled them to take part in politics to express their own worldviews (Suner, 2005, p. 19-25). This emerging polyphony within society affected Turkish cinema, leading to a new movement in the second half of the 1990s: the New Turkish Cinema. Rising Turkish directors including Yeşim Ustaoğlu, Nuri Bilge Ceylan, Zeki Demirkurbuz and Derviş Zaim created a new path for Turkish cinema in terms of a thematic and visual style in the post-Yeşilçam period[1]. These directors questioned issues of identity and belonging in the context of Turkey's present and past from economic, aesthetic, and thematic perspectives (Dönmez-Colin, 2010, p. 100-101). The result was a new cinematic language lending itself to discussions of social, political, and historical taboos such as ethnic identities and Turkey's official political history, including the issue of censorship. In the 2000s, despite the rise of international distribution companies, which increased the proportion of foreign movies to national productions, Turkish films still attracted a significant audience irrespective of their categorization as popular versus art-house cinema.[2] New, young directors and some old generation auteur directors continued within the tradition of New Turkish Cinema by focusing on social and cultural themes and critical political issues.

As a leading director from Turkey, Yesim Ustaoğlu, born in 1960 and raised in Trabzon in northern Turkey, is considered the only female auteur among the founders of the New Turkish Cinema (Atam, 2010, p. 170). She started her career with short movies such as *Bir Anı Yakalamak* (*To Catch a Moment*, 1988), *Magnafantagna* (1989), *Düet* (*Duet*, 1990), and *Otel* (*Hotel*, 1992). After the international success of *Otel*, she shot her first feature film *İz* (*The Trace*, 1994) and received the "Best Turk-

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[1] Savaş Arslan (2010) underlines how the "New Cinema" is set against Yeşilçam's popular filmmaking practices, and is, therefore "post-Yeşilçam".

[2] In the 2000s, art house movies such as Nuri Bilge Ceylan's *Uzak* (2002), Zeki Demirkurbuz's *Yazgı* (2001) and *İtiraf* (2001) and Yeşim Ustaoğlu's *Bulutları Beklerken* (2004) and *Pandora'nın Kutusu* (2008) received acclaim in international festivals. On the other hand, the films of the popular cinema such as Yılmaz Erdoğan's *Organize İşler* (2005), *Vizontele* (2001), *Vizontele Tuuba* (2004), Ömer Faruk Sorak's *G.O.R.A* (2004), Çağan Irmak's *Babam ve Oğlum* (2005) did well at the box office. For a more detailed discussion of popular cinema and art house cinema in the New Turkish Cinema, please see Asuman Suner's "New Turkish Cinema: Belonging, Identity and Memory" (2010).

ish Feature Film" Award at the 14th Istanbul Film Festival, and "The Best Feature Film" Award at the Nurnberg Film Festival in 1994. After this first feature-length installment, she began to produce films with greater freedom in her handling of controversial and taboo themes, creating her own, original visual style. In *Güneşe Yolculuk* (*Journey to the Sun*, 1999), Ustaoğlu took on the screenwriting, directing, and producing. Even though the film was acclaimed critically in international festivals, it was only released in a limited number of movie theaters in Turkey that year, and was not able to reach a large number of viewers. The director's success was followed by *Bulutları Beklerken* (*Waiting for the Clouds*, 2004), which brought Ustaoğlu "The Prize for Best Script" at the Sundance Film Festival the same year. Her filmography continued with *Pandora'nın Kutusu* (*Pandora's Box*, 2008), *Araf* (*Somewhere In Between*, 2012), and her latest work *Tereddüt* (*Clair Obscur*, 2016), which received noteworthy national and international prizes in directing.

There are certain major themes that recur in Ustaoğlu's films. Apart from their specific political and social contexts, the films focus on the figure of the Other, as well as on issues of identity and journey, utilizing visual elements from nature, specifically water as Müjde Arslan (2009) discusses in details in her work on Ustaoğlu's cinema. Each film takes up at least one of the listed themes, though in differing historical and cultural contexts but through a similar visual style.[3] *Journey to the Sun* and *Waiting for the Clouds* reflect Turkey's historical problems focusing on the cultural Other, whereas *Pandora's Box* investigates identity crisis through memory, and *Somewhere In Between* and *Clair Obscur* deal with those positioned as the Other with respect to gender. In each film, the characters attain their subjectivity through an encounter with the Other. These films thus portray different forms of alterity.

This paper explores one of the major issues taken on by New Turkish Cinema, identity and its construction, in Ustaoğlu's films[4]. The thematic analysis of Ustaoğlu's cinema here focuses on the representation of the Other in view of Emmanuel Levinas's ethical philosophy centered on responsibility for the Other (1961/1991, 1968/1996, 1978/2001, 1991/1998).

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[3]   Since this paper is concerned with the thematic analysis of the films, the visual elements will not be examined in detail. Please see Arslan's "Yeşim Ustaoğlu – Su, Ölüm ve Yolculuk" (2009) for a detailed analysis of the visual elements.

[4]   This paper uses the term film to refer to the feature-length films of Ustaoğlu. Her documentary and short movies are excluded from the main analysis.

