



## **BLOSSOMS IN THE STEPPES: REPUBLICAN MASCULINITY PROJECT IN CRISIS**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The gendered model of the Republican era emphasized masculinities and femininities under the guise of equality. While women were seen as the sacred symbol, totems, of modernization and men were given the duty of modernizing women and civilizing the Turkish nation. The Republican masculinity was Westernized and characterized by rationalism, enlightenment values and elitism. In this paper, we will examine Republican masculinity and its crisis as represented in Nuri Bilge Ceylan's bitter, arrogant middle-aged character Aydın in *Winter Sleep* (2014). We will argue that such masculinities, because they are no longer part of the dominant discourse, are now dissolving. We will try to account for Aydın's own masculinity crisis with reference to the Republican masculinity project, its challenges, how it reached an impasse and led to a masculinity crisis at the macro level. Finally, we will examine how the masculinity crisis at the macro level has led some men to question the ideals set forward by the Republic and opened the way for alternative masculinities and modernities.

**Keywords:** Republican Masculinity, Fragile Masculinity, Masculinity Crisis, Nuri Bilge Ceylan, Winter Sleep

## **BOZKIRDAKİ ÇİÇEKLER: CUMHURİYET ERKEKLİĞİNİN KRİZİ**

### **ÖZET**



Cumhuriyet Türkiye'sinin ilk yıllarında, eşitlik kisvesi altında, kadınlık ve erkeklik vurgusu çok belirgindir. Kadınlar Türk modernleşme sürecinin kursal sembolleri, totemleri, olarak konumlandırılırken erkeklere de kadınların modernleşmesini sağlama, Türk milletini muasır medeniyetler seviyesine taşıma görevi verilmiştir. Cumhuriyet erkekliği rasyonalite, batıllık, Aydınlanmacılık ve elitizm ile karakterize edilebilir. Bu makalede Cumhuriyet erkekliğini ve bu erkekliğin krizini Nuri Bilge Ceylan'ın *Kış Uykusu* (2014) filmindeki orta yaşlı, kibirli Aydın karakteri üzerinden incelemeye çalışacağız. Bu tür erkekliğin, artık egemen söylemin parçası olmadığı için, çözülmeye başladığını iddia edeceğiz. Aydın'ın kişisel olarak yaşadığı erkeklik krizini, Cumhuriyet erkekliği projesine, bu projenin çıkmazlarına ve bunların makro düzeyde yarattığı erkeklik krizine değinerek açıklamaya çalışacağız. Son olarak da makro düzeyde yaşanan erkeklik krizinin nasıl bazı erkekleri Cumhuriyet ideallerini sorgulamaya ittiğini ve farklı erkeklik ve modernitelere kapı açtığını tartışacağız.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Cumhuriyet Erkekliği, Kırılgan Erkeklik, Erkeklik Krizi, Nuri Bilge Ceylan, Kış Uykusu

## 1. INTRODUCTION

As well-off former actor, current hotel owner, Aydın<sup>1</sup> and his right-hand man Hidayet are quietly driving through the scenic Cappadocia in a comfortable pick-up truck, the serene scene is disturbed by a rock smashing through the window. The attacker is the young son of his tenant, Ismail, who is in dire rent debt to Aydın. The boy has taken the beating and humiliation of his father, at the hands of the debt collectors, into his own hands. Aydın, unable to deal with the situation, steps back and watches Hidayet face the boy and his father, from a distance. However, with this incident, the illusion of harmony and comfort he seems to enjoy in his cocoon-like home also takes a symbolic crack. So does his fragile masculinity,

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<sup>1</sup> "Aydın" can be literally translated as "enlightened", meaning "well educated, intellectual" in Turkish language.



which carries the residues of what we will call 'Republican masculinities' throughout this chapter.

In Turkey, the empirical investigation of masculinity during the early Republican era has been rare. Much research has been done on what hegemonic masculinities entails in Turkey and it focuses on how male hierarchies are rationalized and women's behavior is controlled under the guise of honor and protection (Sunar and Fişek, 2005). This type of hegemonic masculinity discourse centers around the nuclear family and the role of man as the patriarch, the "father of the family". It involves being the main breadwinner and representing the family in the public sphere. However, the gendered model of the Republican era, which, under the guise of equality, emphasized masculinities and femininities in relation to modernity, is also important to examine. Especially because, the modernization process itself has led to inner contradictions in the hegemonic masculinity discourse. This model, which today is generally seen as underdeveloped, is still cherished by some men (Bolak-Boratav, Fişek, Eslen-Ziya, 2014; Alemdaroğlu and Demirtaş, 2004). In this paper, we will examine these men as carrying the residues of Republican masculinities. We will argue that such masculinities, because they are no longer part of the dominant discourse, are now dissolving.

