

Construction of a Female Director's Cinematic Language: The Case of *Motherland* (2015)

Bir Kadın Yönetmene Ait Sinemasal Dilin İnşası:
Ana Yurdu (2015) Örneği

Beril UĞUZ^{ID}

Abstract

Feminist film theory critiques classical cinema for positioning women as objects of the male gaze and questions whether the cinematic language of female directors should diverge from the conventions of classical cinema. Studies that address female directors' cinematic language and the construction of the female gaze remain relatively limited in the literature. This study aims to reveal how the female perspective and discourse are constructed in visual, auditory, narrative, and thematic elements in the cinematic language of female directors. In this context, after discussing movements diverging from classical cinema and feminist film literature, Senem Tüzen's *Motherland* (2015) is selected through a purposeful criterion sampling method as a case from Turkish women's cinema. The film was analyzed through filmic narrative analysis, encompassing cinematography, mise-en-scène, narrative structure, and thematic elements to identify departures from traditional cinema. Findings indicate that long takes, reaction shots, medium and wide shots, close-ups, selective focus, and montage sequences were used to portray the female character's experiences from her perspective. Mise-en-scène elements, including lighting, sound, set design, space, costume, and acting, contributed to conveying her emotions. The narrative structure includes an open ending, a protagonist with an unclear goal, alienation effects, and themes such as mother-daughter relationships and female solidarity, all of which deviate from classical cinema.

Keywords: Feminist Film Theory, Women's Cinematic Language, Turkish Cinema, Senem Tüzen, Motherland

* Dr. Lec., Başkent University, Faculty of Fine Arts, Department of Cartoon and Animation, Ankara, Türkiye, E-mail: beriluguz@gmail.com, ORCID: 0000-0001-5928-1343

How to cite this article/Atf için (APA 7): Uğuz, B. (2025). Construction of a female director's cinematic language: The case of *Motherland* (2015). *Turkish Review of Communication Studies*, 48, 22-40. <https://doi.org/10.17829/turcom.1609592>

Makale Geçmişi / Article History

Gönderim / Received: 03.01.2025 **Düzeltilme / Revised:** 21.05.2025 **Kabul / Accepted:** 23.07.2025



Öz

Feminist film kuramı, klasik sinemayı kadınları erkek bakışının nesnesi olarak konumlandırmakla eleştirir ve kadın yönetmenlerin sinema dilinin klasik sinema kodlarından farklı olup olmaması gerektiğini tartışır. Kadın yönetmenlerin sinemasal dili ile kadın bakışının inşasını ele alan çalışmalar alanyazında görece sınırlı kalmaktadır. Bu çalışma kadın yönetmene ait sinemasal dilde kadın bakış açısı ve söyleminin görsel, işitsel, anlatsal ve tematik unsurlar açısından nasıl inşa edildiğini ortaya koymayı amaçlamaktadır. Bu bağlamda öncelikle klasik sinemadan farklılaşan sinema akımları ile feminist sinema literatürüne yer verilmiş, ardından amaçlı ölçüt örnekleme yöntemi kullanılarak, Türk sineması kadın yönetmenlerinden Senem Tüzen'in *Ana Yurdu* (2015) filmi incelenmek üzere seçilmiştir. Film, sinematografi, mizansen, anlatı yapısı ve tematik analizi bütünsel olarak içeren filmsel anlatı analizi yöntemi ile analiz edilmiş ve geleneksel sinemadan farklılaşan unsurlar tespit edilmiştir. Bulgulara göre, kadın karakterin yaşadığı deneyimleri onun bakış açısından göstermek için uzun plan, tepki planı, orta ve geniş planlar, yakın plan, seçmeli netlik, montaj sekans gibi sinematografik öğeler kullanılmıştır. Karakterin duygularını seyirciye hissettiren aydınlatma, ses, dekor, mekân, kostüm ve oyunculuk gibi mizansen öğeleri gözlenmiştir. Anlatı yapısında filmin belirgin bir sonu olmaması, ana karakterin hedefinin bulanıklaşması, seyirciyi yabancılaştıran öğelerin varlığı ile anne kız ilişkileri ve kadınlar arası dayanışma gibi konuların ele alınması filmi klasik filmsel anlatı dilinden uzaklaştırmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Feminist Film Kuramı, Kadının Sinemasal Dili, Türk Sineması, Senem Tüzen, Ana Yurdu

Introduction

Unlike other feminist approaches, post-structuralist French feminism focuses on language, as both the ultimate tool of women's oppression and a potential means for subversion (Weil, 2006, p. 153). The women's language approach, pioneered by French feminists (Cixous et al., 1976; Irigaray, 1985; Kristeva, 1977), claims the existence of differences in women's language and discourse, while also encouraging the construction of a different language. When we speak of women's language, it does not only bring to mind literature or the field of writing. Women's language refers to women's expression of their own experiences through various means of communication, encompassing all areas of discourse (Cixous et al., 1976, p. 880), including art and cinema. From the perspective of cinema, a female writer becomes a female director, and the feminine writing or women's language becomes cinematic feminine writing or women's cinematic language.

