



TOLSTOY IN TURKISH CINEMA: ADAPTATION AND INFLUENCE

TOLSTOY'UN TÜRK SINEMASINDAKİ YANSIMALARI: UYARLAMA VE ETKİ

Tuna Kuzucan 

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Abstract

This article examines the influence of Leo Tolstoy's literary legacy on Turkish cinema through both direct adaptations and subtler thematic resonances. It focuses on several case studies – including the classic melodrama *Dudaktan Kalbe* and acclaimed art films such as *Uzak (Distant)*, *Mayıs Sıkıntısı (Clouds of May)*, and *Küf (Mold)* – to explore how Tolstoyan motifs of moral struggle, philosophical inquiry, and realistic storytelling have been transposed into Turkish film narratives. Drawing on adaptation theory and theories of transnational literary influence, the article places Tolstoy's impact in the broader context of Turkish literature and culture, where Russian novels have long held a place of honor. The core argument, based on comparative literary and film analysis, is that Turkish filmmakers have not simply imitated Tolstoy's works. Instead, they have interpreted and reinvented Tolstoyan themes to reflect local realities. The discussion highlights moral and philosophical parallels: the tension between ethical duty and personal desire, the contrast between rural and urban life, and the search for spiritual meaning. It also notes stylistic parallels in narrative realism and understatement. The article concludes that Tolstoy's humanist spirit finds new life in Turkish cinema, demonstrating the enduring power of cross-cultural literary influence. The article also suggests directions for further research. These include examining Russian literary adaptations in other non-Western cinemas and analyzing how literary translators and critics mediate such cross-cultural artistic dialogues.

Öz

Bu makale, Lev Tolstoy'un edebi mirasının Türk sineması üzerindeki etkisini hem doğrudan uyarlamalar hem de daha ince tematik yansımalar üzerinden incelemektedir. Çalışmada *Dudaktan Kalbe* adlı klasik melodramın yanı sıra *Uzak*, *Mayıs Sıkıntısı* ve *Küf* gibi sanat filmleri ele alınarak, Tolstoycu ahlaki çatışma, felsefi sorgulama ve gerçekçi anlatı unsurlarının Türk film anlatılarına nasıl aktarıldığı tartışılmaktadır. Uyarlama kuramı ve ulusötesi edebi etki yaklaşımlarına dayanarak, makale Tolstoy'un etkisini Rus romanlarının Türk edebiyatı ve kültüründeki tarihsel önemine bağlamaktadır. Temel sav, Türk sinemacıların Tolstoy'un eserlerini basitçe taklit etmediği; aksine, Tolstoycu temaları yerel gerçeklikleri yansıtacak biçimde yorumlayıp yeniden inşa ettikleridir. Çalışma, ahlaki ve felsefi paralelliklere dikkat çekerek: etik görev ile kişisel arzu arasındaki gerilim, kırsal ve kentsel yaşamın karşıtlığı ve manevi anlam arayışı. Ayrıca, gerçekçi anlatım ve sade üslup gibi biçimsel benzerliklere işaret edilmektedir. Makale, Tolstoy'un hümanist ruhunun Türk sinemasında yeniden hayat bulduğunu ve edebiyatlar arası etkileşimin kalıcı gücünü ortaya koyduğunu savunmaktadır. Ayrıca ileride yapılacak araştırmalar için, Rus edebiyatı uyarlamalarının diğer Batı-dışı sinemalarda incelenmesi ve edebi çevirmenler ile eleştirmenlerin bu tür kültürlerarası sanatsal diyalogları nasıl aracılık ettiği önerilmektedir.

1. INTRODUCTION

Leo Tolstoy (1828–1910) is renowned as one of the world’s greatest novelists, and his influence extends far beyond Russia’s borders. In Türkiye — a country with historically deep intellectual ties to Russian literature — Tolstoy’s works have inspired generations of readers and writers. Yet his impact on Turkish cinema remains less examined. This study seeks to fill that gap by exploring how Tolstoy’s themes and narrative style have been adapted or echoed in Turkish films. Rather than focusing on straightforward film adaptations of Tolstoy’s novels (which are relatively rare and considered challenging), the emphasis here is on transpositional influence: how Turkish filmmakers have woven Tolstoyan moral and philosophical motifs into original stories and characters on screen.

In approaching this topic, the article uses an interdisciplinary approach, blending literary and film analysis. It begins with an overview of Tolstoy’s literary influence in Türkiye, establishing the cultural and historical context in which Turkish artists encountered Tolstoy. This is followed by a discussion of relevant theoretical perspectives – including adaptation theory and ideas of transnational literary influence – to frame how a 19th-century Russian author’s ideas can travel across languages and media. The core of the article is devoted to case studies of selected Turkish films that exemplify Tolstoyan themes. These case studies draw parallels to Tolstoy’s texts and examine the films’ narratives, characters, and cinematic style. This approach illustrates a blend of comparative literature and film studies methods.

Through these case studies, I argue that Tolstoy’s legacy in Turkish cinema appears not in direct plot retellings, but in a shared ethical and aesthetic sensibility. Themes central to Tolstoy — such as the conflict between personal passion and moral duty, the critique of social pretension, the redemptive value of close family and rural life, and the quest for spiritual truth — find resonant expression on the Turkish screen. Moreover, the stylistic hallmarks of Tolstoy’s prose – a realistic, unvarnished depiction of life that invites reflection without didactic intrusion — are mirrored in the restrained, human-focused approach of many Turkish directors. By highlighting these connections, the article contributes to adaptation studies by showing how literary influence can operate transnationally, even without formal adaptation. It also broadens our understanding of Turkish cinema’s literary engagements, showing that its “source texts” include not only local novels or Western classics but also masterpieces of Russian literature.

Ultimately, examining Tolstoy in Turkish cinema shows the vitality of cross-cultural artistic exchange. Just as Tolstoy’s novels have been translated and cherished in Türkiye for

over a century, his ideas have been “translated” into new artistic forms by Turkish filmmakers. The conclusion synthesizes the findings and suggests avenues for further research. For example, it proposes investigating other Russian literary influences in Turkish arts or comparing Tolstoy’s cinematic legacy in different national contexts. By tracing the dialogue between Tolstoy’s humanism and Turkish cinematic narratives, the study illuminates both the universal and the local dimensions of storytelling — how an artistic vision can travel across time, space, and media to find new life in a distant land.

2. TOLSTOY’S LITERARY INFLUENCE IN TÜRKİYE

Tolstoy’s influence in Türkiye predates cinema and is rooted in a rich tradition of literary exchange. By the early 20th century, translations of Tolstoy’s works into Turkish had become increasingly common, contributing to his growing impact on Turkish readers and writers. One scholarly survey notes that “Tolstoy was increasingly translated into Turkish during this period, therefore enjoying greater influence, and is still one of the most-read Russian authors in Türkiye today” (Arslan, 2024). Notably, Tolstoy’s shorter moral tales have also found enduring popularity; for example, *What Men Live By* – Tolstoy’s 1885 parable about faith and humanity – remains “highly popular among twenty-first-century Turkish youth” (Arslan, 2024). Such widespread readership attests to the resonance of Tolstoy’s humanist themes with Turkish cultural values.

The Turkish fascination with Russian literature dates back to at least the late Ottoman era and gained momentum in the early Republican period. In the 1940s, state-sponsored translation bureaus undertook massive projects to render world classics into Turkish as part of a nation-building and modernization effort. Russian novels were prominent among these. Türkiye’s early Republican intelligentsia viewed Russian realist literature as a model for socially engaged art, and writers like Tolstoy and Dostoevsky were translated alongside French and English classics. Translation was a modernization tool – as scholar Hülya Arslan notes, it “drew cultural values closer” and introduced new ideas into Turkish literature (Arslan, 2024). In this climate, Tolstoy’s ethical and spiritual inquiries found a receptive audience. Turkish literary journals and critics engaged with Tolstoy’s philosophy, and his works reached not only Istanbul but also schools and institutions nationwide.