We will start by examining the Republican Project and founding fathers' attempts to create the ideal women and men for the newly founded nation state. Our focus will be on what we refer to as Republican masculinity and its crisis as represented in Nuri Bilge Ceylan's bitter, arrogant middle-aged character Aydın in *Winter Sleep* (2014). We will try to account for Aydın's own masculinity crisis with reference to the Republican masculinity project, its challenges, how it reached an impasse and led to a masculinity crisis at the macro level.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **The Republican Project and its creation of ideal man**

The mid 1920s in Turkey marks the beginning of a new era, the establishment of the Turkish Republic and the creation of its modern discourse. Such discourse introduced 'the modern way of life' which aimed to transform the Turkish society into a modern, Western state in line with the perceived tenets of Western civilization: secularism, equality, democracy and nationalism. This nation state building can also be referred as a Republican project. The



Republican Project in this paper is defined as “tradition of political thought and a form of politico-moral order, specifically as a political religion which enshrines modernization” (Eslen-Ziya and Korkut, 2010). Modernization was equated with secularism and different aspects of westernization. While it depicted women as sacred symbols or totems of modernization, the men were prototyped after Mustafa Kemal Atatürk (the founder of the Turkish Republic).

Though the Turkish nation-building project was mainly relied on women, men also had their part in it. They had the duty of modernizing women, and civilizing the Turkish nation (Kandiyoti, 1997). This was in fact a patriarchal role where *how to's* of the new women of the Republic were written and dictated by the new Kemalist elite. Hence men were designated Pygmalions who were supposed to carve out the new Republican women. This transformation started with Kemal Atatürk in the early years of the Republic with certain reforms, including the Law on Clothing (1925). In other words “the republic not only stipulated the rights and obligations of Turkish women, but also stipulated what it expected from the Turkish woman subject in terms of her behavior and, specifically, her dress.” (Eslen-Ziya and Korkut, 2010: 317). As Kandiyoti (1997:123) puts, “[m]en gave social birth to the new woman of the Republic”. Hence as Berktaş (2003) argues women became the visible face of the modern Republic. However, their emancipation did not guarantee liberation (Kandiyoti, 1987) for women but in fact it was symbolic and had to be guided by men’s reason, capabilities and abilities.

Moreover, men themselves were not exempt from such re-construction. Although not the totems of the modernization project they also had their part to play. They were *recommended* to wear the secular uniform, the western suit, the hat and the tie. Such men were also *recommended* to have healthy bodies, to be athletic. They were also supposed to attend balls and theaters and dance western ballroom dances like the Waltz and the Polka. This marks the birth of a new form of masculinity, which in this paper we refer as Republican masculinity. This form of masculinity exemplified by Kemal Atatürk also required men to be the head of the nuclear family, marry a respectable woman and to live in a make-believe-equal marriage (Özbay, 2013: 198). Such masculinity is in fact in line with what Connell (2005) refers as hegemonic masculinity. In the following section we discuss different forms of



masculinities and later turn to Aydın in order to understand the Republican masculinity in crisis and discuss the end of an era where he exemplified hegemonic masculinity.

### **Understanding masculinities**

While the literature on masculinities focuses on the construction of masculinities the recent research started rendering the challenges to masculinity. Topics like aging (Erhart and Eslen-Ziya, 2015; Arber, Davidson, and Ginn, 2003), displaced populations (Kabachnik, Grabowska, Regulska, Mitchneck and Mayorova, 2013), as well as changing masculinities due to widowhood and health problems became an emerging research area in the field of masculinities.

Masculinity is defined within the context of gender relations and composed of symbols, practices and ideologies that are associated with men (Kimmel and Messner, 2008). The meanings and attributes that define men and masculinity changes with changing gender roles and the meanings attributed to those roles, as well as age, situations, and settings. Hence masculinity is never a fixed identity, but rather a culturally diverse, and discursively constructed set of prescriptions and practices. Inline with this, even within one society different forms of masculinities are created, constantly negotiated, reframed and even dissolved.

