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Women in the Cinema of Nuri Bilge Ceylan

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Nuri Bilge Ceylan, one of modern Turkey's most accomplished international film-director and widely known for his distinctive, slow-moving cinematic style, generates a certain amount of controversy over his screen representations of women. Some critics, such as Robin Wood, claim that his first three films - *The Small Town* (1997), *Clouds of May* (1999) and *Climates* (2006) - are mostly male-dominated (2), while others like Asuman Süner maintain that the absence of women in his films shows an alternative attitude to the issue of women in Turkish cinema (163) – a macho cinema where the only gaze is male. On the other hand, one cannot help wondering if this scarcity of female roles can be interpreted as a message to the audience – and if so, how? Can it be a subtle criticism of the current situation of women in Turkey? This article seeks to answer some of these questions and explore the implications and problematics of female film characters in the cinema of Nuri Bilge Ceylan; hence, one may conclude that Ceylan displays a highly critical attitude towards not only Western/American capitalism and its destructive effect on Turkish society, but also towards the patriarchal nature of that society and its subsequent subordination of women.

In order to understand the conditions that shape Nuri Bilge Ceylan's view of cinema, it may be helpful to look in brief at what happened before he came on the scene. As Süner details in her book *New Turkish Cinema: Belonging, Identity and Memory*, because of the oppressive political and social climate of the early 1980s, "popular Turkish cinema became estranged from its traditional audience and could not keep pace with the trans-formation of society" (8). She further explains that at a time when the term "Turkish film" (known as *Yeşilçam*) was something of a joke, connoting *bad taste* and *banality*, "filmmakers were trying to find new ways of expression, to address the changing dynamics of society" (8). Under these adverse conditions, film companies needed a change in approach

in order to survive (8). This kind of policy has been well summed up by Stanley Cavell, who explained in *The World Viewed* that: "a medium is something through which or by means of which something specific gets done or said in particular ways. It provides, one might say, particular ways to get through to someone, to make sense; in art, they are forms of speech" (32). Such "new forms of speech" encompass "new types, or combinations and ironic reversals of types," this being "the movies' way of creating individuals" and "individualities" (33). In terms of Turkish cinema, the shift into "new forms of speech" was signaled by means of a movement away from cheaply-made films – mostly comedies and sex-films – into more profound explorations of the struggle between various forces, interests, and voices in contemporary society (Süner 11). With this objective in mind, Nuri Bilge Ceylan creates a form of cinema in which the lives of various types of women from different socio-economic groups are analyzed, in an attempt not to "produce another instance of an art but a new medium within it [Turkish cinema]" (Cavell 103). This is done through the strategy of *absence*: the lack of major female protagonists in his films offers a significant contribution to gender politics, criticizing the highly male-dominated society wherein women occupy the background as obedient servants.

Gönül Dönmez-Colin argues that Ceylan "often depicts women in traditional roles [as] – wives, mistresses, mothers and sisters" (95). In his early work such as *The Small Town* (*Kasaba*) (1997) and *Clouds of May* (*Mayıs Sıkıntısı*) (1999), the action focuses on rural families, in which women fulfill traditional roles as wives and mothers, accepting without question the idea of subservience to their male partners. *The Small Town* describes relationships between members of a Turkish family in a small town from the perspective of an eleven-year-old girl and her seven-year-old brother. The four-part film unfolds along with the seasons. The scene early on in the film wherein a class of children learns about "Love and Loyalty within the Family" is worth mentioning as an illustration of institutionalized sexism involving a little girl, Asiye (Havva Sağlam). In the middle of the reading, the teacher (Latif Altıntaş) notices a malodorous smell in the classroom. After sniffing each desk, he locates the source in Asiye's lunchbox; when he inspects the food she is supposed to eat, he realizes it is scarcely fresh and criticizes her mother for being so careless. Asiye has been blamed by a male authority figure before her peers for something she has not done,

and has thereby been "forcefully introduced to feelings of shame and some merciless aspects of life" ("The Small Town.") This scene is a significant indication of the director's sympathetic attitude towards women, especially those forced to assume a subservient role in traditional Turkish society.