In this regard, this paper claims that the representations of the Other in Ustaoğlu's films are not limited to an essentialist idea of identity, journey, and belonging. Their narratives rather rely on showing Turkey's relationship with its "Others" in terms of a Levinasian sense of responsibility to those Others.

The Other in Ustaoğlu's Cinema

Ustaoğlu's films exhibit a political position on the issue of identity (Basci, 2015, p. 164-166). The director disrupts essentialist discourses that put minorities and gender identities in a fixed category, underlining dialogues, transformations, and hybridity in history (Suner, 2009, p. 79). At first glance, the films present the Other according to the norms of nationalism and patriarchy. *Journey to the Sun* and *Waiting for the Clouds* portray the ethnic Other as identified by the Turkish state, and *Pandora's Box*, *Somewhere In Between*, and *Clair Obscur* highlight how the patriarchy constructs women as the gendered Other. However, Ustaoğlu destabilizes norms and prejudices around the Other, as all of her films' main characters return to being singular subjects through their relationship with the Other. In this way, Ustaoğlu avoids any fixed conceptualizations of the Other since this would end up "suppressing or possessing the Other" (Levinas, 1961/1991, p. 46). Thus, the director does not reduce the Other to the identical; instead, she represents it as an entirely separate entity within the ethical relation with the I. In this regard, Ustaoğlu's films are about "the realities of Turkey depicting all of us, rather than just some of us" (Monceau, 2001, p. 28–30).

The question still remains for us whether and to what extent Levinas's philosophy of the Other is applicable to Ustaoğlu's films. In Levinas's philosophy, the Other is not defined in an essentialist way. In the relationship between the I and the Other, the Other is released from any categorization and conceptualization and is, as Levinas (1961/1991) asserts:

> [...]infinitely transcendent, infinitely foreign; his face in which his epiphany is produced and which appeals to me breaks with the world that can be common to us, whose virtualities are inscribed in our nature and developed by our existence. The alterity of the Other does not depend on any quality that would distinguish him from me (p. 194).

The conceptualizations and thematizations of language serve only to create prejudices and fall short of defining and understanding the

Other (Levinas, 1961/1991, p. 46). Here, Levinas (1991) emphasizes that there is normally a practice of power in the relationship of the I with the Other, where the I posits itself as one of the "possessors and builders of the earth" (p. 46). This possession is mainly a form in which the Other becomes the same by becoming "mine" because the Other discards its independence only when affirming the I's possession (Levinas, 1961/1991, p. 45-46). However, the Other cannot be defined as an antagonist to the I. The I and the Other are certainly not the same, but they are intertwined in a sense, since the I's relation to the Other creates "a bond rather than a form of separation" (Bernasconi, 2004, p. 240).

In *Totality and Infinity* (1961/1991), Levinas employs the *face* to understand the Other. The Other first appears in the face that "does not manifest itself by these qualities of the I" (Levinas, 1961/1991, p. 50-51). The face is "beyond the disclosure and dissimulation which characterize forms," and "it is an expression [which] does not expose [or] conceal an entity" (Levinas, 1961/1991, p. 50). Consequently, the face is free of any cultural concepts and codes. Since the face expresses itself, meaning always commences in the face (Levinas, 1961/1991, p. 51). Thus, the face uncovers a missing part of the I, which is different than revealing a missing part of the I that already exists. Instead, it is "introducing the new into a thought, and the absolutely new is the Other" (Levinas, 1961/1991, p. 219).

An ethical relationship between the I and the Other begins with the encounter of the Other that "calls the I into question" (Levinas, 1961/1991, p. 171). In this face-to-face contact, the I becomes a subject since the Other "paralyzes possession of the I and can also resist this only because the Other approaches the I not from the outside but from above" (Levinas, 1961/1991, p. 171). Thus, the Other breaks the I's conceptualizations, which the I uses to define the world outside its home and shakes the basis of its existence (Levinas, 1978/2001, p. 37-46). In this sense, Levinas (1961/1991) defines the I as a selfish entity who inhabits a world where the I selfishly tries to meet its needs in order to survive. The I experiences joy and happiness at home with itself. However, happiness through enjoyment and satisfaction of needs are of "something else, never of the I itself" because the love of life "does not resemble the care for Being" (Levinas, 1961/1991, p. 143-145). Therefore, the I has no meaning in his life until it encounters the Other. In Levinasian understanding, the encounter with the Other is the beginning of meaning: "The order of meaning, which seems to me primary, is precisely what comes to us from the interhuman relationship,

so that the Face, with all its meaningfulness as brought out by analysis, is the beginning of intelligibility" (Levinas, 1991/1998, p. 103).

The I becomes a subject only through face-to-face contact and experiences things about itself meaningfully through a dialogue with the Other (Levinas, 1961/1991, p. 50-51). Since the I is always in need of re-creating itself, the Other causes a fundamental transformation in the I during their encounter. Consequently, the I becomes aware of a world outside its own selfish world after facing the Other.