According to Connell (2005) masculinity is conceptualized in four major ways: hegemonic, subordinated, marginalized and complicit. Connell (2005) defines hegemonic masculinity as a dominant form of masculinity where traditional gender practices as well as the currently accepted 'answers to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy' are re-created. It is via hegemonic masculinity that aggressiveness, physical power and toughness, competitiveness, rationality, power, and heterosexuality as well as anti-femininity and the rejection of homosexuality (Kimmel 2008) come to be associated with manhood: being a 'real man'. Subordinated masculinities on the other hand included masculinities of gay men; marginalized masculinities such as racial ones; and complicit masculinities such as the ones constructed in conformity with patriarchal hegemonic order (Connell, 2005).

Masculinities are not something static; they change and affect men as they continue their lives. Such representation of an ideal around which masculinity is constructed may affect men who no longer meet the criterion of hegemonic masculinities. When this happens, they



start falling away from the hegemonic masculinities and into something new: a new form of masculinities. By looking at Aydın and his adaptation or mal-adaptation to his changing environment we wish to un-tangle the experience of men possessing Republican masculinities. In the following section by describing Aydın, his surroundings and his relationship with significant others we will highlight the causes of masculine insecurities. Later by looking at specific events and crises we will explain how the fragile masculinity of Aydın encounters masculinity crisis and how it is dissolved. Finally, in the discussion section, we will examine how the masculinity crisis at the macro level has led some men to question the ideals set forward by the Republic and opened the way for alternative masculinities and modernities.

### **3. DATA AND METHODOLOGY**

We have approached this research with ethnographic content analysis (ECA) which is used to document and understand the communication of meanings (Altheide 1987) that make up social reality. The approach involved sampling, the development of a protocol, and then constant comparisons in an attempt to clarify the themes that have emerged. We have viewed the film a total of three times over two weeks and allowed for additional reviewing of specific scenes as needed. Our notes included summaries, observations, and quotations. Observations included the context of the movie at large as well as the context of specific scenes and dialogues within the movie. We have focused not only on the dialogue but also on the actors, their placement, outfits, gestures, and other aspects of interaction--including silences.

### **4. EMPIRICAL RESULTS**

#### **Introducing Aydın, the wise man of the Republic**

Aydın (Haluk Bilginer) is a former actor who could never make it “big” in his sister Necla’s words. As expected of a man of the Republic, he is educated in Western languages and arts. He is elitist, rational, "enlightened" and head of the nuclear family (Özbay. 2013: 198). He is fond of remembering and sharing his supposedly bohemian past when he hitchhiked in Europe, the characters he played on stage, and when he was visited by the



legendary actor Omar Sheriff during a shooting. He now manages a bed and breakfast cave-hotel, Othello, in Cappadocia surrounded by the Anatolian mountains. We often see him in his dark study, sitting at his desk with his glasses on and sipping his herbal tea. What he describes as his 'hard-work' involves the never-ending research for his magnum opus, the history of Turkish theater, and writing holier-than-thou columns for a local paper, called the Voice of the Steppes (Bozkırın Sesi). Aydın's public face is that of an intellectual who pretends at approachability and intellectual expansiveness. However, in the privacy of his house he engages in petty mind games with his wife (Nihal) and sister (Necla). He always uses his middleman (Hidayet) and his lawyers to communicate with the people who he sees beneath himself socially (such as his tenants and their relative, the local imam<sup>2</sup>). On the occasions when he is forced to interact with them he feels very uncomfortable. Despite his blown up ego he is heavily tortured by his insecurities.

His insecurity and fragile masculinity becomes evident in his eagerness to share a flattering letter he receives from one of his readers with everyone he values. The reader identifies herself as an admirer of him and his writings. The letter is filled with praises like: "we are proud to have you in our town", "we read your writing in tears", "we admire your bravery", and "you are a smart man with a pure heart". Although he praises reason above all things and boasts over his own rationality on every occasion, which is a trait of the Republican man, this letter alone convinces him to make a donation. By reading the letter to his wife, sister and only male friend Suavi he tries to affirm his fragile masculinity. He also tries to use it as a tool to regain his wife's respect. That is why he invites his wife into his office to read the letter out loud. However, to his disappointment, he does not get the approval he was hoping from any of them. On the contrary, Nihal, condescendingly, tells him she is getting similar letters every other day.