The debates of women's different languages also emerge within the feminist cinema field. In women's language approach, it is believed that women in the field of literature should create a different or alternative language. Similarly, in the field of feminist cinema, it is stated that women directors should develop a language that differs from traditional cinematic codes. Feminist film theorists Johnston (1973) and Mulvey (1975) advocated a counter or alternative cinema language that differs from mainstream cinematic codes. An examination of films by female directors from various national cinemas including Hollywood, reveals that these films distinguish themselves and function as a counterpoint to Hollywood's dominant values in both narrative and stylistic language, subvert the norms of classical cinema and its dominant patriarchal gaze (Cabrera Campoy, 2017, p. 455; Gürkan & Ozan, 2015, p. 88; Jenkins, 2021, pp. 13–14; Pop, 2011, p. 23; Stewart, 2015, p. 205).

A substantial body of work in Turkish cinema demonstrates that the cinematic language of women directors diverges from classical forms and constitutes a counter cinema. In contemporary Turkish cinema, particularly since the 2000s, several pioneering women directors have contributed to the construction of female narratives and feminine discourse, challenging conventional cinematic representations. Among them, Yeşim Ustaoglu and Tomris Giritlioğlu stand out for a distinctive female gaze by presenting alternative women's subjectivities (Başçı, 2015, p. 167). Pelin Esmer, Zeynep Dadak, and Merve Kayan subvert the classical narrative's voyeuristic gaze and have developed a counter-cinematic language (Gürkan & Biga, 2023, p. 2411). İlksen Başarır foregrounds women as subjective and independent individuals rather than symbolic figures (Aslan, 2019, p. 213), while Çiğdem Vitrinel deconstructs gendered discourse and the male-dominated gaze by presenting women's experiences from a female perspective (Zengin, 2017, p. 66). Other notable women filmmakers shaping female narratives and feminist practices in Turkish cinema include Emine Emel Balcı, Deniz Gamze Ergüven, Ahu Öztürk, Esra Saydam, and Nisan Dağ (Gürkan & Biga, 2023, p. 2411).

This study aims to reveal how the language of women directors is manifested and differs from that of traditional cinema, and how the female gaze is created formally in terms of visual, auditory, and narrative elements. To this end, the study employed the purposeful criterion sampling method to select data sources based on predefined criteria, and *Motherland (Ana Yurdu, 2015)*, by Turkish woman director Senem Tüzen, was chosen as the film that most effectively fulfilled the requirements set for the study. The methodology for examining the elements that reveal women's cinematic language in the movie is filmic narrative analysis, which encompasses both narrative and style. From this perspective, *Motherland* is analyzed in terms of its cinematography, mise-en-scène, editing, and narrative structure features, all of which include visual, auditory, and narrative elements, as well as in terms of their alignments with the framework of feminist film theory, with the women's language approach.

Film Language, Narrative and Feminist Cinema: Challenging Classical Conventions

Classical Hollywood narrative follows a structured progression that has a dominant style and codes. The model is characterized by goal-oriented protagonists whose desires drive the plot, often encountering obstacles that create conflict embodied by antagonists, and clear spatial and temporal relations that drive towards resolution, continuity, presenting the action objectively, a clear conclusion, identification with characters and enjoyment expectation of the audiences (Bordwell et al., 2017, pp. 97–99; Dubois, 2015, p. 142; Yeşilyurt, 2024, pp. 268–269) all of which are supported by cinematography and mise-en-scène tools such as short shot durations, the shot-reverse shot technique which supports continuity editing, and the close-ups are the prominently used techniques to reinforce the effects of suture and identification in classical style (Ekinci, 2018, p. 77; Fischer, 1989, p. 23).

Interpreting classical cinema as a reflection of the United States' dominant ideology, various cinematic movements have emerged criticizing the continuity techniques of classical cinema (Fenghi, 2025, pp. 21, 41). Wollen (2009, p. 418) discusses the existence of a counter-cinema and

identifies its characteristics: estrangement; unsettling the audience; prioritizing reality; narrative intransitivity; openness and ambiguous endings; a multiplicity of heterogeneous diegetic worlds, and the deliberate foregrounding of the filmmaking process to make the audience aware that they are watching a film. New cinematic practices prioritize in-depth presentation of the characters which results in a loosening of the goal oriented progression; a high dose of subjective realism that attempts to visualize the mental and emotional states; heightened sense of realism; nonlinearity and narrative instability; a high degree of self-reflexivity, rebellious positions and active participation from the spectator (Nelmes, 2012, pp. 84–86; Sorolla-Romero, 2018, pp. 32–33; Thanouli, 2006, pp. 185–188). Contemporary cinema often features slow and static compositions, long takes, techniques such as jump cuts and discontinuity, minimalist mise-en-scène, a portrayal of existential doubt and alienation, and an avoidance of the shot/reverse shot structure (Bordwell et al., 2017, pp. 255–256; Finn, 2023, p. 150).