Journey to the Sun is a story about the identity shift that happens in one of the main characters, Mehmet, who, despite not being Kurdish, is constantly treated as Kurdish by others because of his darker skin tone (Suner, 2005, p. 271). In this way, the film represents the Other through a historical lens and underlines how nationalist discourses construct the Other's identity. The Turkish state and its organs like the police often describe the Kurdish identity as the Other on the basis of differences in hair color, skin color, and other ethnic traits, as well as language and political orientation. However, as Levinas (1961/1991) asserts, these perceptions are not sufficient to define the Other because they derive from the position of the I as the dominant figure who exercises power over the Other through language as well as practices (p. 50-51). In this regard, the constitution of Mehmet's subjectivity challenges and disrupts the dominant position of the Turkish identity as the film depicts the journey of recognition of his identity through the Other. In this case, the Other is the Kurdish Berzan, who was forced to leave his hometown of Zorduç, a town in eastern Turkey, whom Mehmet befriends.

Mehmet's skin tone defines his identity, and an accusation he has to respond to. His initial conflict with Turkish officials is due to his appearance, which has political connotations (Koksal, 2016, p. 143-147). In Mehmet's interrogation scenes, the police do not believe him when he says he is from the Aegean town of Tire because of his dark skin and hair, as his family name "Kara" (black, dark) represents. Even after his release, he is unable to evade his alleged Kurdish identity. He is fired from his job, and forced to leave his home because the door has been marked with an X.[5] Later, Berzan is killed during a protest, and Mehmet takes care of the

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[5]   S. Ruken Öztürk (2004, p. 338) mentions in *Sinemanın "Dişil" Yüzü: Türkiye'de Kadın Yönetmenler* that Yesim Ustaoğlu created the story of *Journey to the Sun* with Tayfun Pirselimoğlu after she read a newspaper article mentioning

funeral. Respecting Berzan's wish to be buried in his hometown of Zorduç, Mehmet decides to take his body there. On the way, Mehmet needs to feel included in Berzan's environment and among his fellow citizens, which impacts Mehmet's behavior regarding his identity (Koksal, 2016, p. 145). While staying at a hotel during the journey, he sees the police at night and fearing they will come for him, he decides to dye his hair blond to hide his alleged Kurdish identity, which turns out to be counter-productive. Then, when he washes away the dye, he also figuratively removes his old identity (Koksal, 2016, p. 147; Suner, 2005, p. 272). Thus, Ustaoğlu uses Mehmet to mirror Turkey's political history and criticizes the essentialist understanding of identity, which categorizes people as Kurds according to their physical traits. Thus, the face of the Other functions as an "entity who questions the time we live" (Chambers, 1994, p. 17).

Mehmet's inner journey begins after he encounters Berzan in Istanbul and then others along his journey to Zorduç, all of whom shape his perception of his own. However, Ustaoğlu breaks from essentialist fixations of identity when Mehmet turns into Berzan. Mehmet does not categorize Berzan as a Kurd or judge him as others do. Mehmet sees Berzan as a person who is free from any fixed conceptualizations, as someone with whom he is in solidarity. He wants to "become" Berzan. As Mehmet spends time with Berzan, things take on new meanings for Mehmet. In line with Levinas's concept of encounters with the Other, Mehmet's life gains meaning when he meets Berzan. Through dialogue with Berzan, Mehmet starts to recognize himself, reconstituting his subjectivity. During his inner journey, Mehmet experiences an another world full of sacrifice and suffering, reminiscent of Levinas's selfish I (1961/1991) when it contacts the Other. Berzan, and others like him on similar journeys, show Mehmet that there is another world and home other than his selfish inhabitation. A life without Berzan is so meaningless that Mehmet "becomes" Berzan at the end of the journey. From that point onwards, he has no past life. The last sequence of the film implies not an endpoint, but rather a loop in which Mehmet will continue to explore himself by encountering the Other. In the end, *Journey to the Sun* becomes a film about releasing Mehmet from being only a Turk and opens new possibilities for the imagination regarding the Other (Robins & Aksoy, 2000, p. 205).

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that the houses of villagers who did not adopt the village guard system in South-Eastern Region of Turkey were marked with a red X.

Waiting for the Clouds portrays the identity struggles of the main character, Ayşe/Eleni, who experiences exile, confronts her feelings of guilt, and rediscovers her original identity by encountering her neighbor's son Mehmet, who reminds Ayşe/Eleni of her lost brother Nico. Ayşe/Eleni's identity is first represented in terms of a nationalist discourse. The early sequences depict how the Turkish state categorizes its citizens and how Turkishness is defined. The news on the television mentions the census, which will establish statistics on language and religion. When the census officials arrive at Ayşe/Eleni's home, they ask questions about her identity, family name, and religion. The census scenes show that the Turkish state constructs Ayşe's/Eleni's Turkish identity based on her official identity card rather than the reality (Koksal, 2016, p. 80). While depicting the way Ayşe/Eleni reclaims her original identity, the film questions how Turkishness is constructed in the nationalist discourses. Furthermore, as Koksal (2016) points out, the scenes at Mehmet's school where the children are performing their daily routine of reciting their oath, serve "as opportunities to communicate deeper social commentary on the education system" because "these instances subtly mark the nationalistic tone of the education system" and the culture in the country:

> I am a Turk/ I am honest/ I am diligent/ My law is to protect the younger/ Respect the elders/ To love my country/ and my nation more than I love my self/ I dedicate my existence to the existence of Turkish nation/ What an honor to say I am a Turk (p. 83-84).