Many prominent Turkish writers of the early 20th century openly acknowledged Tolstoy’s impact on their creative development. A recent study reports that “Turkish writers like Reşat Nuri Güntekin, Halit Fahri Ozansoy, Sabahattin Ali confessed that Tolstoy had a

profound impact on their literary creativity” (Yalçınkaya, 2018, p.219). Reşat Nuri Güntekin – a leading novelist of the 1920s and 30s – not only admired Tolstoy but even wrote a book about him. In 1933, Reşat Nuri published *Tolstoy, Art and Us (Lev Tolstoy, Sanatı ve Biz)*, reflecting on the Russian master’s ideas. He dedicated the study to Tolstoy’s memory, ending it with a chapter titled “Tolstoy’s Main Ideas” which emphasized “the moral quest and depth of ethical excitement” in Tolstoy’s works (Güntekin, 1962, p. 232). This is telling: the author of *Çalıkuşu (The Wren)* and *Dudaktan Kalbe* regarded Tolstoy as a guiding light, especially in the realm of moral and realist literature. Other writers, such as Sabahattin Ali (who penned the Turkish classic *Madonna in a Fur Coat*), similarly drew inspiration from Tolstoy’s narratives of social justice and individual conscience (Şifman, 2021, p. 221).

Tolstoy’s esteem in Türkiye was further enhanced by a historical perception: after serving in the Crimean War, Tolstoy became a vocal critic of militarism and developed sympathies that some in Türkiye interpreted as “pro-Turkish.” Turkish literary historians often point out that, unlike Dostoevsky — who harbored Pan-Slavist antipathy toward the Ottomans — Tolstoy grew into a friend of Turkish and Islamic culture (as some Turkish essays portray him). Whether or not this view is fully accurate, it gave Turkish admirers another reason to see Tolstoy as a kindred spirit who challenged Western imperial narratives.

By the mid-20th century, Tolstoy was firmly part of the Turkish literary canon in translation. His works were taught in schools and circulated in affordable editions. Orhan Pamuk, Türkiye’s 2006 Nobel laureate in literature, recalls growing up reading Turkish translations of Russian novels. Pamuk noted that reading a translated 1940s edition of a Russian classic filled him with wonder, making him feel the events “as though they had all happened to me for the first time.” Such recollections underscore that Russian literature — Tolstoy certainly included – has been integral in shaping modern Turkish literary sensibilities.

In short, well before any film adaptations, Tolstoy’s themes of family, faith, social inequality, and moral self-examination had already struck deep chords in Türkiye’s literary circles. Tolstoy’s works found a receptive audience thanks to these historical and cultural ties between Turkish and Russian literature. This backdrop helps us understand how Tolstoy’s influence could later flow into Turkish cinema. Filmmakers of the late 20th and early 21st centuries – many of them avid readers – inherited a tradition that revered Tolstoy as a master of realism and ethics. It is not surprising, then, that echoes of Tolstoy appear in the stories they chose to tell on screen and in their manner of storytelling.

3. ADAPTATION THEORY AND TRANSNATIONAL INFLUENCE

Before examining specific films, it is useful to establish a theoretical framework for how literary influence crosses borders and media. Adaptation studies traditionally looks at how source texts are transformed into new works (often novels into films). In this case, however, we are dealing with a broader and less direct phenomenon: the transnational migration of narrative themes and styles – what we might call a cultural adaptation. Tolstoy’s influence on Turkish cinema exemplifies how ideas can be transmitted and reimagined without a straightforward, one-to-one adaptation of a specific work. Understanding this requires blending concepts from adaptation theory with perspectives from world literature.

Linda Hutcheon’s theory of adaptation provides a helpful starting point. Hutcheon defines adaptation in two ways: as a product (a work that openly acknowledges its relationship to an earlier text) and as a process (the creative act of reinterpreting that text) (Hutcheon, 2006). Crucially, Hutcheon emphasizes that adapters are “first interpreters and then creators.” That is, an artist drawing on a prior work must first grapple with its meaning and then re-express it in a new form.

In our context, Turkish filmmakers who channel Tolstoy are acting as interpreters of Tolstoy’s themes and then as creators. For example, they might ask what *War and Peace* says about society and morality, interpret those themes, and then weave them into an original cinematic story. Even if they are not adapting a specific Tolstoy novel, they are still adapting in a broader sense — appropriating and transforming elements of Tolstoy’s artistic vision.

Transnational adaptation adds another layer of complexity. Here, the transfer is not only from page to screen, but also from one cultural context to another. Comparative literature often discusses how works serve as symbolic capital when they travel. Pascale Casanova’s concept of the “world republic of letters” suggests that nations import foreign literary prestige to advance their own cultural projects (Maguire & McAteer, 2024). In Türkiye’s case, embracing Tolstoy (and other Russian classics) was part of aligning with a vision of high culture and modernity. But beyond institutional motives, there was an artistic kinship that transcended borders: Turkish writers and filmmakers found that Tolstoy’s humanism and realism resonated with Türkiye’s own experiences of social change, moral struggle, and spiritual quest.

A transnational adaptation perspective recognizes that when a story or theme crosses into a new culture, it often changes to fit local realities. Strict fidelity to the source is less relevant than the meaning the source offers in the new context. As adaptation theorists often

note, adaptations – especially transcultural ones – are not copies but “repetitions with variation” on the original. The Turkish films we are examining are not direct Tolstoy adaptations; rather, they are original works that echo Tolstoy. This echoing is a kind of intertextual adaptation, where themes, character archetypes, or moral questions from Tolstoy’s oeuvre are woven into a different cultural fabric. Such adaptation-as-influence demands both interpretation and creativity: Turkish artists identify what is universally compelling in Tolstoy (say, the struggle of individuals against societal pressures) and then tailor it to Turkish settings, characters, and cinematic language.

It is also important to note that influence is rarely unilateral or unmediated. Turkish creators often encountered Tolstoy through the prism of local translators and critics. For example, the early Republican translations of Tolstoy sometimes abridged spiritual passages or highlighted anti-imperialist tones that resonated with Turkish nationalism. These translated texts and commentaries acted as filters, shaping which Tolstoyan aspects stood out to Turkish readers and artists. Adaptation theory reminds us that each adaptation is contingent on the adapter’s context and goals. In Türkiye, the “adaptation” of Tolstoy often took on a moral-philosophical bent, foregrounding ethical and social themes that spoke to Turkish audiences.

We can also view this in terms of reception theory: adaptation as an active form of reception. Rather than passive consumption, Turkish filmmakers’ engagement with Tolstoy was a creative reception that resulted in new works. This aligns with the idea of world literature as “a series of active appropriations” by receiving cultures (Damrosch, 2003). Notably, Turkish critic Berna Moran observed that early 20th-century Turkish novelists borrowed the psychological depth of Russian novels to enrich Turkish fiction. In a similar way, Turkish auteur filmmakers in the late 1990s and 2000s (such as Nuri Bilge Ceylan and Semih Kaplanoğlu) can be seen as actively appropriating the meditative, humanistic style of Tolstoy and his contemporaries.

Interestingly, Turkish commentators have noted the difficulty of directly adapting Tolstoy’s long novels to film. Writer Kaya Genç, for instance, argued that Tolstoy’s novels “tend not to work in the world of cinema” as well as those of some other authors (Genç, 2014). He cited Joe Wright’s lavish Hollywood adaptation of *Anna Karenina* (2012) which, despite its visual splendor, left him yawning. Genç felt it was “too perfect, too glorious, too spectacular,” lacking the modest, personal touch that gives cinema its impact. This critique highlights a crucial point: Tolstoy’s greatness lies in a profound truthfulness and simplicity, which can be lost on screen if a film opts for grandiosity over intimacy. The suggestion is that Tolstoy’s spirit

is better captured in films that organically absorb his themes rather than in expensive, literal retellings of his plots. In other words, a small Turkish art film about ordinary people might convey Tolstoyan sincerity more effectively than a big-budget adaptation of *War and Peace*. This insight helps explain the focus of this article: by examining Turkish films that channel Tolstoyan elements in their own original stories, we might see a closer alignment with Tolstoy's ethos than in some official adaptations.

In summary, this article treats adaptation as a broad, dynamic phenomenon that includes cross-cultural inspiration. Turkish cinema's engagement with Tolstoy exemplifies adaptation as a conversation – a conversation across languages (Russian to Turkish), across media (literature to film), and across time (19th century to 21st century). The case studies that follow will illustrate this conversation in practice. We will see how key Tolstoyan ideas find new expression on the Turkish screen. By focusing specifically on Tolstoy's influence (distinct from the influence of other Russian authors like Chekhov or Dostoevsky, as discussed later), we can observe how Turkish filmmakers aligned themselves with Tolstoy's brand of humanism and realism, adapting it to a Turkish idiom and concerns.