Aydın being a wealthy man with no need to make a living, has free time to obsess over aesthetics and cleanliness. This leaves him criticizing the unattractive character of his tenants' poverty, and particularly in case of the imam, his muddy shoes and smelly feet. The tenant /

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<sup>2</sup> Imams are Islamic religious leaders in charge of a mosque and are employees of the Turkish state. They have an authoritative role in their community and they deliver Friday sermons, which the local men attend in large numbers. The sermon topics range from everyday life issues (the role of the children, men and women), to politics as well as spiritual matters.



imam is constructed as the other. He satisfies Aydın's sense of superiority, reaffirming his social distinction from the religious lower classes. He calls him messy and sneers upon him for not being the role model. In a conversation he has with his sister over his column for that week titled "Lack of aesthetics in Anatolian towns", Aydın utters that men of Islam should, above all, take pride in their homes. He claims that poverty should not be the justification for lack of aesthetic values. He says, "if all you have is three olives, at least arrange them nicely". At the end of the column he writes, "Islam is first and foremost, the religion of high culture". In line with the secular Turkish State's perspective during the early years of the Republic, Aydın believes that the imam and the sermons he gives on Fridays should be a tool to educate and elevate the community. That's why he is extremely disappointed of the imam's aesthetic appearance and his way of living. For instance, he never considers the fact that poverty could be the main reason for such living. In fact, when Aydın finds out he has to walk miles to reach his house, Aydın is perplexed.

The way Aydın deals with his disappointment of the imam reveals three important aspects of his character, which the film develops around. First, he is completely disconnected from his surroundings and he does not refrain from jumping to conclusions from specs of evidence he has. For instance, when he sees the muddy shoes of the imam, he thinks it is caused by a lack of character. Second, as criticized by his sister and his wife, he always swims in the safe waters. This is evident in his column on Islam where he carefully ends it by stating that Islam is the religion of high culture. Lastly, he never directly communicates with people who he sees beneath himself. He uses his column to deliver his message, like the way he uses Hidayet and his lawyers to talk to his tenants.

Aside from endorsing the Republican distinction between the educated elite and religious lower classes Aydın also remains to be the head of the household under the disguise of gender equality. As the "man of the household" he manages the estate he and his sister have inherited. In a conversation with his her he utters that she won't be able to find a husband with such a sharp-tongue He delivers similar sexist when he happens to see his tenants' garden: "they have completely ruined the place, it's hard to believe there is a woman in the house".. Such sexist attitude is also evident in his relationship with his wife who is considerably younger than Aydın. During an argument, when Nihal mentions leaving, and getting a job Aydın laughs at her sarcastically and says, "leave whenever you like, nobody is





holding you back, get a job with a minimum wage, work from nine till six and if you have time left to save the world, then do so". In all these conversations it is evident that he endorses the gendered division of labor. He repeatedly calls his wife "my precious" (iki gözüm) implying that she is valuable to him but also under constant need of protection. This becomes more evident when he lectures her on finances and fundraising. He says, in a condescending way, he has to help her; in fact he will have to postpone his trip to Istanbul until he sorts out the financial records of her charity organization. He says she is gullible and inexperienced and easy prey for men who want to take advantage of her money and social status. He does all these criticisms under the protection of their family name and honor. He says he can replace the money she might lose but it is the name of their family that he is worried about. This can be read as a concern over gender politics in a primarily religious and conservative society.

His domination over her becomes more evident during the symbolic act when he takes her financial files from her desk while she cries, "take the last thing that I am left with". He calls the files "a pile" and claims that he will put them in order. This scene is highly telling of the hierarchical relationship they have under the guise of equality. This we find is similar to the roles set to women and men under the Turkish Republican Project. The reforms that replaced the old Ottoman *Shari'a* codes abolished Islamic laws. Women gained the right to vote and to be elected. The Republic gave the rights and obligations to Turkish women, but also placed expectations on their behavior and, her appearance. As Arat (1994) suggests, Turkish women were treated not as equal partners of men but instead as symbols of modernization and westernization, a key to becoming European. We can also observe this in Aydın's relationship with his wife. We argue that Aydın positions himself as a wise man, who knows the ways of life and claims the right to dictate and lecture the women in his life. Interestingly, though he positions himself superior to men who belong to a different social class he delivers his wisdom via middlemen. However, he never lectures men with equal rank, such as his friend Suavi. Not surprisingly, challenges to his wisdom and authority by two women in his life and by his tenant's little son leads to Aydın's masculinity crisis.