Waiting for the Clouds questions the official discourses on Turkish identity and investigates Ayşe/Eleni's true identity as the historical Other who suffered during the mass migration of non-Muslims in the 1910s. Through Ayşe/Eleni's trauma, Ustaoğlu denounces the political attitudes of those in power and their current representations (Koksal, 2016, p. 80).

During Ayşe/Eleni's inner journey towards revealing her true identity, she reconstructs her identity after encountering neighbor's young son Mehmet. Although Ayşe/Eleni is described as the historical Other by nationalist thinking, Mehmet becomes the Other for Ayşe/Eleni in Levinasian thinking because her encounter with Mehmet changes everything for her: it starts her suffering and initiates her inner journey. She can no longer deny or repress her true identity. Here Mehmet's identity as the Other does not refer to any essentialist form. Instead, for Ayşe/Eleni, he is released from any fixed conceptualizations such as the communist's son, a neighbor, or an orphan and appears solely as a face (Levinas,

1961/1991). Mehmet breaks the fixed form of Ayşe/Eleni's Turkish identity and shakes her to her core. Thus, through this face-to-face contact, Ayşe/Eleni's life gains meaning, and she reconstructs her true identity. After her long-lost brother Nico acknowledges Eleni as his sister, the film ends with the documentary footage of a woman holding a baby, as was shown at the beginning of the film. This return to the beginning points out a circle, a loop of life where Ayşe/Eleni is back to where she started: "the experience of cultivating multiple identities, rather than one essential or original one" (Basci, 2015, p. 153).

Pandora's Box, Somewhere In Between, and *Clair Obscur* focus on their female protagonists' positions. In *Pandora's Box*, the main female character, Nusret, is depicted as an old woman with dementia, who is excluded by her children because of her disease, but then becomes the Other for her nearly 20-year-old grandson Murat, who reconstructs his identity through his encounter with her. Her female identity is not in the forefront as is the case for the female characters in *Somewhere In Between and Clair Obscur.* The central female characters' identities in *Somewhere In Between and Clair Obscur* are constructed within a gendered perspective by the patriarchal discourse as these characters construct their identity through their encounters with the Other. These films represent women as the gendered Other, whose voices have been silenced by the patriarchy. In this regard, these films feature women characters in a struggle against the patriarchal order, whereas in *Waiting for the Clouds,* the main character, Ayşe/Eleni, is able to express herself, and thus cannot be characterized "as a victim of patriarchy" (Suner, 2007, p. 63).

The story of *Pandora's Box* centers on Nusret, who has Alzheimer's disease, and her grandson, Murat. When the 80-year-old Nusret disappears in her hometown, her children, who live in Istanbul, go there to bring her back to Istanbul. This gathering forces each of the siblings to face their own identity. Nusret's disease involves memory loss, or the inability to record information, which Ustaoğlu prefers to define as not coincidental (M. Arslan, 2010, p. 141-142). According to Akça's interview with Ustaoğlu (2008), Nusret is an embodiment of Ustaoğlu's criticism on how the modern individual in capitalist society forgets their nature, the source of their origin, and is isolated from other individuals in their daily routine.

Ensnared by the consumerist culture, Nusret's children do not spend much time with themselves, as they are lost in their everyday rou-

tines, which is reminiscent of Levinas's selfish I (1961/1991), who "recollects itself in dwelling at home with itself" (p. 156-158). Consuming its needs as much as it wants does not render the I free, only dependent. While the siblings try to deal with their inner resolutions, her grandson Murat is lost in his own existential crisis. Murat is depicted wandering the streets of Istanbul, questioning the meaning of life. Unlike his mother and her siblings, Murat does not ignore his grandmother Nusret, instead choosing to engage her in dialogue. Nusret becomes a face for Murat that shows him a world beyond his own selfish one. When he starts spending time with Nusret alone, Nusret's existence interrogates his selfish identity, which commences his inner journey. Murat identifies with her, ultimately kidnapping her from the hospital, and takes her to her village. First on the streets, then in the natural surroundings in her village, Murat understands Nusret's wish to come home: to return to her origins and where she belongs.

Somewhere In Between and *Clair Obscur* underline how the patriarchal discourse describes a woman as the gendered Other. The female protagonists in both films are trapped in their own lives. In *Somewhere In Between*, Zehra seeks a way to escape from her village in Karabük. Elmas in *Clair Obscur*, a child bride, lives as if in a vortex with her husband. Şehnaz in *Clair Obscur*, on the other hand, is a modern, professional woman, but still cannot face the fact that she is stuck with her egoistic husband's attitudes. Both films portray the inner resolutions Zehra, Şehnaz, and Elmas experience through an encounter with the Other. However, the films' endings suggest different readings in terms of how the female characters shape their identity in relation to men. In both cases, it becomes essential to define the Other firstly in terms of gender.