Mainstream cinema has also been widely critiqued by feminist film theory for its patriarchal narrative and stylistic codes. Mulvey's assertion that classical cinema positions women as objects of the male gaze has been highly influential in shaping feminist film theory (Barrowman, 2025, p. 201). Cabrera Campoy (2017, p. 447) highlights how women are reduced to fixed stereotypes and subordinate roles. In response, theorists such as Mulvey and Johnston called for a counter or alternative cinema, whereas others like E. Ann Kaplan, Annette Kuhn, Mary Ann Doane, and Alison Butler proposed subverting dominant forms from within (Barrowman, 2025, p. 206; Stewart, 2015, p. 209). According to Gürkan and Ozan (2015, p. 88), feminist cinema is a counter cinema, and its opposition comes from its ideology against the patriarchal system.

Both in Hollywood (Jenkins, 2021, pp. 13–14) and world cinema, women's narratives often serve as a counterpoint to dominant cinematic values. Stewart (2015, pp. 206–209) highlights in her analysis of the female gaze in Argentine art cinema how female director Lucrecia Martel disrupts linear narrative structure and employs distancing techniques to prevent identification, also favoring slow and realist aesthetics. Spanish female filmmaker Iciar Bollain's films, as noted by Cabrera Campoy (2017, pp. 454–455), break with the passivity of women as objects. In Chinese cinema, Hu (2022, pp. 310, 321) notes that women directors challenge traditional rural female stereotypes and portray women as active agents who resist patriarchal norms and engage with the market economy. Similarly, in New Romanian cinema, Pop (2011, p. 23) emphasizes representations of women seeking independence and exploring female subjectivity. In African cinema, women directors foreground female perspectives and lived experiences, portraying women as powerful agents of cultural transformation (Petty, 2012, p. 153).

In films by women directors throughout the world, recurring themes include motherhood, relationships between mothers, daughters, and sisters, autobiographical details, and personal stories often situated in domestic or intimate settings (French, 2021, pp. 65–66; Malone, 2018; Pop, 2011, p. 24; Stewart, 2015, p. 214; Zaatari & Sfeir, 1999, p. 19). Their cinematic language often emphasizes length of the shot, long takes, relaxed rhythms, motionless camera, use of space, wide-angle shots, distancing the subject with the use of zoom out or fluid camera movements (Fernández Escareño, 1996, p. 175;

French, 2021, p. 58; Petty, 2012, pp. 147–153; Rashkin, 2001, p. 97). Additionally, women's feelings and emotions are prioritized over actions (Telfer, 2018; TIFF Originals, 2016; Uğuz, 2022).

Whether they explicitly engage in feminist activism (Fabian, 2018) or do not identify as feminists (Cabrera Campoy, 2017, p. 446; Mantziari, 2022, p. 165), women directors have consistently struggled to gain visibility in male-dominated, masculinized national film industries as seen in the cases of Spanish, Scandinavian, and New Romanian cinema (Mantziari, 2022, p. 173; Oroz & Binimelis, 2020, p. 104; Pop, 2011, p. 22). Since the 2000s, their efforts—often through independent production companies—have increased their presence, particularly in international festivals and in art cinema, short films, independent productions, and documentaries (Oroz & Binimelis, 2020, pp. 113–114; Pop, 2011, p. 22). Turkish cinema likewise reflects these struggles and gains, with a significant rise in women's film production since the 2000s (Tanrıöver, 2016, p. 333).

In Turkish cinema, only a few directors, such as Pelin Esmer, Merve Kayan, and Zeynep Dadak, have successfully distanced themselves from the mainstream model with active and independent female characters (Gürkan & Biga, 2023, p. 2411). Other notable women directors questioning dominant narratives of the male gaze by breaking continuity and creating alternative female subjectivities include Belmin Söylemez (Özdemir, 2018, p. 160), Azra Deniz Okyay (Cantaş, 2023, p. 119), Yeşim Ustaoglu and Tomris Giritlioğlu (Başçı, 2015, p. 167), Çiğdem Vitrinel (Zengin, 2017, p. 66), and İlksen Başarır (Aslan, 2019, p. 213), among others.

Senem Tüzen, another prominent woman director in Turkish cinema, has been frequently studied in academic works, particularly through her film *Motherland* (2015), due to her development of an alternative cinematic discourse. Velioglu Metin (2019) analyzes the film through Foucault's concept of power, while Büyükgöze (2017) examines it in terms of spatial relations. Ataman (2017), Yaşartürk (2023), Sönmez (2019), and Öztürk (2018) focus on the unresolved mother-daughter relationship and the subversion of motherhood stereotypes in the film. Most studies on *Motherland*, unlike this paper, offer theoretical textual analyses. Only Aytas and Koca (2019) address the film's cinematography within a minimalist cinema framework; however, they do not link it to feminist cinema or feminine language.

Although most studies in both national and international literature focus on women directors' films through themes, stereotypes, and cultural codes, there is a notable lack of detailed analysis on their cinematic language and the construction of the female gaze. In this regard, the study offers a significant and original contribution to literature by shifting the focus to the technical and stylistic dimensions of women's cinematic language, emphasizing visual, auditory, and narrative elements as expressions of female subjectivity and perspective.

Aim and Method

Aim

This study aims to explore how women's cinematic language might be possible and poses the following research questions (RQs):

RQ1: How do women directors' film language and female perspective differ from traditional cinema?

RQ2: How do women directors construct the female perspective, language, and discourse in their films?

RQ3: How is women's cinematic language created formally in terms of visual, auditory, and narrative elements?