4. TOLSTOYAN THEMES IN TURKISH CINEMA: CASE STUDIES

To ground these ideas, let us turn to specific Turkish films that exemplify Tolstoyan influence. Each case study highlights how a Tolstoyan motif or thematic complex has been adapted into a Turkish cultural context and cinematic form.

4.1. *DUDAKTAN KALBE*: A MELODRAMA OF ETHICS AND AMBITION

One of the earliest examples of Tolstoy's influence in Turkish storytelling came indirectly through literature. *Dudaktan Kalbe* (*From the Lips to the Heart*) was originally a 1923 Turkish novel by Reşat Nuri Güntekin, and it bears the unmistakable imprint of Tolstoyan romanticism and moral inquiry. This story – later adapted into a film in 1965 (directed by Lütü Ö. Akad) and a television series in 2007 – centers on a love triangle and the moral choices of its protagonists. On the surface, *Dudaktan Kalbe* is a romantic melodrama, but at its core it grapples with questions Tolstoy himself explored: the struggle between ethical loyalty and personal desire, and the conflict between ambition and integrity.

Contemporaries of Reşat Nuri observed that *Dudaktan Kalbe* “recalls the pathos and romance of Leo Tolstoy's novels.” In other words, the novel's melancholy tone and emotional sincerity felt Tolstoyan. Indeed, the arc of the main character, Kenan, resembles an inner moral

conflict Tolstoy might have written. Kenan abandons his first love, Lamia, to pursue fame as a violinist, giving in to vanity and ambition. He later becomes haunted by regret over this choice.

Kenan's trajectory calls to mind Tolstoyan protagonists who sacrifice personal happiness due to ego or social pressure and then face spiritual consequences. One is reminded of Anna Karenina or Prince Andrei in *War and Peace*, who feel the emptiness of worldly success or passion when it clashes with their conscience. Kenan eventually realizes that his ambition cost him a genuine love. This epiphany parallels Tolstoy's characters discovering the hollowness of status and the supreme value of authentic human connection.

Additionally, the novel's sympathetic portrayal of Lamia — an orphaned girl treated almost like a servant by her relatives— echoes Tolstoy's compassion for the downtrodden and innocent. In *Resurrection* and other works, Tolstoy often highlighted the plight of young women or peasants wronged by those in power. *Dudaktan Kalbe* similarly critiques the strict class and gender norms of its time through Lamia's suffering and quiet dignity.

It is no accident that *Dudaktan Kalbe* contains these Tolstoyan elements, given Reşat Nuri Güntekin's admiration for Tolstoy. As noted earlier, Reşat Nuri was deeply influenced by Tolstoy's moral vision. In 1933, he praised "the moral quest and depth of ethical excitement" in Tolstoy's fiction — an outlook he poured into his own writing. Thus, *Dudaktan Kalbe* has a moral didacticism alongside its love story: it implicitly asks whether ambition and material success are worth the loss of integrity and love. That question is Tolstoyan to the core. (It recalls the lesson of Tolstoy's *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* — that chasing social approval can lead to spiritual ruin.) Kenan's fate in *Dudaktan Kalbe* serves as a moral parable: he must live knowing he betrayed his better nature. This outcome is a poignant commentary on the cost of choosing vanity over love – a theme Tolstoy would certainly recognize.

When *Dudaktan Kalbe* was adapted to film in 1965, its Tolstoyan undertones remained intact. Turkish cinema in the 1960s was full of melodramas, and *Dudaktan Kalbe* fits into the Yeşilçam melodrama tradition (Yeşilçam being Türkiye's version of classic Hollywood). Despite the tear-jerking plot devices, the film stays focused on moral character and personal growth rather than on contrived coincidences or spectacle. The conflicts are resolved not by a deus ex machina, but by Kenan's own journey of repentance and self-awareness.

In the film's climax, Kenan is confronted with the harm his selfishness has caused. Director Lütfi Akad emphasizes this moment through simple, intimate cinematography. The camera holds a close-up on Kenan's face as he realizes what he has lost, allowing the actor's

expressions to convey his remorse. This unembellished focus on the character's inner change is very Tolstoyan: it mirrors how Tolstoy would hone in on a character's moral awakening. Kenan's confrontation with his guilt leads to contrition and an attempt at atonement – a resolution that aligns with Tolstoy's belief in personal redemption through moral self-realization.

This Tolstoyan resonance can be underscored by comparing the film's dialogue to Tolstoy's own writing. In *Resurrection*, Tolstoy's protagonist Nekhlyudov undergoes a harsh self-reckoning. Tolstoy writes that Nekhlyudov realized “all these things appeared so simple, so clear, so unquestionable, and at the same time, all his life was so contrary to them” (Tolstoy, 1899/2009, p. 174). In Akad's *Dudaktan Kalbe*, Kenan has a similar epiphany. He laments, “What have I gained from fame? I lost everything real in my life.” In that line, Kenan recognizes that chasing fame led him to abandon authenticity and love. This confession closely mirrors Nekhlyudov's regret at straying from life's simple moral truths. The comparison highlights how *Dudaktan Kalbe* — through Reşat Nuri's Tolstoy-inspired story and Akad's cinematic interpretation— functions as a Tolstoyan melodrama of moral choice and consequence.

4.2. **UZAK (DISTANT): ALIENATION AND THE SEARCH FOR MEANING**

Nuri Bilge Ceylan's *Uzak* (*Distant*, 2002) is a quiet, contemplative film that might initially seem far removed from Tolstoy's 19th-century world. The film is a minimalist portrayal of two cousins: Mahmut, a middle-aged commercial photographer in Istanbul, and Yusuf, a young factory worker from a provincial town who comes to the city to look for work. *Uzak* unfolds in long, patiently observed scenes with sparse dialogue. It chronicles the growing emotional distance between the two men as they fail to connect and gradually retreat into their own loneliness. The film, which won the Grand Prix at Cannes in 2003, is often described as Chekhovian in its atmosphere, echoing Anton Chekhov's short stories. Ceylan himself has acknowledged Chekhov as a major influence (he even dedicated his earlier film *Clouds of May* to Chekhov). However, alongside the Chekhovian elements, there are Tolstoyan currents running through *Uzak*, evident in its themes and moral underpinnings.

One central theme of *Uzak* is the contrast between rural simplicity and urban disillusionment. Yusuf arrives from the countryside with naive hopes, only to confront the cold reality of big-city life where he feels lost and unwelcome. Mahmut, by contrast, is an Istanbul intellectual who has lost his creative drive and lives in cynical ennui. This tension between them recalls Tolstoy's frequent juxtaposition of peasant wisdom and aristocratic malaise. In *Anna*

Karenina, for example, Konstantin Levin represents Tolstoy’s idealization of rural life and honest labour, in stark contrast to the sophisticated but spiritually empty world of St. Petersburg high society. *Uzak* brings a similar dichotomy into a modern context. Yusuf’s village is suggested to be a place of community and honest living (he fondly recalls friends and a sense of belonging back home), whereas Istanbul is depicted as alienating — beautiful in its winter starkness, but impersonal and full of existential pitfalls. Mahmut’s isolation in the bustling city echoes the “existential emptiness” Tolstoy associated with modern, materialistic life. As one critic put it, *Uzak* “elegantly examines the depths of existential emptiness” in contemporary urban men – a phrase that could describe the crisis of meaning in Tolstoy’s *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*.

Tolstoy was deeply concerned about the moral consequences of modern life and the loss of genuine human connection. *Uzak* brings that concern into the 21st century. The film’s narrative is simple — nothing grand happens, just everyday frictions and minor disappointments— yet these small moments collectively raise a big Tolstoyan question: How should one live? Neither Mahmut, with his comfortable but purposeless existence, nor Yusuf, with his aimless search for work, is truly flourishing.