Another important scene related to the role of the women in *The Small Town* occurs during the third part, when the children arrive at the corn field as the sun is setting; a fire is lit and maize cobs are roasting. The children's grandparents (Mehmet Emin Ceylan and Fatma Ceylan), parents (Sercihan Alioğlu and Semra Yılmaz) and cousin Saffet (Mehmet Emin Toprak) gather around to talk. The male characters conduct most of the discussion while the two women prepare food: the grandmother keeps peeling the cobs and grilling them over the fire, paring fruit and offering some to her husband. She is the maternal figure permanently cast in a conciliatory role (Atam 185), who cannot tolerate the tension between her son and grandson over her dead son. On the other hand "the grandfather relates his experiences during the First World War, how he was taken prisoner by the British and sent to India, how he survived years of hunger and deprivation" ("The Small Town,") while the father believes in analytical thought, science and rationality. This scene is crucial in its depiction of the roles of traditional Anatolian women living in a male dominated world, in which they are only allowed to be mothers, daughters or daughters-in-law. They will not participate in the father's conversation; nor do they question his judgment, however naïve it might be. At one point he admits to being an admirer of Alexander the Great and the United States; he gives a long history of Mesopotamia and subsequently that "one should have a balanced diet to live long like Americans do," assuming, quite erroneously, that all Americans enjoy long and healthy lives.

The absurdities of his viewpoint are evident, yet the women accept it without question; to do otherwise might involve them in questioning their status within a highly stratified society. We do not know anything about the wife, her education or her ideas on America or the Americans; when she joins in the conversation, she speaks of how she felt when she was pregnant for the first time, or how she looked after the children during a fire in their neighborhood a couple of years previously. She admits feeling relieved for them and generally worrying over their safety and well-being. She has her own idiosyncratic view of life based on maternal commitment (Atam).

In *Clouds of May*, it is possible to observe a similar type of woman. The film tells the story of Muzaffer (Muzaffer Özdemir), who returns to his native town to make a movie. While his father, Emin (Mehmet Emin Ceylan) tries to save the small forest he has cultivated from confiscation by the authorities, his mother (Fatma Ceylan) devotes herself to domestic affairs; what she cares about most is her son's happiness. Although she does not want to act in her son's film, she reluctantly accepts the directions he gives her as to how to perform in front of the camera. In one sequence Muzaffer is shown trying to shoot a woodland monologue; while he tries to arrange the *mise-en-scène*, his father seems more preoccupied with his oak trees, so cannot concentrate on repeating the lines his son reads out loud to him. The mother sympathizes with her exasperated son and remonstrates with her husband.

The female characters in *The Small Town* and *Clouds of May* are representations of typical, traditional Anatolian women embracing rural lifestyles based on agriculture. However, Ceylan expands his field of vision after *Clouds of May* in response to the social and political changes experienced by the Republic of Turkey in recent decades. One such change can be seen in the gradual encroachment of capitalist values in the countryside. Wood argues that in *Clouds of May* this is evident in the impending destruction of Emin's forest, "which he passionately but ineffectually opposes, relying on written agreements ambiguous in the first place and now perhaps obsolete" (3). We cannot help being reminded of Fredric Jameson's observation that all third-world cultural productions seem to be allegorical (69): third-world, in this context, is an umbrella term used to define texts produced in developing countries that differ from so-called "first-world" (i.e. Western) texts in terms of their political orientation. Third world texts project a political dimension in the form of national allegory: "the story of private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public-world culture and society" ("Third World Literature" 69). Likewise Deleuze claims that such texts are both political and exert a collective value (*Kafka* 17). Jameson explains this further in his unpublished essay "A Note on the Specificity of Turkish Cinema" ("Note"):

> Along with Turkey, Iran is one of the rare Asian (or Eurasian) modernizing and non-socialist countries not to have been occupied by the colonial powers (and therefore not technically

> "postcolonial.") Both offer combinations of peasant production and urban industrial capitalism of a uniquely transitional kind, and their cinema in that respect has no particular equivalent elsewhere [….] Yet all this is very much in a contemporary situation of globalization and its simultaneities. Thus both cinemas also register, each in its own way, a unique combination of the traditional, the modern, and the postmodern – a combination that has been able to fascinate Western audiences, owing no doubt to the structural deficiencies of their own societies and the absence from them of any traditional or collective elements.

What fascinates Western audiences in the cinema of Nuri Bilge Ceylan is his oblique criticism of capitalism in the form of various disappearances or absences. In *Clouds of May*, the oak trees which are doomed to be cut down are an emblem of the moment of capitalist penetration, and hence signify a significant shift in rural modes of production. Emin's struggle to save his trees, a personal story, can be seen as an allegory of rural Turkish people striving to keep their traditions and values based on agriculture. The world inhabited by traditional families live is in decline: the oak trees belong to this world. When one mode of production, the agricultural system, disappears, it means that people embracing mode of production will either have to change or end up with nothing.