Since the women's language approach inherently questions traditional language, and this study is based on this approach, it is assumed that the women's cinematic language differs from the conventional cinema approach. Based on this assumption, the study examines the elements within the cinematic language of women directors that diverge from mainstream cinema. Rather than grounding the analysis in the concept of (feminist) counter-cinema, which stands in direct opposition to mainstream cinema, the study instead references an independent cinema perspective—one that critiques and differentiates from mainstream codes. It is suggested that the women's cinematic language aligns closely with this independent cinema concept because independent cinema can be understood as a form of cinema that, while partially engaging with mainstream conventions, seeks to transform them by focusing on social and political issues, and is free from commercial concerns (Tzioumakis, 2011, pp. 107, 125).

Method

Data Collection and Sample Selection

The study employs the “purposeful criterion sampling method”, a qualitative research approach that selects data sources based on predefined criteria. In criterion sampling, the aim is to include cases that meet the criteria determined by the researcher in the study (Patton, 2002, p. 238). For data collection, firstly, a list of 34 films was initially compiled from a total of 93 films directed by women in Turkish cinema, as recorded in the film archive of Antrakt cinema newspaper (AntraktSinema, n.d.), which were released in cinemas during the recent period (2010–2020) and are considered to meet at least one of the “first set of criteria” assumed to be indicative of a women's cinematic language: having a female protagonist, focusing on the female perspective, addressing women's problems, experiences and subjectivities, emphasizing women's desires and emancipation, questioning women's roles in society, and/or diverging from conventional cinematic conventions.

To select a film as a sample for detailed analysis from this list, “second set of criteria” were established based on the introduction and literature review sections: The film should diverge from conventional cinematic codes, have a low-budget and be free from commercial concerns; say or bring something new in narrative or cinematic terms; make visible the challenges women face in society; focus on a specific female experience; portray women from a different perspective; prioritize the emotions and viewpoints of the female characters; center on themes of motherhood and childbirth from a female perspective or explore the mother-daughter relationship or the relations

between women through the lens of female subjectivity. The female character should not conform to patriarchal norms but instead exhibit behaviors that challenge them, possess an identity beyond stereotypes, and be represented as a subject rather than an object. The narrative should emphasize her empowerment or liberation, highlighting her desires, goals, decisions, and actions. She must be an agent of her own story, guided by her intuition, engaged in a search for self-definition and positioning, and demonstrate resilience in her struggle for life. Furthermore, she should be portrayed as a strong and independent role model, expressing herself through her profession.

Motherland (Ana Yurdu, 2015) by Turkish woman director Senem Tüzen, was determined as the film that most effectively fulfills the criteria set for the study, in multiple ways, and was chosen as the focal point of analysis to explore the research questions in detail. The sampling method was applied not only to the films themselves but also to the cinematic languages of their directors. Accordingly, Senem Tüzen was chosen as the most fitting director, as her cinematic language in *Motherland* aligns most closely with the predefined criteria. Senem Tüzen is a Turkish director, producer, and screenwriter who explores women's issues from a female perspective with a subjective cinematic language. She has received numerous awards at international film festivals. Across leading global film festivals, Tüzen has won a total of 14 awards and received 13 nominations, including prestigious honors such as the Emmy Award, the FIPRESCI (International Federation of Film Critics) Prize, the NETPAC (Network for the Promotion of Asia Pacific Cinema) Award, and the UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) Award (IMDb, n.d.), with her two films *Motherland* (Tüzen, 2015) and *Eat Your Catfish* (Tüzen et al., 2021) co-directed with Adam Isenberg and Noah Amir Arjomand. Furthermore, even though the best director awards of the best film festivals both in Türkiye and worldwide are, unfortunately, rarely given to women directors, Senem Tüzen became the first and only woman director to receive the "SIYAD Turkish Film Critics Association Best Director Award" in Türkiye since the 1970s with her film *Motherland* in 2016 (Wikipedia, n.d.). In these contexts, Senem Tüzen is seen as a director who fulfills the criteria determined to reveal the characteristics of a woman director's cinematic language.

Data Analysis

The methodology to examine the elements that reveal the women's cinematic language in the film is "filmic narrative analysis". As defined by Bordwell (1985, pp. 50–53), filmic narration is "the process whereby the film's syuzhet and style interact in the course of cueing and channeling the spectator's construction of the fabula". According to him, we can analyze the film narrative as consisting of two systems: syuzhet and style. Syuzhet provides the actual representation of the story or fabula, embodying the film as a dramaturgical process, including narrative logic, causality, time, and space, which consist of particular events such as actions, scenes, and turning points. From his perspective, narration also includes stylistic processes that embody the film as a technical process. Style names the film's systematic use of cinematic devices, a steady flow of cinematic techniques– mis-en-scene, cinematography, editing, and sound. From this perspective, the film *Motherland* is analyzed in terms of its cinematography, mise-en-scène, editing, and narrative structure features, all of which include visual, auditory, and narrative elements, as well as in terms of their alignments with the framework of feminist film theory, with the

women's language approach. The analysis focuses on how the preferred visual, auditory, and narrative elements carry meanings in terms of women's perspective and women's language, as well as how these elements differ from mainstream cinematic codes.