The film subtly critiques Mahmut’s hypocrisy and lost idealism. In one darkly ironic scene, the two cousins sit down to watch a movie. Mahmut, who prides himself on being a cultured cinephile, plays Andrei Tarkovsky’s *Stalker* (a classic Russian art film rich in spiritual themes). Yusuf, bored by its slow pace, falls asleep. The moment Yusuf starts snoring, Mahmut switches the TV to a pornography channel for his own amusement. This wry scene speaks volumes. It symbolizes Mahmut’s abandonment of his high ideals (represented by the Tarkovsky film, itself part of a Russian spiritual-literary lineage) in favor of base escapism. Ceylan uses this episode to reveal the gap between Mahmut’s self-image as a refined intellectual and the reality of his private indulgences. As the Ajam Media Collective noted, Ceylan once half-jokingly said “there is not such a long way between Tarkovsky and porn” — highlighting how thin the veneer of Mahmut’s sophistication is (Ajam Media Collective, 2014). Beneath the humor of the scene lies a classic Tolstoyan critique: failing to live up to one’s own moral and intellectual standards leads to self-contempt and emptiness.

The emotional gulf in *Uzak* also resonates with Tolstoy’s portrayals of isolated individuals searching for meaning. Mahmut’s spiritual desolation recalls Tolstoy’s *A Confession*, in which Tolstoy lamented the aimlessness of educated people who had lost faith and purpose. At one point in *Uzak*, Yusuf suggests that life might be “better back home” in their

village. Mahmut responds curtly, “Everything is the same here,” and then asks wearily, “Then why come here?” This exchange echoes the disillusionment of a Tolstoyan character like Pierre Bezukhov in *War and Peace*. After experiencing the shallow glitter of society, Pierre feels “in a strange, dull, and sleepy state” amid the crowd (Tolstoy, 1869/2007, p. 352). Both Mahmut and Pierre are adrift, numbed by the sense that modern life offers no solace for the soul.

In *War and Peace*, Tolstoy eventually allows Pierre to find meaning in love and family. *Uzak*, however, offers no such comfort. In a Chekhovian manner, it ends with Mahmut alone, watching a ship depart on the Bosphorus — as distant and adrift as ever. This bleak ending aligns more with Chekhov’s open-ended realism than with Tolstoy’s usual inclination toward moral resolution. Yet the feeling of loss that pervades *Uzak* — loss of community, loss of authenticity — is profoundly Tolstoyan. The film can be seen as the tragedy of a man who cannot reconnect with the Tolstoyan values of sincere human relationships and purposeful living.

Stylistically, Ceylan’s approach in *Uzak* also echoes Tolstoy’s narrative style. Tolstoy was a master of detailed realism, observing the subtle shifts in characters’ emotions and the minutiae of daily life. Similarly, *Uzak*’s cinematography — characterized by static long takes and bleak winter cityscapes — forces the viewer to observe the minutiae of the characters’ days: the silent breakfasts, the awkward coexistence in a cramped apartment, the small glances that reveal disappointment or quiet sympathy.

Ceylan’s camera maintains an objectivity that recalls Tolstoy’s impartial narrative voice. Scenes in *Uzak* unfold with minimal commentary; we are shown actions and gestures and must infer the feelings beneath. Frequently, the two men are even framed far apart within the same shot, visually emphasizing their emotional distance. This kind of restraint is a hallmark of Tolstoy’s writing as well, especially in his later works, which refrain from overt authorial judgment. By not intervening with heavy-handed clues or melodramatic touches, *Uzak* achieves an observational purity that filmmaker Rob Nilsson praised. Nilsson called *Uzak* “an unadorned and powerful piece,” noting that it reflects the spirit of Dostoevsky and Tolstoy in “not trying to influence or intervene in the viewer’s experience” (Daily Sabah, 2013). In other words, *Uzak* lets the audience contemplate the characters’ inner lives and moral choices without telling them what to think—much as Tolstoy allows readers to draw their own reflections on his characters’ everyday struggles.

In summary, *Uzak* is a modern cinematic meditation on themes Tolstoy would recognize: the erosion of human connection in modern life, the search for meaning in a spiritually barren world, and the quiet suffering of a person cut off from their roots. The film's style owes a debt to Chekhov (with its understatement and focus on mundane moments), but the ethical and existential questions it raises place it firmly in a Tolstoyan lineage. *Uzak* exemplifies how a Turkish filmmaker absorbed the mood and moral inquiry of Tolstoy (alongside other Russian influences) to create a story that is deeply rooted in Turkish reality yet universally relatable in its exploration of existential melancholy.

4.3. **MAYIS SIKINTISI (CLOUDS OF MAY): RURAL LIFE, ART, AND THE VALUE OF HOME**

Mayıs Sıkıntısı (*Clouds of May*, 1999) is another film by Nuri Bilge Ceylan, and it forms a loose trilogy with *Kasaba* (*The Small Town*, 1997) and *Uzak*. If *Uzak* depicted city life alienation, *Clouds of May* lovingly depicts the rhythms of rural life and the bonds of family — though not without some bittersweet undertones. The film is partly autobiographical and meta-cinematic. It follows a filmmaker (a stand-in for Ceylan himself, named Muzaffer) who returns from the city to his native village to shoot a film using his own parents and local villagers as actors. While Muzaffer is obsessively trying to make his art film, his father is fighting a legal battle to save the family's walnut grove from being seized by the state in a boundary dispute. These intertwined plotlines create a gentle, meditative drama exploring home, creativity, generational conflict, and the relationship between people and their land.

At first glance, *Clouds of May* declares its Russian literary influence by dedicating itself to Anton Chekhov. As Dennis Grunes notes, the story echoes Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard*: Muzaffer's father is desperately trying to prevent the loss of his beloved trees and land (Grunes, 2007). However, much like *Uzak*, this film also has Tolstoyan resonances alongside its Chekhovian ones. Chekhov and Tolstoy, while different in style, shared certain humanistic concerns, and *Clouds of May* sits at the intersection of their influences.

The father's fight to protect his land in *Clouds of May* carries a symbolism that invokes Tolstoy's agrarian idealism. Tolstoy, especially later in life, championed the idea that moral wisdom and true happiness come from honest labor on the land and a love of the soil. In *Anna Karenina*, Levin's story illustrates that peace and purpose are found in working the fields and staying connected to one's land and community (echoing Tolstoy's own practice of farming at Yasnaya Polyana). In *Clouds of May*, the aging father (played by Ceylan's real-life father, Emin

Ceylan) embodies a deep attachment to his land. He's a humble, uneducated man, but he knows the value of those walnut trees beyond any money or bureaucratic decree.

In one memorable scene, he walks along his property's boundary, pointing out each tree that would be cut down if he loses his case. The scene exudes a quiet reverence for the permanence of nature versus the transience of human affairs. This reverence is very Tolstoyan: to him, land is not just property but a vessel of family memories, community, and spiritual nourishment. The father's battle to save his grove is more than an economic issue; it is portrayed as a moral struggle to preserve a wholesome way of life against the impersonal forces of authority.

Meanwhile, Muzaffer — the son/filmmaker — initially seems indifferent to his father's worries. He is absorbed in the creative and technical hassles of making his movie (for example, coaxing his shy mother to act, or making his young nephew roll down a hill in a steel drum over and over to get the "perfect" shot). There's a subtle self-critique here of an artist so focused on his project that he becomes, as Grunes says, "insufficiently appreciative of humanity" (Grunes, 2007). Tolstoy, who believed art is only worthwhile if it fosters empathy and moral progress (as he argued in *What Is Art?*), might disapprove of art that is disconnected from real human concerns.

In *Clouds of May*, Muzaffer's film-within-the-film is portrayed with gentle satire. His single-minded dedication borders on comical at times — for instance, prioritizing a film shoot over helping with everyday farm chores. By the end of the film, Muzaffer does finish shooting, but he realizes that village life goes on with or without his artistic input. His father's land dispute concludes (he loses the case, although it is left ambiguous when or if the walnut trees will be cut), and Muzaffer must soon return to Istanbul. In the poignant final scene, his parents sit quietly together under a cloudy spring sky after the film crew has left. Muzaffer watches them from a distance. In that moment, we sense his perspective has shifted — perhaps he has gained a deeper appreciation for the simple life he left behind, or at least realized that his artistic ambitions should not eclipse the human stories in his own home.