The pioneer of the second wave feminism, Simone de Beauvoir, employed Georg W. Hegel's concept of the Other to describe a male-dominant culture representing woman as the sexual Other of man (De Beauvoir, 1949/2011). De Beauvoir (1949/2011) clarifies her position in her feminist works by stating that "one is not born, but rather becomes, woman" (p. 283). She argues that a woman's biological condition as a preserver of sperm has positioned her as secondary, generating a problem of social order. In the binary relationship between man and woman, woman as the sexual Other represents only the negative aspects, whereas being a man is the symbol of the dominant social group (De Beauvoir, 1949/2011). In this regard, in *Somewhere In Between* and *Clair Obscur*, Zehra and Elmas

symbolize the patriarchal society's repressed woman.

In *Somewhere In Between*, Zehra's life is shaped around the truck driver Mahur, with whom she has an affair, and who claims she did not care about her life until she met him. Even though Zehra is defined as the gendered Other by the patriarchal society, Mahur becomes a face for Zehra to render her life worth living (Levinas, 1961/1991). However, when Zehra gets pregnant, Mahur disappears. Mahur acts according to the needs of his own, not taking any responsibility for what has happened. Zehra's life is not the same after meeting Mahur. To avoid being ostracized for having a child out of wedlock, she disassociates herself from others. Following her miscarriage in a hospital toilet stall alone, she loses her voice for some time - a silence that could be interpreted as a reaction against the patriarchy, which silences women. Koksal (2016) highlights the importance of depicting women's silences saying, "not because it 'means' more when women are silenced, but because it creates a bigger, 'quieter' silence" (p. 36). Here, Zehra's journey towards becoming a subject, as Levinas defines it, is not possible within a relationship with Mahur, since the relationship is a dependent one. In the end, Zehra's secondary position in society does not change. To overcome her trauma she decides to marry her imprisoned childhood friend, Olgun. The film ends with Olgun and Zehra's wedding ceremony in the prison, which symbolizes Zehra's new life as a wife trapped within the patriarchal order.

Clair Obscur depicts its central female characters, Şehnaz and Elmas, at the beginning, both as gendered Others, but who suffer from the patriarchal order in different ways. Despite being a psychiatrist, an upper-middle class woman, working near Istanbul, Şehnaz cannot seem to get out of her life with her manipulative, egoistic husband, who reminds us of Levinas's selfish I, who loves its life by consuming the needs it creates. However, the film develops in a way suggesting that "love of life does not resemble the care for Being" (Levinas, 1961/1991, p. 145). The husband's dominance in Şehnaz's life is even more ominous because he does not outwardly display the typical behaviors of the patriarchal man, not the way Elmas' husband does, for instance.

Ustaoğlu's criticism, however, is directed towards Turkey's overall patriarchal social structure, including work and family life, which, in the case of Elmas, silences her voice at a very early stage in her life. She was forced to marry an older man as a child. As a conservative woman, she cannot even go out without her husband's permission because the exter-

nal world (outside of the home) belongs to the man, signifying a man's world (Çur, 2005, p. 117). Elmas' identity as a subordinated and repressed woman is also related to religion, customs, and traditions. As Kate Millet (1971) argues, gender is related to socialization, the power of which feminists should aim to diminish. She defines gender as "the sum total of the parents', the peers', and the culture's notions of what is appropriate for each gender by way of temperament, character, interests, status, worth, gesture, and expression" (p. 31). Feminine gender norms become problematic since "gendered behavior reinforces women's subordination so that women are socialized into subordinate social roles: they learn to be passive, ignorant, docile, emotional helpmeets for men" (Millett, 1971, p. 26). However, since these roles are learned, we can create more equal societies by resetting social roles.

In a similar vein, Judith Butler (1999) rejects any attempt to fix woman into a category because to "define woman in a gendered category is to define her in a way that implies that there is some correct way to be gendered a woman" (p. 5). Additionally, Butler (1999) criticizes feminists not because they define women in the wrong way. Instead, she claims that "woman" can never be defined in a way that "does not prescribe some unspoken normative requirements that women should conform to" because "there are no such essential properties, and gender is an illusion maintained by prevalent power structures" (p. 9-24). Thus, patriarchy as a power structure tells women, whether directly or not, how they should perform as women. In other words, a woman becomes the Other whom the Self, as man, dominates. In this light, Elmas is a symbol of the unspoken normative requirements of the patriarchy. Having been taken out of school and forced to marry an older man, she has a restricted life with her husband and her mother-in-law. Elmas is expected to do housework and give her husband a child. One day upon the sudden death of her husband and mother-in-law, she is brought to the hospital in a state of shock. There, she meets Şehnaz, who helps her out with facing her trauma, resolving her identity crisis, and reclaiming her free will from the patriarchy.

Ustaoğlu destabilizes the woman's position as the gendered Other through the therapy session scenes in the film. Their meeting changes the lives of both Şehnaz and Elmas; each overcomes her identity crisis and becomes a subject again. In this regard, Şehnaz and Elmas's relationship goes beyond a formal one; they serve as mirrors for each other's

traumatic life. Şehnaz does not categorize Elmas in patriarchal codes. Elmas is a pure face, as Levinas (1961/1991) suggests, which expresses itself and is released from any constructed characteristics of identity (p. 51-52). During a therapy session, Elmas's description of the suffering she experienced during intercourse with her husband triggers something in Şehnaz so deeply that Şehnaz realizes that something is wrong with her marriage and indirectly herself. After their encounter, not only does Şehnaz's life change, but Elmas's identity crisis also comes to an end. Therefore, here, the Other is represented as a face in the Levinasian sense (1961/1991), which reveals "a missing part of the I and introduces a new world," a different life (p. 219). Elmas accepts her trauma and welcomes her identity as a child, which she was forced to leave behind, by playing with her neighbor's daughter. Şehnaz leaves her husband and is shown laughing, as she drives away to her new life.