Findings and Discussion

Cinematographical Tools Revealing The Woman Character's Perspective

An overview of *Motherland's* narrative focuses on Nesrin (Esra Bezen Bilgin), the female protagonist who quits her job in Istanbul following a painful divorce, and retreats to her deceased grandmother's village house in Anatolia to work on her first novel. Despite Nesrin's desire for solitude, her mother, Halise (Nihal Koldaş), unexpectedly appears, leading to Nesrin's discontent. In analyzing the film's cinematography, it is noteworthy that director Senem Tüzen places a strong focus on Nesrin's face, dedicating extended durations to highlight her reactions, emotions, and perspective through the use of long takes, rack focus, and reaction shot techniques. In the scene where Nesrin and her mother, Halise, sit side by side in the living room, Halise reproaches Nesrin for coming home late. In the continuous shot of Halise speaking, the focus shifts from Halise to Nesrin using the racking focus technique. Nesrin lowers her head, and her sharply focused image remains for an extended period, allowing us to closely observe her reaction, which reveals profound helplessness in response to her mother's words.

In another scene, Halise, seated on the stairs, takes Nesrin's hand and silently begins to pray instead of responding to her words. Nesrin is bewildered by her mother's action, and her reaction is captured in a medium shot where only she is in sharp focus, not her mother. Nesrin's anxious eyes and rapid breathing reveal her inner turmoil as she exclaims: "What are you doing, Mom!" (Tüzen, 2015, 31:52). In the continuation of the scene, as Halise continues to criticize her daughter, a mixture of astonishment, anger, and sadness becomes visible on Nesrin's face. Her sharp image persists for a 30-second duration, while Halise's is shown for only 15 seconds, highlighting the emphasis placed on Nesrin's emotional state over her mother's. In another scene, presented in a continuous two-minute shot, only Nesrin remains visible after Halise exits the frame, saying: "If only we had left this house before anything happened to us" (Tüzen, 2015, 37:30). Throughout their two-minute dialogue, the camera lingers solely on Nesrin's unenthusiastic reactions to her mother. This extended shot highlights her facial expressions, reactions, and body language, giving the sense that her emotions and perspective are prioritized.

In the scene viewed through the bedroom window, Halise is visible only for a few seconds, while the remaining 30 seconds of the uninterrupted shot focus on Nesrin. The following three-minute-and-ten-second shot in the bedroom continues to center on Nesrin as she listens and responds to Halise. For one minute and 15 seconds, without cuts, the camera remains fixed on her as she recounts her novel's plot, a psychiatrist who strangles her own child to be with her lover in a mental hospital. The story stirs Halise's anxieties about her daughter. The final shot of the bedroom scene is a long take of over two and a half minutes, during which Halise's harsh

judgment—branding Nesrin a sinner for having an abortion—registers on Nesrin’s still and expressionless face in close-up. Notably, Nesrin’s sustained reactions take precedence over the classical shot/reverse-shot structure. Across the entire bedroom sequence, Nesrin remains the only character on screen for over seven minutes, while Halise appears for roughly two. The use of space in the film, with the frequent presence of wide and medium shots, also subtly suggests the influence of a female director behind the camera.

As exemplified in *Motherland*, many scholars note that women directors often center their narratives on female experiences and devote significant screen time to exploring them. According to French (2021, p. 58), among the standard features of female directors are the length of the shot and the use of space. Fernández Escareño (1996, p. 175) while analyzing Marisa Sistach’s *Anna’s Steps* (Sistach, 1991), notes that the film possesses qualities that are reminiscent of feminist director Chantal Akerman’s innovative filmmaking style: “a relaxed rhythm created by the use of long takes in which little apparently happens or in which the entirety of a conversation or action takes place within a single shot”. Rashkin (2001, p. 97) states that Chantal Akerman’s films employ wide-angle shots captured with a motionless camera, depicting women engaging in their daily activities in scenes of prolonged duration. Her film *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* is “a picture of female experience, of duration, perception, events, relationships, and silences” (De Lauretis, 1985, p. 159).

In an interview, Tüzen stated that she initially aimed for objectivity between the characters but ultimately chose to present the story from Nesrin’s perspective, shaped by her own relationship with her mother (Bozdemir, 2016). This choice is reflected in the film’s cinematography and autobiographical tone. As French (2021, pp. 65–66) and Zaatari and Sfeir (1999, p. 19) have noted, films created by women often share common characteristics, such as a focus on autobiographical touches, personal narratives set within domestic or private settings, particularly within the family dynamic. In *Motherland*, montage sequences are also used to convey Nesrin’s emotional state. In one scene, she loses focus after her mother’s arrival, portrayed through fragmented shots of her scribbling, fidgeting with a pencil, and playing with her lips and hair—gestures that indicate growing boredom and distraction. In another scene, she tries to refocus on writing after briefly browsing Facebook. She opens her novel draft but struggles to concentrate, becoming increasingly frustrated. In a sudden outburst, she slaps and insults herself, exposing internalized violence and oppression. Seeking relief, she turns to masturbation, tapping into her sexual pleasure. Through these montage sequences, Tüzen delves into the character’s inner world, allowing the audience to follow Nesrin’s emotional journey and psychological struggles. This approach aligns with the concept of the female gaze in cinema, which prioritizes the subject’s emotional experience over the male gaze’s tendency toward control and objectification (Telfer, 2018).