Tolstoy also emphasized the importance of family and domestic life as the source of meaning. (Ironically, he opens *Anna Karenina* with, "All happy families are alike; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way," and then spends the novel exploring family troubles.) *Clouds of May* excels in depicting the rich texture of daily family interactions — affectionate teasing, minor squabbles, and the underlying care in even the disagreements. By

casting his own parents as themselves, Ceylan achieved a striking naturalism; many viewers felt like they were watching their own relatives on screen.

This authentic portrayal of family life is reminiscent of Tolstoy's keen observation of domestic scenes — for example, the warm, chaotic family gatherings in *War and Peace* or the intimate husband-and-wife conversations in *Anna Karenina*. There is moral beauty in these ordinary moments, a sense that everyday life contains profound truths. *Clouds of May* embraces that idea by finding drama in the mundane: walking through fields, gathering eggs, sharing meals, or debating trivial matters. The film suggests that these very acts are the core of human existence, and that art should honor rather than dismiss them.

A direct comparison with Tolstoy's text underscores these family dynamics. Tolstoy opens *Anna Karenina* with, "All happy families are alike; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way" (Tolstoy, 1878/2004, p. 1). He implies that each family's heartaches are unique. In *Clouds of May*, we find a similar idea. The family is not overtly "unhappy," but there are subtle tensions beneath the surface. In one scene, Muzaffer questions his father about the lawsuit, asking why he cares so much about the land. The father softly replies, "Because they've seen more life than you and I." That simple line carries a world of meaning — the father expresses a connection to the trees (and all they've witnessed) that his son does not yet understand.

This exchange highlights a nuanced kind of family "unhappiness." The family members love each other, but they are pulled apart by different priorities: the son's modern, artistic ambitions versus the father's traditional, rural values. The father feels a quiet sorrow realizing that his children do not fully share his attachment to the land. This layered family dynamic is exactly the kind of situation Tolstoy portrayed so well, and *Clouds of May* brings that Tolstoyan insight into a Turkish setting.

Another Tolstoyan element in *Clouds of May* is its critique of impersonal forces threatening a traditional way of life. Tolstoy was wary of state and institutional power that disrupted peasant communities. In the film, the antagonist is not an evil person but a faceless bureaucracy: a government survey ruling that some of the father's land is not legally his. There is no physical villain — just an official letter and a potential surveyor. This modern encroachment on traditional life is akin to the pressures Tolstoy lamented in his time.

Clouds of May clearly wants us to sympathize with the father's almost quixotic fight. Legally, he has little chance against the state, yet we feel he is right because his love for the

land is pure and deeply human. This moral instinct aligns with Tolstoy's tendency to valorize individual conscience standing up against unjust social machinery.

Cinematically, *Clouds of May* lavishes attention on the village's natural environment. Ceylan's camera lingers on the changing seasons, the sunlight and clouds (true to the title), and the simple Anatolian landscape. Long, uninterrupted shots let us soak in the atmosphere — mist drifting over hills, wind rustling the trees, the unhurried pace of village life.

This patience and focus on nature's rhythms is reminiscent of Tolstoy's descriptive passages of the countryside. Think of Levin mowing the fields in *Anna Karenina*, where working outdoors under the open sky becomes a spiritually harmonious moment. Similarly, in *Clouds of May*, nature is not just a backdrop; it is part of the film's meaning. By spending time on non-verbal, non-dramatic moments (like a lingering shot of clouds moving across the sky), Ceylan sets a contemplative tone that invites the viewer to reflect on our place in the world — much as Tolstoy's detailed realism invites readers to pause and observe life. Even the title, with its image of fleeting May clouds, hints at the transience of life's troubles and joys, a poetic touch that Chekhov or Tolstoy would appreciate.

Although Ceylan dedicated *Clouds of May* to Chekhov, the film's thematic core is equally aligned with Tolstoy's worldview. The blend of influences shows how Turkish filmmakers like Ceylan absorbed multiple Russian literary qualities and made them their own. We see Chekhov's touch in the film's gentle humor and loose, slice-of-life structure. But we feel Tolstoy's presence in its moral weight and its deep reverence for land and family. The result is that *Clouds of May* offers a richly layered meditation on the value of home and the passage of time.

4.4. *KÜF (MOLD)*: SUFFERING, FORBEARANCE, AND JUSTICE

Küf (Mold, 2012), a film directed by Ali Aydın, is a stark and powerful drama that drew immediate comparisons to Tolstoy (and Dostoevsky) from critics. The story is set on the margins of Turkish society and unfolds with unflinching austerity. The protagonist, Basri, is a quiet, aging railroad worker who has spent 18 years searching for his son. The son disappeared in the 1990s, presumably taken by security forces during political unrest. Every month, Basri writes petitions to government offices asking about his missing son, and every month he receives no answer. He lives a life of lonely routine — patrolling long stretches of train track for debris, doing his daily chores, and enduring the unendurable with stoic patience and a glimmer of hope.

Critics noted that *Küf*'s style and weighty themes bore the mark of Russian literary giants. At a screening during the Los Angeles Turkish Film Festival, filmmaker Rob Nilsson praised *Küf* as “an unadorned and powerful piece,” explicitly likening it to “the styles of Dostoyevsky and Tolstoy” for its way of “not trying to influence or intervene in the viewer’s experience” (Daily Sabah, 2013). This observation is telling: it points out *Küf*'s objectivity and restraint — traits characteristic of Tolstoy’s mature style — as central to its impact.

Indeed, *Küf* is filmed with an extremely patient, observant camera. Scenes often play out in real time with minimal dialogue, frequently in static single takes. We in the audience are made to sit with Basri through silence and mundane routine. The film uses no melodramatic score or overt sentimental cues to push our emotions. Like Tolstoy’s prose, it presents events plainly, almost gravely, and thereby forces us to engage through empathy and reflection rather than being guided by manipulation.

Beyond its style, *Küf* resonates with Tolstoyan themes of suffering, injustice, and moral perseverance. Basri’s story brings to mind Tolstoy’s concern for individuals crushed by unjust systems and the question of how to retain one’s humanity under such conditions. Tolstoy often tested his characters by making them endure suffering imposed by authority or fate.

For example, in Tolstoy’s short story “God Sees the Truth, But Waits,” an innocent man is wrongfully imprisoned; he maintains his dignity and ultimately forgives the person who wronged him, illustrating patient suffering and spiritual triumph. Similarly, Basri endures a prolonged injustice. His child’s disappearance is a wound that never heals, and yet the authorities respond with silence and indifference. Basri’s reaction is not violent anger or collapse into despair, but a kind of saintly persistence — he keeps sending petitions, knocking on police doors, and quietly hoping for news, year after year.

This unwavering hope in the face of hopelessness reflects a deeply Tolstoyan moral outlook: that true righteousness lies in not giving up and not succumbing to hatred, even under oppression. Basri’s stoicism, his gentle demeanor toward the officials who dismiss him, and his private grief all portray a Tolstoyan kind of hero — an ordinary man who achieves a form of spiritual nobility through long-suffering and love (in Basri’s case, love for his lost son and for the truth).

There are also hints of Dostoevsky’s influence in *Küf* — for instance, in the psychological intensity of Basri’s silent anguish and the theme of a parent tormented by a child’s fate (Dostoevsky often wrote about suffering fathers and innocent children, as in *The*

Brothers Karamazov). But whereas Dostoevsky might have given us feverish monologues or dramatic confrontations, *Küf* stays in Tolstoy's lane of measured realism and moral subtlety.

Basri is not prone to emotional outbursts or long speeches. He is a simple, uneducated man, much like one of Tolstoy's sympathetic peasant characters (for example, Platon Karataev in *War and Peace*). The film's power builds through small moments that quietly reveal Basri's character: he dutifully cares for his ailing mother, he meticulously files copies of every petition he sends, and he calmly endures the wary surveillance of a new local police chief (who fears Basri's persistence might mean trouble). This portrayal aligns with Tolstoy's admiration for the quiet moral strength of ordinary people. In *Resurrection*, for example, Tolstoy contrasts the humble righteousness of the oppressed with the moral blindness of their aristocratic oppressors. Similarly, in *Küf*, Basri — though politically powerless — stands out as a figure of integrity, especially compared to the bureaucrats who find it easier to ignore an inconvenient truth.