Finally, interpersonal relationships play an important role in Ustaoğlu's films. While nationalist and patriarchal discourses construct the Others as fixed essences, Ustaoğlu disrupts the understanding of this essentialist idea of identity through several characters' encounters. Thus, the films suggest that the Other is free from any fixed category and is a significant character in a narrative, into which the main characters enter to reconstruct themselves.

An Alternative Reading of the Other through Levinas's Responsibility

As the first step in the constitution of ethical subjectivity, encountering the Other is a fundamental experience, according to Levinas's philosophy since it brings up the possibility of dialogue and thereby a sense of responsibility for the Other (Levinas, 1978/2001, p. 22-38). In line with this philosophical conception, each central character in the films analyzed here recognizes themselves through an ethical relationship that involves taking responsibility for the Other. The narratives in Ustaoğlu's films can thus be understood most fully when one makes this concept of responsibility central to them.

According to Levinas (1961/1991), ethics ultimately concerns responsibility which is "calling into question of the same by the Other, that is, [...] accomplishes the critical essence of knowledge" (p. 43). Rather than a set of values in the form of written law or codes, Levinas's ethics is, as Critchley (1992) argues, "delineating the essence or meaning of the

ethical in a way that disrupts traditional moral thinking and all claims to good conscience" (p. 4). So, Levinas's philosophy describes ethics as an opening toward the Other and highlights how ethics arise as an open response to difference.

Responsibility for the Other arises by encountering the Other where the I responds to the Other's call. Thus, an ethical relationship starts by welcoming the Other (Levinas, 1991). An ethical relationship requires responsibility, which Levinas (1991/1998) delineates as the central precondition of subjectivity: "To be me is always to have one more responsibility" (p. 60). Facing the Other is, as Levinas asserts (1961/1991), "to receive from the Other beyond the capacity of the I which means exactly: to have the idea of infinity" (p. 51). Therefore, we cannot trace back the source of this relationship between the I and the Other since it is unconditional; it is where "the idea of infinity is consummated" (Levinas, 1961/1991, p. 27). So, a primary responsibility to the Other constitutes ethics as "not a branch of philosophy, but first philosophy" (Levinas, 1961/1991, p. 304).

In Levinas's ethics, when the I encounters the Other, the Other commands the I to be attentive to the Other's call. Responding to the call is significant since being attentive first "signifies a surplus of consciousness," and "presupposes the call of the Other." (Levinas, 1961/1991, p. 178). The attentive I recognizes the Other, receives his command to command. So, Levinasian ethics begin with this command which calls the I to show responsibility for the Other by attending its call. Levinas (1991/1998) defines the responsibility for the Other as an infinite one since the I "hears in the Other's face the Word of God" (p. 110). This is to say that responsibility in an ethical relationship between the I and the Other is inevitable for the I, who is responsible for the Other before it is responsible for itself. Therefore, the I must obey the Other's call without expecting anything in return from the Other, since in Levinas's concept of kindness (1991), the I must acknowledge that "the Other counts more than myself" (p. 247). Thus, the experience of responsibility by attending the call of the Other is "not a free choice", as Bernasconi (2004, p. 236) asserts, rather "it is the experience of 'the impossibility of evading the neighbor's call'" (Levinas, 1968/1996, p. 95). In this regard, the I is responsible "prior to any commitment" (Levinas, 1968/1996, p. 87). Ultimately, responsibility is to be conscious of the Other's call and then make decisions in response to the ethical commands that issue from this call.

In Levinas's terms (1961/1991), the conscience is a force igniting the sense of responsibility by welcoming the Other into the I's selfish world (p. 84-85). It is the consciousness of the shame that freedom feels for itself (Levinas, 1961/1991, p. 86-88). So, conscience is a response to the sufferings of the Other and creates an ethical relationship since morality, as Levinas (1961/1991) claims, "begins when freedom, instead of being justified by itself, feels itself to be arbitrary and violent" (p. 84). In this sense, responsibility stems from this feeling of discomfort created by conscience, and responsibility fails when the I does not respond to the Other's call.

In *Journey to the Sun*, Mehmet's sense of responsibility for Berzan compels him to take a journey. When Berzan dies during a protest, Mehmet feels responsible for his death because he was not able to protect Berzan from Turkish officials. Mehmet decides take Berzan's body to Zorduç to fulfill Berzan's last wish. However, Mehmet's journey to Zorduç is not a one-way journey. Since a journey, as Chambers (1991, p. 5) suggests, is a "movement between fixed places" and intimates a potential homecoming, Mehmet's journey is also an internal migration, through which he ultimately reconstructs his identity. Mehmet shows Levinasian responsibility by leaving his life behind and putting the fulfillment of Berzan's last wish before anything else. Thus, Berzan's death evokes a sense of inescapable responsibility. The process of the constitution of Mehmet's subjectivity triggered by an encounter with Berzan has been completed by showing responsibility for him when Mehmet brings Berzan's body to Zorduç. Inevitably, this journey ends with Mehmet's identity crisis. He realizes his true self by substituting himself for Berzan, thus achieving his responsibility towards Berzan.