Mise-en-scène Tools Centering The Female Character’s Emotions and Feelings

Regarding mise-en-scène tools, it is evident that director Tüzen employs them to make the audience viscerally feel what Nesrin is experiencing. One of the mise-en-scène tools in which the

dominant feeling of the female character is felt most is lighting. The differences in the use of bright or dark colors are observed, especially when Nesrin experiences negative moods, such as being tense, restless, anxious, helpless, gloomy, or angry. While Nesrin is usually a confident, determined, and positive person, she is surrounded by a negativity that starts with her mother's arrival in the village. Halise, grieving the loss of her mother, is unhappy in her marriage, complains that her children are not there by her side enough, and feels trapped by the regret of not having lived her own life. This combination of unhappiness and regret manifests as a sense of stuckness and is strengthened by dark scenes in film.

The opening scene, where Nesrin enters the village, takes place on a dark night, which can be interpreted as a foreshadowing of the film's gloom. Velioglu Metin (2019, pp. 482, 490–491) reads two light sources illuminating women in the opening scene in terms of Foucault's panopticon, which refers to the masculine eye. According to her, *mise-en-scène* tools such as lighting, space, setting, and costumes support the claustrophobic content of the film. Darkness dominates many scenes. The moment when a peasant woman sitting on the street calls Nesrin over and prays by spitting in her hand; the scenes where Nesrin confronts her mother, and the scene where Halise cries non-stop emerge at night. The street lamp, the candle the mother holds and the lantern of Nesrin's phone are the insufficient light sources. This pervasive gloom supports Nesrin and Halise's sense of being stuck.

In addition to the lighting, the use of sound and setting as other *mise-en-scène* tools also foregrounds the dominant feelings of the female character. The main sound element in *Motherland* is the Azan, the prayer call of Muslims. The Azan reinforces Nesrin's feeling of stuckness as a result of her mother's use of religion as a tool of pressure. As a recurring motif, Azan is used as a continuity element and sound bridge between scenes. Azan is also the trailer music of the movie. According to the writers (Akbulut, 2020, p. 241; Aytas & Koca, 2019, pp. 51–54), the absence of non-diegetic music or sound effects, the scarcity of dialogue, tranquil acting and local actors, dark claustrophobic spaces, visual plainness, the use of long takes, close-ups and static shots, as well as the conflict between mother and daughter, all bring *Motherland* closer to minimalist cinema.

The fact that religion is used as a tool of oppression in the film is accompanied by the minaret of the mosque, which appears frequently in the *mise-en-scène* as a symbol of Nesrin's stuckness. This gloomy feeling that Nesrin experiences increases with the psychological violence her mother, Halise, applies to her by using religious rules as an excuse. All elements symbolizing religion in the film appear in different forms in editing and *mise-en-scène*, emphasizing this feeling. In one scene where Halise stands on the balcony, she and the mosque's minaret are seen. After she moves aside, her body comes in front of and covers the minaret image. She stands and thinks on that point while she seems as a substitute and bearer of religion. The symbolizing image of the minaret is also used in editing as a continuity element that connects different scenes. The minaret appears with varying scales of shooting, is frequently displayed at various times of the day and seasonal weather changes such as snow and fog in the village.

It is also observed that the costume points to the qualities and feelings of the woman character. Nesrin's costume is a mixture of village and city clothes. She, by adapting to the village clothes, wears a shalwar, but she does not tie a cheesecloth on her head like other village women; her hair is long and mostly loose. She walks about outdoors in a short leather jacket that she wears over a shalwar. Although she wears unobtrusive colors and prefers to wear authentic shalwar, with her leather jacket, shawl, loose hair, and gait, it is understood that she is not one of the other village women. Nesrin's costume emphasizes her free and self-confident as well as her rebellious side. However, mother Halise is completely in tune with the masculine conservative structure of the village. The contrasts in the costumes serve as an indication of the film's position between modernity and tradition. Akbulut (2020, p. 240) states that *Motherland* is interpreted as an expression of contemporary Türkiye, caught between the dualities of modern/traditional, Western/Eastern, developed/undeveloped, civilized/illiterate, and urban/rural.

In one of the scenes, Nesrin's underwear is seen on the hanger on the balcony. The image of the underwear's reflection is also seen in the mirror on the balcony wall. When Halise notices Nesrin's underwear on the clothesline, she immediately takes it off the hanger. In this village where masculinity is dominant, all clues reminding women of their sexuality should be enveloped. It is understood that Halise adapts to the masculine and conservative structure of the village and is a character compatible with the patriarchy. According to Yaşartürk (2023, p. 149), this underwear serves as a representation of the value conflicts between Nesrin and Halise. In *Motherland*, the pastoral atmosphere created by the medium and wide shots of an Anatolian village, along with the use of more than 50 frame-within-a-frame compositions, achieved through elements such as doors and windows in the visual arrangement, gives the film a distinctive cinematic style, form, and poetic quality. Büyükgöze (2017, p. 21), interprets the frequent use of frame-within-a-frame compositions—primarily centering on Nesrin—as a reflection of the spatial manifestations of the restrictions and oppression she has internalized.