### **The fragile masculinity and its crisis**

During the conversation, which eventually leads to the destruction of their relationship with her sister, Necla admits that he has been a disappointment. She says, "we were all your



admirers, we believed you would be a famous actor and do important work, I guess we set up the bar too high”. After this general call down, Necla also criticizes his work that he highly values. She calls his writings cheesy, superficial and claims that they are all an attempt to be loved and approved by his readers. Aydın does not take her “you are a total failure” message well. Because his unbearable masculine egotistic identity mainly is build upon his past, which he cherishes and of his writings, he snaps back at her. Such need of approval from his significant others and his readers, we argue, arise from affirmation of masculinity. Such fragile masculinity, which started with the crack on his car window, later continues with the remarks of his sister and his wife. During an argument, Nihal calls him selfish, resentful and misanthropic. She claims that, he crashes people down with his so-called virtues. Though he responds to these criticisms with his sarcastic laughter, we later observe that they open cracks in his masculine identity. This is evident in his failed attempt to leave for Istanbul where he crashes at his only male friend Suavi’s farmhouse. There he confronts his wife’s friend, an elementary school teacher, Levent and both get drunk heavily. There, too, he is attacked, this time for being a selfish rich man and not opening his hotel to earthquake victims. Levent, in reaction to Aydın's evasive excuses quotes a passage from Richard III<sup>3</sup>, “Conscience is but a word that cowards use, devised at first to keep the strong in awe”. Aydın responds by letting go, loosing control, over-drinking and throwing up-- maybe for the first time. This could represent his acceptance of de-masculinization, which later will become more evident in his inner speech to his wife.

At the wake of the morning we see the three of them hunting on snow. There he shoots a rabbit and takes it home to his wife. Later we see him outside his own house, holding the rabbit in his hand and delivering an inner monologue. There he says he could not leave, maybe because he got old, or because he became a different man. He begs her not to let him go but take him as her servant, as her slave. This can be read as a symbolic act of unloading of the burden of Republican masculinity placed on his shoulders. When he asks her to let them continue with their life, the way she chooses it to be, he means he is no longer the head of the household, and would no longer be dominating over her territory. His utterance of “forgive me” implies that his masculinity crisis is dissolving. This, in fact, is supported by the

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<sup>3</sup> Act 5, Scene 3



following scene where he sits down to write the first words of his book. This is important because it implies that he no longer needs the approval of his readers to establish his masculinity. We define such act as liberation from the burdens of Republican masculinity.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Aydın a wealthy land and hotel owner with his unbearable masculine egotism gets off ordering people working for him around and flexing fragile masculinity while toadying up to foreign tourists, and writing superficial self-aggrandizing weekly column in the largely insignificant local paper. His fragile masculinity, which is takes the first blow with the crack on his car window, later cracks down with Necla's comments at her brother's so-called "work" and his way of life. She criticizes him on the grounds that deriving a sense of meaning from such petty work can only be the result of a great self-deception. She questions his right to write about religion, charitable giving, spirituality and politics. He hits the ground bottom after he receives similar remarks from his wife.

In this paper, we argued that this in fact could be interpreted as a blessing in disguise. He gets his sister off his back both metaphorically and literally, and unloads his so-called responsibilities towards his wife as the head of the household. We defined it as a symbolic act of unloading of the burden of Republican masculinity placed on his shoulders. We argue that because the men were unable to fully internalize the abstract project that was proposed within the ideals of westernization, Republican modernization did not go beyond creating men with boosted but fragile egos. These men claimed to be modern by simply rejecting the traditional way of living and values. This in return made the boundaries very vulnerable. This dilemma by creating a crisis of masculinity led some men to question the ideals set forward by the Republic and opened the way for alternative modernities. Hence the Republican western model of manhood is no longer seen to be popular and dominant. According Özbay (2013) this kind of masculinity which is characterized by rationality, enlightenment and elitism is no longer valid. As a result, while some men who want to hold on to these ideals might feel as outsiders, outcasts, longing for the past Republican era, men like Aydın by rejecting such masculinity construction could break away.

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