Waiting for the Clouds centers its narrative on a failed sense of responsibility. Ayşe/Eleni's trauma stems from feelings of guilt for letting her brother Nico go to Russia with the other orphans during the war at the beginning of the twentieth century. She has failed to fulfill her ethical responsibility to Nico in the Levinasian sense since she did not respond to the latter's suffering, which reinforces her shame over the years. When she meets her neighbor's young son Mehmet, however, his face compels her to search for her brother. Upon receiving a clue from Tanadis, another migrant Greek from Trabzon, she travels looking for her brother. On the streets of Thessaloniki, she traces Nico's steps to fulfill her final responsibility, to tell him that she never forgot him and should have never

let him leave with the others. When Eleni gets Nico's forgiveness as her brother, Eleni's path towards recognizing her original self, the first step of which had been facing young Mehmet, reaches completion. In the end, Ayşe/Eleni takes on a burden that is not of her own making and bravely deals with the consequences (Öztürk, 2010, p. 161).

Pandora's Box discusses how the modern individual deals with responsibility through the relationship between Nusret, an older woman who has Alzheimer's disease, and her children, as well as among the siblings themselves. When she gets lost in the mountains near her home, her children are forced to travel to the Western Black Sea Region to bring their sick mother back to Istanbul. This journey forces the siblings to spend time together, since they must now cooperate to care for their mother. When Nusret re-enters their lives, she becomes the key person, taking her children out of their daily routine and criticizing their egotistical selves. Each sibling reveals their alterity and starts putting things right. However, the siblings fail in their ethical responsibility towards her in the Levinasian sense, when they do not respect Nusret's wishes, both because of her worsening dementia and because she is accustomed to living in the mountains, something her modern, city-dwelling children look down upon. They are unable to integrate Nusret into their 'modern' life and decide to put her in a care facility, thus treating her as the Other of the family. In Levinas's conception of ethics (1961/1991), it is essential to put ourselves in the Other's position and respond to the Other's call. In this sense, Ustaoğlu's portrayal of the children's (ir)responsibility towards Nusret seems to contain a criticism of the modern individual's ethics in general.

Her grandson Murat, however, does respond to Nusret's call, and takes her back to her village. This new-found sense of responsibility in turn helps Murat rediscover himself, which is not the case for Nusret's children. Murat empathizes with Nusret when he first meets her. Instead of ignoring Nusret, he respects her identity and her wish to go home, as Levinasian ethics requires, and takes her there.

Somewhere In Between and *Clair Obscur* deal with the concept of responsibility in the context of women's solidarity from different perspectives. While, in *Somewhere In Between*, Zehra's friend Derya supports Zehra in all situations, in *Clair Obscur*, Şehnaz helps Elmas on a professional level, and Elmas unknowingly helps Şehnaz reconstitute herself. In *Somewhere In Between*, Mahur's irresponsibility causes the destruction

of Zehra's subjectivity as a woman in the patriarchal society, when Mahur does not attend to Zehra's call by leaving her to deal with her pregnancy alone. On the other hand, as another woman stuck in the patriarchal order, Derya knows what Zehra is going through and helps Zehra pull herself together. Derya is portrayed as a mirror to society as well. She has been keeping a secret, from everyone including her husband: an unwanted pregnancy with a boyfriend in her past, with the baby given up for adoption. Through the encounter with Zehra, Derya confronts her past and her maternal identity, which she has repressed. However, Derya's support does not fulfill her responsibility in the Levinasian sense because it does not change anything in Zehra's subjectivity. Instead, she advises Zehra to abide by the patriarchal rules and find a husband. In terms of Levinas's ethics, Derya does not respond to Zehra's call as the Other. Therefore, the solidarity between the two women does not satisfy the demands of Levinasian ethics.

Clair Obscur does not limit its criticism to the patriarchy; rather, the film depicts patriarchal violence in a way that underlines women's responsibility to each other and how they occasionally fail this. Elmas' greatest trauma is not her marriage; instead, it is that her mother let this happen to her by not objecting to Elmas' father. During therapy, which involves the process of the individual's trauma and self-realization through and path through their past (Giddens, 1991, p. 71-73), she questions how her mother let her get married when she was still a child, allowing her to go through the same thing she herself once did. Similarly, Elmas' mother-in-law fails her responsibility when she pushes Elmas to do housework, serve them dinner, and get pregnant. In a way, she treats her as a servant and abuses her just like men do. When Elmas and Şehnaz meet at the hospital, Şehnaz is the only person that tries to empathize with Elmas and to show her respect because of her traumatic past. She does not ignore or "otherize" Elmas because of her social and economic status as she engages her in dialogue (Critchley, 1992, p. 4-5). This is why, despite the common criticisms concerning women failing their responsibility to other women, the film does not suggest that women are a woman's greatest enemy. Instead, the film depicts the relationship between Elmas and Şehnaz to show how a woman's life can change positively through solidarity with other women. Though unintentionally, Elmas and Şehnaz take metaphorical responsibility for each other, enabling each to reconstruct her true self. As a result, both women overcome their own identity crises through the therapy sessions, with each becoming a subject as a free woman.