At the 2016 Toronto International Film Festival, director and writer Joey Soloway (TIFF Originals, 2016) discussed the female gaze in cinema, describing it as a way to center emotional and bodily experiences through a female perspective. She noted that the female author invests in feeling, prioritizing emotion over action: "I can tell a woman directed this because I feel held by something that is invested in my feeling, in my body". She calls this "the feeling seeing", which involves using the frame and camera to invoke a feeling of in-feeling, rather than looking at the character, to make the audience feel what the characters are experiencing.

Narrative and Thematic Tools That Challenge Traditional Cinema

Motherland seems to depart from traditional cinematic conventions in many ways. At the beginning of the film, Nesrin appears to have a clear goal—to stay in the village house for a while to write her novel. However, with the arrival of her mother in the village, the narrative loses any sense of purpose or action related to Nesrin's goal of writing her novel—the focus of the narrative shifts to the unresolved conflict between mother and daughter. The film, with its ambiguous ending

and unresolved conflict between mother and daughter, also differs from mainstream conventions. Nesrin, angry with her mother, storms out of the house and has a sexual encounter with a mentally handicapped man far from the village, then returns home. The film ends with a moment of confrontation as she looks at herself in the mirror. This kind of ending leaves the audience with no sense of purification. The ongoing conflict between the mother and daughter has neither a clear beginning nor an end. The subject of the film is the unresolved and unresolvable nature of this continuing conflict between mother and daughter.

In addition to the lack of cause-and-effect relationships in *Motherland*, the characters are not constructed to win the audience's sympathy as is expected in mainstream films. In the movie, there is no representation of good or bad characters. Nesrin is not someone the mainstream cinema audience can identify with, as she is a character judged by her mother, who inflicts violence on herself when she cannot concentrate on her work, has had an abortion, and wants to write a novel about a woman who killed her child for love. The audience cannot identify with the character of Halise, who transfers her own helplessness and sense of stuckness to her daughter Nesrin. The mainstream audience cannot find a character in the film with whom they can relate. The film focuses on a female experience that lies outside of mainstream conventions.

Motherland centers on the mother-daughter conflict, a theme that has been rarely addressed in Turkish cinema. Actually, some feminist cinema theorists argue that motherhood and the relationship between mother and daughter possess subversive potential in both cinema and symbolic culture (Kaplan, 2001, pp. 5–6; Mayne, 1990, pp. 26, 150; Mulvey, 1975, p. 7). Because the daughter's pre-oedipal relationship with her mother is repressed by and excluded from the symbolic law due to its ambiguity (Chaudhuri, 2006, p. 54). According to Kristeva (1980, pp. 134–135), in contrast to the symbolic field, which is the language of the father, motherhood represents the semiotic field and has a different language.

While the film touches on topics such as female solidarity, gender-based violence, and abortion, its primary focus on the unresolved conflict between mother and daughter results in a narrative that disturbs rather than gives pleasure to the audience. Halise, who embodies both the self-sacrificing mother and the phallic mother, is torn between patriarchal norms and her own struggle to break free from them. She projects her internal conflict and her inner gloom onto her daughter Nesrin by using religious and patriarchal repression and by criticizing and judging her life choices. Unable to cope with her fragmentation and depression, she develops a domain of control over her daughter and starts to share this pain with her by making her experience the same stuckness she could not get out of. In this way, society's perception of the self-sacrificing and sacred mother is transformed into a problem within the mother-daughter relationship. As Chodorow (1978, p. 99) states, by examining the social reproduction of motherhood, psychotic mothers primarily project their pathologies onto their daughters.

Nesrin's reaction as an effort to resist her mother's authority emerges as a struggle for individualization. To liberate herself, she does things that she knows her mother would never approve of, thereby violating and symbolically killing her mother. An example of this is Nesrin distancing

herself from the village and engaging in a reverse sexual intercourse with Halil (Semih Aydın), the village madman, an act that she is certain her mother would disapprove of. According to Ataman (2017, p. 1194), after this sexual encounter, when Nesrin returns home, the Islamic call to prayer for the dead “sela” is heard from the mosque loudspeaker that can be interpreted as a signal that Nesrin, who lived under the dominance of her mother and the maternal archetype, is dead and a new Nesrin is born.

Velioglu Metin (2019, p. 489) suggests that Nesrin’s sexual relationship with a madman represents a step into the “universe of madness”, a path toward realizing her liberation. The internal conflicts experienced by the mother and daughter, as well as their psychological states that could be perceived as madness, align with the perspectives of women’s language theorists. According to Irigaray (1985, p. 34), Kristeva (1977, p. 77), and Cixous (2008, p. 60), women experience a sense of division between the realities of their lived experiences and emotions and the socially imposed gender stereotypes and obligations. The feelings of anger and rebellion brought on by this division drive women to hysteria and madness. In their work *The Madwoman in the Attic*, Gilbert and Gubar (1980, pp. 45, 77–78) argue that female characters created by women writers are often filled with anger, at odds with society, rebellious, and even depicted as mad or monstrous, serving as the dark twin of the madwoman writer herself. Through these characters, director Tüzen seems to reveal her fragmented self, expressing her anger and experiences through a different cinematic language. Indeed, in a newspaper interview, she states that much of the story in the film is drawn from her own life (Arslan, 2016).