Eventually, *Küf* provides some closure. In the final act, by chance, human remains are found near the railway, and Basri is summoned to see if any of the recovered items belonged to his son. The authorities bluntly inform him that his son's body was discovered in an unmarked grave — murdered and buried off the record. This revelation is devastating, but it ends Basri's long limbo of uncertainty.

In the final scene, Basri performs a namaz (Islamic funeral prayer) for his son in an open field, alone under a gray sky. It is a deeply emotional climax, reminiscent of the spiritual resolutions in some of Tolstoy's works. This catharsis does not come from vengeance or official justice (the perpetrators are never identified or punished). Instead, it comes through Basri's personal act of faith and mourning. The image of a solitary father praying over his child's anonymous grave is heartrending. It raises the kind of moral and existential question Tolstoy grappled with: How can one find solace or meaning amid senseless suffering?

Tolstoy's later philosophy emphasized humility, love, and the primacy of personal conscience over the blind workings of the state. In *Küf*, Basri's final act is a quiet moral victory — he retains his humanity and honors his son's memory, even though the world cruelly failed them. The film's cinematography and pacing reinforce these themes by immersing us in Basri's slow experience of waiting. Long, uninterrupted shots show Basri walking miles of empty track or sitting quietly in an office, making us feel a hint of his endless wait. This approach parallels Tolstoy's narrative patience — for example, his willingness to spend pages on the tedium of a

bureaucrat's life in *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* or on the slow passage of time in “God Sees the Truth, But Waits.”

The effect is that when the emotional climax arrives (the discovery of the remains), it feels like a dam silently breaking. The film still avoids any overt melodrama, but years of suppressed grief finally surface. Reviewers noted that this restrained build-up followed by release is part of what makes *Küf* so powerful. It fits a Tolstoyan aesthetic of earned, honest emotion — the idea that a story should carefully build empathy so that the audience feels deeply without being artificially pushed.

One can directly compare Tolstoy's words with Basri's experience in *Küf*. In *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, Tolstoy observes: “Ivan Ilyich's life had been most simple and most ordinary and therefore most terrible” (Tolstoy, 1886/2004, p. 45). The horror of Ivan Ilyich's life lies in its ordinariness — a banal existence ending in a spiritual crisis. Basri's life in *Küf* is similarly simple and ordinary: day after day of humble, repetitive tasks. Yet beneath that mundane routine lies a deep tragedy, which makes it terrible in Tolstoy's sense.

In *Küf*, Basri's ordinariness is illustrated by a routine scene: he goes to the post office to mail another petition, then stops at the police station and asks, “Any news?” Each time, the officer replies blandly, “Same as last month. Nothing.” The exchange is painfully mundane, repeated every month for 18 years, but it masks an unfathomable sorrow. This scenario reflects Tolstoy's insight about the terror hidden in everyday life. Basri's suffering is not dramatic — it is the slow drip of unanswered letters and lonely meals, much like the mold (*küf*) slowly growing in the corners of his damp home, symbolizing decay and creeping hopelessness. By focusing on this slow erosion of hope, *Küf* embodies the Tolstoyan idea that heroism can mean simply carrying on in the face of relentless pain without losing one's decency or capacity to care.

In sum, *Küf* shows how deeply Tolstoy's influence can resonate in a modern film that otherwise has no explicit link to Tolstoy. By portraying profound loss, unwavering parental love, and the pursuit of truth and dignity, *Küf* carries the moral weight of a Tolstoyan narrative. Its spare, observant realism matches Tolstoy's narrative ethos, resulting in a film that is “unadorned and powerful” much like a Tolstoy story – stark yet emotionally overwhelming. Among our case studies, *Küf* perhaps most clearly echoes Tolstoy's compassionate focus on the afflicted and oppressed. It also demonstrates the ongoing relevance of Tolstoyan storytelling for confronting modern issues. Here, a politically charged tale of a disappeared person is

presented not as a thriller, but as an ethical, human-centered drama that examines one man's soul.

5. COMPARATIVE TEXTUAL ANALYSIS: TOLSTOY AND TURKISH FILM DIALOGUES

Family and Unhappiness: In *Anna Karenina*, Tolstoy writes, "All happy families are alike; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way" (Tolstoy, 1878/2004, p. 1). This implies that each family's troubles are unique. In *Clouds of May*, we see a variation of this idea. The family is not overtly unhappy, but a generational divide creates a singular strain. For example, Muzaffer asks his father why he cares so much about their land. His father gently answers, "Because they've seen more life than you and I." That simple response is quietly heartbreaking. It reveals the father's sense of loss that his son does not share his deep attachment to the land. This subtle discord in an otherwise loving family is their own kind of "unhappiness," echoing Tolstoy's insight that every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.

The Tragedy of Ordinary Life: Tolstoy writes in *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, "Ivan Ilyich's life had been most simple and most ordinary and therefore most terrible" (Tolstoy, 1886/2004, p. 45). He suggests that a life that looks ordinary and simple can hide a quiet horror if it lacks meaning. Basri's life in *Küf* exemplifies this principle. His daily routine — inspecting railroad tracks, writing petitions, caring for his mother — is extremely ordinary. Yet every unanswered petition and every day with no news of his son makes the ordinariness of Basri's life tragic. In a repeated exchange, Basri asks the police, "Any news?" and the officer replies, "Same as last month. Nothing." The mundane wording belies the devastating reality. Basri's persistent but futile question highlights how lonely and painful his "simple" life really is. It mirrors Tolstoy's notion that profound suffering can hide beneath an unremarkable daily life.

Urban Ennui and Disillusionment: In *War and Peace*, after immersing himself in shallow society, Pierre feels "in a strange, dull, and sleepy state" (Tolstoy, 1869/2007, p. 352). This describes a kind of spiritual fatigue. Mahmut in *Uzak* experiences a similar urban ennui. In one scene, Yusuf says life was better back in their village. Mahmut dryly responds, "Everything is the same here." When Yusuf persists, Mahmut cynically asks, "Then why come here?" Mahmut's words, like Pierre's emptiness, convey a surrender to meaninglessness. *Uzak* thus translates Tolstoy's insight about the emptiness of modern life into a contemporary Turkish context: Mahmut, the Istanbul intellectual, feels as spiritually drained and disillusioned as Tolstoy's aristocrat Pierre.

Moral Reckoning and Regret: In *Resurrection*, Tolstoy’s nobleman Nekhlyudov is consumed by guilt for his past behavior. Tolstoy writes that Nekhlyudov realized “all these things appeared so simple, so clear, so unquestionable, and at the same time, all his life was so contrary to them” (Tolstoy, 1899/2009, p. 174). In other words, Nekhlyudov suddenly sees that he has not lived according to the moral truths he believed. In *Dudaktan Kalbe*, Kenan has a similar epiphany. After years of chasing fame at the expense of love, Kenan confesses, “What have I gained from fame? I lost everything real in my life.” This is Kenan’s conscience speaking — he realizes he sacrificed genuine love (Lamia) and integrity for vanity. It closely parallels Nekhlyudov’s recognition that he lived against his own principles. Both men undergo a late awakening to the “simple and clear” truths they ignored: for Nekhlyudov, compassion and responsibility; for Kenan, love and contentment instead of ego. By voicing this regret, *Dudaktan Kalbe* injects a Tolstoyan moral clarity into its melodramatic story, giving the character an inner resurrection.

6. DISCUSSION: MORAL AND PHILOSOPHICAL PARALLELS

The case studies reveal a pattern of connections between Tolstoy’s literary legacy and Turkish cinematic storytelling. At the heart of Tolstoy’s work is a preoccupation with ethical questions: How should one live? What truly matters in life? How do we respond to suffering and injustice? Each of the Turkish films grapples with similar questions within its own context.

One key parallel is the tension between personal desire and moral duty. Tolstoy often portrayed characters torn between their passions and their sense of right and wrong (for example, Anna Karenina’s love versus her marital duty, or Prince Andrei’s ambition versus honor in *War and Peace*). Similarly, in the Turkish films, characters face these dilemmas. In *Dudaktan Kalbe*, Kenan is pulled between his artistic ambition and his loyalty to love; choosing ambition leaves him miserable, underscoring a moral that Tolstoy himself often implied – that chasing vanity over duty or affection leads to spiritual loss. The takeaway is akin to Tolstoy’s message: authenticity, humility, and love ultimately matter more than ego or social recognition.