Once agriculture has been destroyed, the traditional roles of Turkish women as wives and mothers are subject to revaluation. In *Once Upon a Time in Anatolia* (*Bir Zamanlar Anadolu'da*) (2011), which takes place in central Anatolian Kırıkkale, it is still possible to see traditional Turkish women such as Cemile (Cansu Demirci) who lives in a village with her family. Everyone seems to be fascinated by her beauty, which might signify a nostalgic longing for past (patriarchal) stability: woman as object of desire is both attractive yet passive, posing no threat to established values. This bears out a point made in classic feminist film theory: in *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir argues that women are made not born, and hence subject to the influence of patriarchal power that deploys the brute fact of biological difference in order to manufacture and hierarchize gender

difference (281). However Cemile is perhaps unique in Ceylan's later work; for the most part the director is concerned to depict women who are no longer content to play the traditional, obedient wife or girlfriend role any more. *Climates* (*Iklimler*) (2006) begins with middle-aged lecturer and doctoral candidate Isa (Nuri Bilge Ceylan), en route to a summer holiday on the idyllic Aegean coast with younger lover Bahar (a television art director played by the director's wife Ebru Ceylan), while shooting a series of photographs of ancient ruins for possible use in a class lecture. On the one hand it seems that Bahar is the kind of pliant woman associated with Ceylan's earlier work: Dönmez-Colin claims that as "the partner of an older philanderer [she] expresses her sadness [at her current situation] through her silences and tears just like the silent women of the *Yesilçam* melodramas decades earlier" (95). However one may argue at the same time that Bahar represents the liberated career woman with the freedom to go on holiday with her boyfriend; she is sensitive and fragile, but at the same time strong enough to fight for the values she cherishes (Pay 45). It would be impossible for her to ignore her boyfriend's infidelity and continue her life as if nothing had happened. Her restless attitude at the dinner table, coupled with her blind-folding Isa while riding on the freeway can be seen as examples of her inability to adjust to the traditional Turkish woman's role – in other words, remaining passive while her male partner has total freedom of speech and action.

In *Once Upon A Time in Anatolia* the wife of prosecutor Nusret (Taner Birsel) cannot accept his cheating on her while she is pregnant. Nusret and Dr.Cemal (Muhammet Uzuner) wait for Commissar Naci (Yılmaz Erdoğan) to locate the exact location where Yaşar (Erol Eraslan) was murdered. Nusret tells Cemal about a beautiful woman who dies all of a sudden right after giving birth; the story of his own wife. Dr. Cemal is not convinced with Nusret's explanation and seeks out medical evidence; it turns out that Nusret's wife committed suicide after discovering his infidelity by overdosing on her father's heart pills. Although trying to defend himself by claiming that he was only unfaithful once while drunk, Nusret's true motives are exposed; he was a serial philanderer whose behaviour proved impossible for his wife to ignore. Like Bahar in *Climates*, she was not prepared to put up with a traditionally passive role. Wood's claim about the earlier film is also valid for *Once Upon a Time in Anatolia*: "I cannot think of another film as intelligent, as subtle, or as devastating in its sensitivity to the problems of heterosexual relationships in the post-feminist era" (4).

It would seem that in the era of capitalism in the Republic of Turkey, it is almost impossible for men and women to sustain an equitable relationship. In *Climates* the image of the troubled couple standing amidst architectural ruins prefigures their seemingly inevitable separation. The troubled look on her face is also another indication of their broken relationship. The distance between Bahar and Isa is made all the more insurmountable by Isa's act of infidelity with his former lover, Serap (Nazan Kesal) during one of Bahar's recent shooting trips away from İstanbul. When we look at the male character, Isa, it is as if his unfinished thesis reveals his self-inflicted pattern of irresolution, and inability to commit himself to something or someone. The impossibility of this happening is evident from the scene where Bahar "exposes herself to him emotionally by telling him her dream" (5). Isa can only respond by asking her when she has to be on set, signaling the end of their relationship.