Motherland is examined in relation to films such as *Köksüz* (Akçay Katıksız, 2013), *Dirlik Düzenlik* (Yetik, 2020), and *Zefir* (Baş, 2010) all of which refer to the unresolved conflicts between mothers and daughters (Öztürk, 2018, p. 303; Yaşartürk, 2023, pp. 139, 149). According to Sönmez (2019, p. 177), what differentiates *Motherland* from conventional women’s films is the conflict between women, rather than between men and women.

Conclusion

According to the findings of this study, which aims to reveal the difference in the cinematic language of women directors, the emotions, feelings, point of view, thoughts, reactions, facial expressions, and body language of the female character in *Motherland* are brought to the foreground with several cinematographic tools to be better understood by the audience. The film employs a combination of long takes, reaction and extended reaction shots, the use of space along with wide and medium shots, close-ups, rack focus, and montage-sequence techniques to emphasize the main female character, Nesrin’s point of view. The deliberate combination of these cinematographic techniques distances the film from mainstream cinema. Additionally, mise-en-scène tools such as lighting, sound, setting, costume, recurring symbols, and accessories stress the qualities, emotions, and feelings of the female character. Director Tüzen, drawing from her own lived experiences and insights, expresses her feelings, thoughts, and desires through a different cinematic language, aligning with the approach of French feminism’s women’s language.

On the other hand, regarding the film's narrative structure, it is noteworthy that Tüzen employs various techniques to disrupt, alienate, and distance the audience from pleasure, thereby diverging from mainstream cinema. Nesrin's primary goal and motivation remain fluid throughout the film, while the narrative focus shifts toward the unresolved conflict between mother and daughter. The film's ambiguous ending further detaches the audience from pleasure, prompting contemplation instead. Due to their unresolved tensions and internal unrest, the characters neither evoke sympathy from the audience nor allow for identification. Themes such as the unresolved conflict between mother and daughter, relationships between women and female solidarity, gender-based violence, and abortion are issues that neither traditional cinema nor the patriarchal ideology shaping it has conventionally addressed.

The thematic context of the film also resonates with the principles of French feminism's women's language and feminist film studies. Much like the image of the hysterical and mad woman writer in the women's language approach, Nesrin appears as a character who goes mad with rage due to her incompatibility with the patriarchal society. The character's discordance becomes a field of resistance. Psychological manifestations such as madness, anxiety, or depression ultimately lead the female characters to create a space of emancipation. Both Tüzen, through the act of filmmaking, and her dark twin Nesrin, through her struggle to write a novel, engage in the production of women's writing and subjectification.

In conclusion, *Motherland* incorporates codes that align with previously established definitions of women's cinematic language. Based on prior studies as well as the findings of this study, it can be argued that women's cinematic language manifests through various combinations of the following elements: prioritization of women character's subjectivity and her perspective on her experiences through cinematographic tools; the use of *mise-en-scène* as a non-verbal element to reference the character's emotions; creating a sense of distanciation between the audience and the narrative, focusing on relationships between mothers, daughters, and other women characters; transforming cultural expressions of women; and possessing a language different from traditional cinematic language through the combination of all these features.

This study makes a significant contribution to feminist film studies by addressing the relative scarcity of detailed, technical analyses that investigate how women directors develop a different cinematic language through visual, aural, structural, and formal tools. Unlike studies that focus primarily on thematic or theoretical concerns, this research offers an in-depth examination of how a female perspective and discourse are articulated cinematically, particularly in divergence from classical cinema codes. The study also provides an addition through its attention to the technical specificities of a woman director's cinematic language within the context of Turkish cinema.

Women directors often address female experiences and societal issues from a woman's perspective, providing women audiences with an opportunity to find a space for representation in cinema. In exploring women's cinematic language, it is recommended to delve into topics emphasized by feminist film theorists and women's language approach, themes neglected by phallogocentric narratives—such

as motherhood, mother-daughter relations, the girl child's discovery of her sexuality, the vagina, the non-maternal sexual woman, the feminine voice, and experiences. Detailed technical analyses can examine how these subjects are translated into a cinematic language that conveys the emotions and viewpoints of female characters.

Author Declaration

Peer Review Statement: This article has been evaluated through a double-blind peer review process.

Plagiarism Check: The article was screened using İntihal.Net software and found to comply with the journal's plagiarism policy.

Conflict of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Funding and Project Support: No institutional or financial support was received for this study.

Ethics Committee Approval: This study does not require ethics committee approval.

Use of Artificial Intelligence Tools: In this study, GPT-4o and DeepL were used solely for post-writing language refinement. All content reflects the author's original intellectual contribution.

Source of the Article: This article is based on the doctoral dissertation entitled 'Cinematic Possibility of Feminine Language: A Sociological Approach to the Films of Women Directors in the Last Decade of Turkish Cinema,' completed under the supervision of Prof. Dr. Erol Demir in the Department of Sociology at Ankara University in 2022.

Data Availability Statement: No new data were generated or analyzed in this study. Data sharing is not applicable.

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