Another parallel is the critique of social pretension and the emptiness of modern life. Tolstoy was critical of aristocratic pretensions and the hollowness he saw in high society. In *Uzak*, we find a modern reflection of this critique. Mahmut’s cultured, urbane lifestyle is revealed as emotionally empty. He prides himself on being a sophisticated artist, yet his life lacks genuine connection or purpose, much as Tolstoy depicted many high-society characters as having no real happiness or substance. Meanwhile, the film suggests that meaning might

exist in the simpler life Mahmut has left behind, echoing Tolstoy's idealization of the honest, down-to-earth life of peasants or those close to nature. Philosophically, *Uzak* raises the Tolstoyan question: what good is sophistication or progress if one loses one's soul or joy in living? Mahmut's quiet despair aligns with Tolstoy's skepticism about a modern "civilization" detached from humanist values.

How one responds to suffering is another philosophical bridge. In his later works, Tolstoy came to believe that the meaning of suffering lies in how we bear it — with love, faith, or moral integrity. In *Küf*, Basri's response to immense suffering (the disappearance of his son) is patience, perseverance, and a refusal to hate or give up hope. This is profoundly Tolstoyan. It parallels characters like the wrongfully imprisoned man in "God Sees the Truth, But Waits," who maintains dignity and forgives his offender. Basri's long vigil for truth, and his gentle persistence despite despair, reflect the same idea: that moral worth is proven by enduring hardship without bitterness. When Basri finally prays for his son, it is a moment of grace akin to Tolstoy's spiritual scenes — an act of love and faith that transcends injustice.

A related theme is the possibility of redemption or personal transformation. Tolstoy's characters often experience moral awakenings or seek atonement (Nekhlyudov in *Resurrection*, Pierre in *War and Peace*, Levin finding spiritual insight in *Anna Karenina*). In the Turkish films, we see smaller-scale versions of this. Kenan in *Dudaktan Kalbe* has a late realization of his wrongdoing and tries to make amends (even though some losses can not be undone). Mahmut in *Uzak* is more ambiguous – the film ends before we see any overt change, but the final shot of him alone hints at an awareness of his own isolation, a possible first step toward self-awareness. Muzaffer in *Clouds of May* subtly changes; witnessing his father's defeat and reflecting on his family's way of life, he seems to grow a bit more humble or appreciative. These arcs underscore a Tolstoyan faith in the capacity for moral self-knowledge. The films suggest, as Tolstoy does, that recognizing one's misplaced priorities or emptiness is the beginning of wisdom.

Finally, all these films wrestle with the question of what makes life meaningful — a question Tolstoy himself obsessively explored. Tolstoy, especially later in life, asked what gives life meaning in the face of death and hardship. *Uzak* poses this implicitly through Mahmut's listless existence; *Küf* poses it through Basri's perseverance; *Clouds of May* through the tension between art and life; *Dudaktan Kalbe* through the cost of trading love for fame. In each film, meaning is found (or lost) in human relationships and moral choices. Mahmut loses a sense of meaning by alienating others and betraying his ideals. Basri finds meaning in

pursuing truth and honoring his son's memory. Muzaffer finds a renewed sense of purpose in reconnecting with his roots and family. Kenan only finds some peace by acknowledging his moral failure. These conclusions align with Tolstoy's humanist philosophy: that love, truth, and integrity are the core of a life worth living.

7. STYLISTIC PARALLELS

Beyond thematic content, there are striking stylistic parallels between Tolstoy's narrative approach and the cinematic style of these films. Several stand out:

Observational Realism: The Turkish directors employ a patient, observational style reminiscent of Tolstoy's detailed realism. Tolstoy's prose is known for clear, rich detail that immerses readers in everyday life. Similarly, films like *Uzak*, *Clouds of May*, and *Küf* use long takes, minimal music, and naturalistic performances to observe characters without interference. Often the camera remains still or moves very slowly, letting scenes unfold naturally. For instance, *Küf* holds the camera on Basri during extended moments of silence and routine, much like Tolstoy would linger on a character's ordinary day. This unvarnished, reportorial approach builds a powerful emotional impression. By the end of *Küf*, the sight of Basri quietly praying is overwhelming precisely because the film has been so restrained leading up to it. In the same way, Tolstoy's plain, steady accumulation of detail makes the climaxes of his stories deeply affecting.

Multi-Perspective Empathy: Tolstoy's narratives often shift between multiple characters' perspectives, painting even minor characters with understanding and empathy. Likewise, these Turkish films, while centered on one or two protagonists, give attention to supporting characters and their inner lives. In *Clouds of May*, Ceylan includes scenes focusing on Muzaffer's young nephew and his mother, even though these digressions do not advance the main plot. In *Uzak*, the film balances Mahmut's point of view with Yusuf's, making us understand both. In *Küf*, we briefly glimpse the new police chief's personal concerns. This democratic spread of attention is very Tolstoyan: it suggests that every person's story matters. The films, like Tolstoy's novels, create a tapestry of experiences, enhancing our empathy for all the characters, not just the leads.

Symbolism within Realism: Tolstoy often embeds symbols in everyday elements of his stories — an oak tree reflecting a character's growth, a patch of sunlight indicating hope. These symbols arise naturally from realistic settings. The Turkish films do something similar. They find meaning in concrete, ordinary objects and environments. In *Küf*, the persistent mold

in Basri's home is a subtle symbol of decay and lingering grief, quietly growing as Basri's hopes fade. In *Clouds of May*, the walnut trees are both literal and symbolic treasures, representing family legacy and continuity; their threatened removal carries emotional weight. The drifting clouds in the sky, often shown in *Clouds of May*, evoke the transience of life's moments. In *Uzak*, the winter landscape and distant ships underscore the characters' isolation and longing. These films do not use heavy-handed metaphors; instead, like Tolstoy, they let natural elements and simple visuals speak poetically within a realistic context.

Narrative Pacing and Structure: Tolstoy's stories, especially his later works, often forgo tight plots in favor of an ebb and flow of everyday life, punctuated by moments of high drama that feel earned. Similarly, the Turkish films often avoid formulaic plotting. They feel like slices of life with their own rhythm. *Clouds of May* does not build to a conventional dramatic climax; the resolution of the land dispute is understated and almost anticlimactic, and the film ends on a reflective mood rather than a plot point. *Uzak* and *Küf* also conclude without tidy resolutions — Mahmut remains distant, Basri does not get justice in the legal sense. This approach is akin to Tolstoy's realism, where life continues beyond the final page and not every conflict is neatly resolved. Instead of neat endings, meaning in these films is found in small personal victories and insights (Mahmut perhaps recognizing his loneliness, Basri finding closure in faith, Muzaffer appreciating home). This realistic pacing and openness invite viewers to keep thinking about the characters' lives, just as Tolstoy often leaves readers pondering what happens after the novel ends.

8. TOLSTOY'S INFLUENCE VS. CHEKHOV'S AND DOSTOEVSKY'S: A COMPARATIVE LENS

While Tolstoy's impact on these Turkish films is clear, it is important to distinguish his influence from that of other great Russian writers, particularly Anton Chekhov and Fyodor Dostoevsky. The directors were likely inspired by all three to some degree, but each author contributes something different, and Tolstoy's role is unique.

Chekhov's influence is evident in the films' subtlety, open-ended structure, and compassion for everyday people. Ceylan, for example, openly cites Chekhov as an inspiration. *Clouds of May* is even dedicated to Chekhov, and its scenario of an orchard and land at risk parallels Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard*. Chekhov's trademarks — quiet realism, focus on mood and character over plot, and a poignant sense of life's little disappointments — are present

in these films. We see it in the gentle, unresolved endings and the wry observation of mundane life in *Uzak* and *Clouds of May*.

But what does Tolstoy contribute that Chekhov does not? Tolstoy brings a greater moral and philosophical weight. Chekhov tended to present life without open judgment and often ended stories ambiguously. Tolstoy, by contrast, often pressed big ethical questions and sought deeper moral or spiritual truths. In the films, the Chekhovian influence is in the observational, understated style, whereas the Tolstoyan influence is in the underlying ethical concerns and the emphasis on certain themes. For instance, *Clouds of May* clearly echoes Chekhov's *Cherry Orchard* in plot, but its emotional core — the father's almost sacred connection to his land and the moral critique of the bureaucratic threat — is more Tolstoyan. Chekhov's version of a lost estate is tinged with resigned sadness and irony, whereas in *Clouds of May* the loss carries a moral urgency and reverence for nature that feel closer to Tolstoy.