On the other hand Ceylan's women are not always so morally upright; in a capitalist world they can cheat on their male partners, just as their partners can cheat on them. This kind of thematic structure recalls the Hollywood melodramas of the late Forties and early Fifties, which were ironically considered as "women's films, or 'weepies'" by critics and audiences alike (Elsaesser and Hagener 95). Ceylan takes that familiar American stereotype and reinvents it for modern Turkish cinema. In *Three Monkeys* (*Üç Maymun*), the female protagonist Hacer (Hatice Aslan) commits adultery when her husband is in jail: Dönmez-Colin points out that "her unconditional surrender to the culprit responsible for her husband's imprisonment […] is unexpected for the viewer" (95). Hacer is clearly a woman acting according to her desires rather than observing marital values – even her mobile phone lyrics, cleverly linking her obsessive tailing of her lover to the first arousal of her husband's suspicions - indicate her passionate yet vengeful nature: "I hope you love and are never loved back […] I hope love hurts you like it hurts me." Her cheating differs from that of Isa (or even of Nusret in *Once upon a Time in Anatolia*), in that she does not expect her husband, Eyüp (Yavuz Bingöl), to behave as if nothing had happened. On the contrary she incites him to react. In the sequence where Eyüp finds her wearing a nightdress and lying on the bed, Hacer does not ask for forgiveness when her husband finds out about her infidelity: "by not behaving like the underdog, she gives her husband the chance to forego his injured male pride and forgive her" (Dönmez-Colin

95). She seems to be ready to pay the price for his forgiveness - hence her suicide attempt - although it is not clear whether she really plans to jump or is simply bluffing (Yücel 22-30). Hacer does not deny what she has done and even follows her lover Servet (Ercan Kesel) to his house. While Servet wants a short affair, she refuses to give up on him, calling out: "you are my destiny." It is not Hacer but Servet who dies in the end–almost as if the director is punishing him for continuing the affair in the first place. Eyüp is left to try and rebuild his relationship with his cheating wife; he is also "punished" by the director for his apparent lack of responsibility. While capitalism has wrought significant changes in the way we look at "masculinity" and (more importantly) "femininity," it also forces men to become more responsible for their own actions. They cannot just get away with behaving in the way they wish. *Three Monkeys* is not a "woman's film" – as understood in classical Hollywood cinema – but rather a trenchant comment on contemporary Turkish society.

In *Climates,* Serap seems to be willing to have an affair with Isa despite Isa's sadistic tendencies; but the only thing she seems to be after is sex, without worrying about the consequences (Wood 6). In fact she decides to be disloyal to whatever man she chooses, so long as it suits her purposes (Atam 193). Like Hacer in *Three Monkeys*, she identifies love in purely capitalist terms, as a means of instant self-gratification. In *Distant* (*Uzak*) (2002), Mahmut's lover (Nazan Kırılmış) appears with another man in a bar and when she visits Mahmut, she leaves his place crying, as if she has failed to gratify herself; the desperate condition of a woman simultaneously cheating and yet in love. Likewise in *Once Upon a Time in Anatolia* the murder is committed on Gülnaz's behalf; as a woman of desires, she had an affair with the killer who claims to be the father of her child. It is indicative of the director's overall sympathies that again the cheating woman does not get punished, but the men involved with her.

Many years ago Mary Ann Doane wrote of the importance of desire in the Hollywood woman's film of the Forties and Fifties: "[It] is always in excess – even if it is simply the desire to desire, the striving for an access to a desiring subjectivity. The desiring woman and her excessive sexuality may be theoretically unrepresentable (according to the logic of a masculine theory, in any event); she may be doomed to die to insure closure for the narrative, but for a moment of cinematic time she is at least present, flaunting her excess" (122). Ceylan takes the idea of excess and reworks it in the context of the contemporary Republic of Turkey: capitalism

leads women to pursue lifestyles based on excess – or on a disregard for "masculine theory" or masculine values. However they are not destroyed for making such a move; on the contrary, it is the men they interact with who are "doomed to die," or at least to be blamed for what they have done.

This paradigm assumes equal significance for another recurrent type of woman in the cinema of Nuri Bilge Ceylan - the ex-wife. In *Distant*, the audience follows the relationship between Mahmut and his ex-wife, Nazan (Zuhal Gencer Erkaya), who are seen having a conversation over her new marriage and life. In this scene we learn that Nazan cannot have any children (because of the abortion she had prior to their divorce) and she will immigrate to Canada with her new husband. It is significant that Mahmut still seems to care about her, since the news of her departure disturbs him more than the fact that she is married to someone else. The news provokes some almost adolescent behavior in him: when she calls to tell him her departure time, he tries to find a place where he can talk to her without being overheard by his cousin Yusuf (Mehmet Emin Toprak). He shuts himself in the bathroom and converses from the toilet seat. Later, Mahmut actually goes to the airport to see her off; clandestinely he watches her going through the departure gates with her new husband. She catches sight of him, but he vanishes without any exchange of words. The poignancy of the moment is palpable: will Nazan end up believing that her last glimpse of Mahmut was simply imaginary? Once again our sympathies lie with Nazan rather than Mahmut; it seems that her desire for freedom cannot be accepted by the once-dominant male, who has to try and "possess" her somehow by means of the gaze (as he watches her moving through the departure gate).