Ustaoğlu's films thus center their narrative on the sense of responsibility for the Other, who ultimately does not represent a fixed identity. Instead, the films suggest a different reading of the Other, one that is not defined according to the terms and categories of the dominant discourses. It is actually the pure face of the other as radical alterity, in Levinas's sense, which helps the central characters constitute their subjectivity.

Conclusion

Yeşim Ustaoglu's films are political. This is not only because of the immediately political context of the films such as *Journey to the Sun* and *Waiting for the Clouds* but also because of Ustaoğlu's unsettling attitude against social norms, especially those that concern identity and otherness, in films like *Pandora's Box*, *Somewhere In Between*, and *Clair Obscur*. As Süalp (2014) correctly asserts, Ustaoğlu's films speak the untold and represent "insignificant people and softly speaking of the minor, and/or oppressed and forbidden histories" (p. 248). Thus, the director succeeds in raising problematic social and political issues that are not easy to speak about publicly.

This paper offers an analysis of a different perspective on the Other than the usual historical and gendered ones. By employing Levinas's ethical philosophy centered on a radical responsibility for the Other, the analysis focuses first on the Other as a constructed identity shaped by the dominant discourses. More importantly, it argues that different characters can be interpreted as the Other, not only free from any fixed categorization but also in a way that reconstitute the central characters' ethical subjectivity as long as they are able to fully respond to the Other's call. In this regard, the Other in Ustaoğlu's films is not an antagonist; to the contrary, it functions as a mirror helping the main character ultimately discover their own identity: Berzan in *Journey to the Sun*, Mehmet in *Waiting for the Clouds*, Nusret in *Pandora's Box*, Mahur/Zehra in *Somewhere In Between* and Elmas/Şehnaz in *Clair Obscur*.

Ustaoğlu raises difficult questions, bringing up Turkey's responsibility to its Others from a broader perspective. In *Journey to the Sun,* Mehmet begins to see Turkey, and the Kurds as the ethnic Other through Berzan's eyes. In *Waiting for the Clouds,* Ayşe/Eleni deals with her hidden past and recognizes her repressed identity through an encounter with young Mehmet's face. Additionally, both films depict the historical Other and offer an internal observation of Turkey's political history. Berzan's

characterization reflects Turkey's political context in the 1990s during the escalation of the conflict between PKK and the Turkish state. On the other hand, Ayşe/Eleni's trauma represents Non-Muslim immigrants' trauma in Turkey's history. The depiction of how Eleni deals with her repressed past mirrors, in a way, Turkey's need to face the history of its Non-Muslim minorities: directly, of the painful emigration of Greeks in 1916, and indirectly, of Armenians in 1915.

Pandora's Box criticizes the modern individual in terms of their (ir) responsibility for the Other. Nusret, as the family's Other, helps her children and her grandson Murat get out of their routine and deal with their identity. Even though the siblings start to engage in self-criticism, they ultimately fail in showing responsibility for Nusret by not respecting her identity and greatest wish. Murat puts himself in Nusret's place and does not ignore her as the Other. He respects her identity and wishes, as demanded by a Levinasian ethics, taking her back to her village.

In *Somewhere In Between* and *Clair Obscur*, Ustaoğlu criticizes the role of women as the Other in the patriarchal order and society's attitude against women in Turkey from a broader perspective. Elmas' characterization hints at one of Turkey's enduring, crucial problems, namely the issue of child marriages, while underlining the Levinasian point of view rather than the constructed identity of a woman. *Somewhere In Between* and *Clair Obscur* portray the Other's representation from a gendered perspective and are good examples of showing how responsibility for the Other is essential in a woman's life. Elmas is a victim of her mother's irresponsibility, as her mother let her marry an older man when she was only a child. Similarly, Zehra in *Somewhere In Between* is also a victim of the patriarchal order, and the film does not offer a happy ending for female characters, as Zehra cannot get out of a life dominated by the patriarchal order and ends up marrying Olgun for salvation. On the other hand, in *Clair Obscur*, Şehnaz helps Elmas personally overcome her trauma, and Elmas unknowingly helps Şehnaz rediscover herself. Through the relationship between Elmas and Şehnaz, the film highlights how a woman's life can change positively through solidarity with other women.

To conclude, this paper has attempted to reveal that the Other's representations in Ustaoğlu's films are not limited to identity, journey, and belonging as issues in their usual sense. Instead, it has claimed that these films structure their narratives around the concept of responsibility for the Other in the Levinasian sense. Each film thus provides an ex-

cellent source for a meditation on the Other and ethical responsibility. In the end, the concept of responsibility embraces the issues of identity, the Other, and ethics simultaneously while offering a broader interpretation of gender-related, historical, cultural and political discourses.

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