At the end of *Once Upon a Time in Anatolia*, Dr.Cemal still wants to look at photos of his ex-wife, just after returning from the body hunt. He looks out of the window at Yaşar's wife Gülnaz (Nihan Okutucu) with her son walking, in other words, moving to another place. This sequence can be viewed from two perspectives: from one angle, it is the male, rather than the female, who is gazing – in other words, adopting the passive role while Gülnaz is the active protagonist. On the other hand Cemal's expression suggests a kind of nostalgic yearning for a pre-capitalist era in which gender roles were clearly defined and divorce was unheard of. Once again masculine values are set aside; in this brave new world, people have the right to opt for their own ways of living.

At the same time, the issue of the ex-wife may draw attention to unresolved problems. In *Three Monkeys,* both Eyüp and Ismail are visited by the dead boy, who may represent somebody or even something belonging to the past. In an interview with the London *Guardian*, Ceylan said that he wanted the boy to appear in scenes where a character needed to be comforted, especially those who feel an element of guilt (Andrew). In view of this information, one may argue that the male characters might feel guilty about their former marriages; hence they cannot stop thinking about the past. In *Distant*, Mahmut's wife cannot have any children because of the abortion she had while they were still married. Similarly, we also know that the prosecutor Nusret caused his wife to commit suicide, leaving their child behind, after his disloyalty had been revealed. However in a capitalist world dedicated to progress, the past does not matter; the present and future assume more significance. It could thus be argued with some justification that the male characters have an archaic outlook on contemporary life.

The issue of women's absence is another aspect of Ceylan's meditation on women. Süner suggests that this theme has been embraced by filmmakers who subordinate women to men and deny them agency, but have a critical self-awareness of women's complicity with patriarchal society (163-179). Examples of absent women are numerous in the cinema of Nuri Bilge Ceylan: in *Distant,* the timid introverted hero Yusuf casually but deliberately brushes against an attractive young woman on a public bus. The audience sees her changing seats to show that she has been disturbed, but she doesn't express her discomfort. Another example is the young girl (Ebru Ceylan) Yusuf tries to impress in the street, accidentally starting a car alarm and thus humiliating himself. When alone with the same girl in the apartment lobby, waiting for the concierge, he cannot conduct a sensible conversation with her. Again she remains silent. The audience sees the same girl dating another man as Yusuf follows her. As for Mahmut's mother, the audience sees her very briefly either at the hospital or at her home. His sister is heard on the phone and then seen very briefly in his mother's house. In Climates Isa's colleague Mehmet, who is trying to settle down after dating for a couple of years, mentions his relationship with his fiancé now and then; but the audience never sees her either on the screen or in photographs (Atam 193). *In Once Upon a Time in Anatolia,* Commissar Naci's wife is heard on the phone at the beginning and the end of the film. She is not very happy because of the child, whose medical condition needs regular treatment. Likewise Dr. Cemal's wife is seen only in photos. In

Three Monkeys, Servet's wife is seen briefly in front of their house.

Such examples might prompt us to conclude with Süner that in Ceylan's oeuvre "the audience never sees the world from a woman's perspective" (163). However we might look at this from another perspective, inspired by Deleuze's observation that: "if there were a modern political cinema, it would be on this basis: the people no longer exist, or not yet […] *the people are missing*" (*Cinema II 216*). In the cinema of Nuri Bilge Ceylan some women are missing; through their absence, the director suggests that there are still legacies of the patriarchy in contemporary Turkish society. He aims to reinvent the Hollywood women's film in another context by giving voice to all types of women, both active and passive (Stam 171). It is this aspect that might be characterized as the "positive element [in Ceylan's films]" which at the same time refuses to offer any easy solutions (Süner 163). Even though some women in capitalist Turkey have independence, they end up not getting what they want. In the light of this information, one can conclude that Ceylan seems to be highly critical of patriarchal values of Turkish society and Western/American capitalism, both of which confine women to subordinate roles.

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