Similarly, *Uzak* is often called Chekhovian for its mood and its focus on everyday moments. Yet beneath that surface, *Uzak* has a Tolstoyan dimension: it quietly questions what makes life meaningful, a very Tolstoy-like inquiry, and implicitly critiques Mahmut's failure to live up to his ideals. Chekhov might have simply shown two lonely people, but *Uzak* (like Tolstoy) casts a subtle moral eye on Mahmut's choices. In essence, Chekhov gave these films their narrative subtlety and humanistic humor, while Tolstoy gave them their moral backbone and humanist gravitas.

Dostoevsky's influence on these films is less pronounced but worth noting. Dostoevsky is known for psychological depth, moral ambiguity, and intense, often dark, drama. The Turkish art films generally avoid the overtly dramatic, feverish qualities of Dostoevsky's stories. For instance, *Küf* deals with a scenario (a parent's suffering and a brutal state crime) that could have been depicted in a very Dostoevskian way — full of intense confrontations, guilt-ridden monologues, and perhaps a more explosive emotional climax. Instead, *Küf* remains restrained and exterior, which is more in line with Tolstoy's approach.

Where we sense Dostoevsky in these films is in the acknowledgment of human darkness and inner turmoil. *Küf* certainly shares Dostoevsky's compassion for those who suffer innocently and his indictment of social injustice. There is psychological intensity in Basri's silent torment that recalls Dostoevskian characters. *Uzak* has moments (like Mahmut's self-loathing when he switches to pornography) that echo the kind of divided self Dostoevsky

explored. But stylistically, the films refrain from Dostoevsky's extremes of emotion and conflict.

Tolstoy's influence, by contrast, manifests in the films' focus on moral conscience and everyday virtue. If Dostoevsky probes the extremes of guilt and redemption with high drama, Tolstoy illuminates moral truth in ordinary life with quiet reflection. In these films, Tolstoy's presence is seen in the ethical questions and the sympathetic, realistic portrayal of ordinary people. For example, Basri's ordeal in *Küf* is presented without sensationalism, focusing on his moral fortitude — very Tolstoyan — rather than on graphic details or melodrama that a Dostoevskian approach might have emphasized.

In summary, Chekhov's influence can be seen in the films' tone and form (subtle, character-driven, often open-ended), Dostoevsky's influence flickers in their awareness of psychological and social depths, but Tolstoy's influence is at the core of their themes and ethos. Turkish filmmakers blended these influences: Chekhov provided narrative subtlety, Dostoevsky an understanding of inner struggle, and Tolstoy a guiding humanist vision. Tolstoy's unique contribution is especially clear in how these films consistently revolve around ethical questions (duty versus desire, integrity versus hypocrisy) and ultimately affirm values like love, family, and honesty —albeit in an understated way.

It is also important to remember the historical context: Turkish intellectuals have long admired all three Russian writers. Yet Tolstoy was often regarded as the moral philosopher among them. Turkish critics sometimes contrasted Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, and Chekhov in a similar way to how Western critics do: Tolstoy the ethical realist, Dostoevsky the psychological agonist, Chekhov the subtle observer of life's small dramas. The films reflect this mixture. Ceylan, for example, cites Chekhov and Dostoevsky, but through Chekhov's influence one can find Tolstoy's spirit filtering in as well. And because Tolstoy was so prominent in Turkish literary culture (through widespread translations and admiration by writers like Reşat Nuri), it is natural that his ideas would permeate Turkish cinema, sometimes even indirectly.

By distinguishing among these influences, we can better appreciate Tolstoy's unique role. Chekhov lent the films a compassionate gaze and structural elegance; Dostoevsky contributed an awareness of existential struggle; but Tolstoy provided the guiding light of humanist values and the search for moral clarity. It is Tolstoy's humanist spirit — his deep concern for how people should live and treat one another— that shines through most clearly in

these films, giving them a depth and universality that link Turkish stories to a broader human story.

9. CONCLUSION

Leo Tolstoy's far-reaching influence is very much alive in Turkish cinema, not through direct, scene-by-scene adaptations of his novels, but through more subtle thematic echoes and philosophical kinship. By examining films such as *Dudaktan Kalbe*, *Uzak*, *Clouds of May*, and *Küf*, we have traced how a Russian literary spirit can permeate a different medium and culture, yielding works that are at once authentically Turkish and quietly Tolstoyan. These films collectively demonstrate how Tolstoy's core concerns – the moral striving of individuals, the critique of social pretenses, the contrast between sincere rural values and hollow urban sophistication, and the quest for spiritual meaning amidst suffering – find new life on screen in stories set in Istanbul apartments, Anatolian villages, and along remote railroads.

Methodologically, this study combined comparative literary analysis with close film analysis. This interdisciplinary approach allowed us to see intertextual “conversations” between Tolstoy's texts and Turkish cinematic narratives. Recognizing Tolstoy's influence, for example, helped articulate why *Küf* feels so universal in its portrayal of suffering: it is part of a continuum of storytelling that includes Tolstoy's compassionate narratives of the oppressed maintaining their dignity. Likewise, identifying Tolstoyan themes in *Uzak* and *Clouds of May* enriched our understanding of those films' commentary on modern Turkish life; it became clear that these films were not just personal or national stories but also contributions to a larger humanistic discourse that Tolstoy exemplified.

A major finding of this research is that literary influence can operate transnationally in complex and subtle ways. Turkish filmmakers have not been mere imitators of Tolstoy, but active interpreters and reinventors. They took what was meaningful from Tolstoy—whether it be a theme like the redeeming quality of family bonds, a structural idea like juxtaposing city and country life, or a stylistic preference for quiet realism—and wove those elements into stories that address Turkish social realities and cultural sensibilities. This goes beyond simple homage; it represents what adaptation theorist Linda Hutcheon calls the adapter's dual role as “first interpreter and then creator.” In this case, Turkish artists interpreted Tolstoy's ideas about life and morality and then created new cinematic works that express those ideas in a Turkish context. The result is a form of cultural adaptation where the source of inspiration (Tolstoy's

writing) and the new creation (the film) are in a dialogue, even though they are separated by language, era, and medium.

We also saw that Tolstoy's influence in Turkish cinema is part of a broader literary conversation. Other Russian writers like Chekhov and Dostoevsky are certainly in the mix of influences, but Tolstoy's unique voice —his humanist, moralistic, yet deeply empathetic voice— is distinctly audible. By comparing Tolstoy's influence with Chekhov's and Dostoevsky's, we highlighted that Tolstoy often provides the ethical backbone and thematic substance, whereas Chekhov contributes narrative form and tone, and Dostoevsky contributes psychological depth and a sense of the tragic. Understanding this helps prevent an oversimplified attribution of any Russian-like quality in Turkish films to Tolstoy alone; instead, we can appreciate the nuanced blend while still affirming that Tolstoy's legacy is a significant strand in that braid.

From a cultural perspective, this case study underscores the concept of a “world republic of letters” in action. Türkiye, through its early translations and educational canon, embraced Tolstoy and other Russian authors as part of its own literary heritage. That cross-cultural embrace set the stage for later creative reinterpretations. The enduring popularity of Tolstoy in Turkish literary circles meant that filmmakers inheriting this cultural environment could draw from Tolstoy almost as readily as from native sources. In a sense, Tolstoy became assimilated into Turkish culture as a shared reference point, which is a testament to the permeability of cultural boundaries when it comes to powerful art. This challenges a strictly nationalistic view of literature and cinema; it shows that what is “Turkish” cinema can also be, in part, “Russian” in its lineage – and by extension, that storytelling is a transnational human endeavor.

The findings here invite further research in several directions. One avenue is to explore other Russian literary influences in Turkish arts, or conversely, to see how Turkish literature and themes have been received or adapted in other cultures (a reverse inquiry). Another interesting direction is to examine Tolstoy's cinematic legacy in other national contexts: for instance, how have Tolstoy's works or ideas influenced Indian cinema, or Japanese cinema, or other Middle Eastern cinemas? A comparative study could reveal whether Tolstoy's humanism finds similar expression elsewhere or whether local contexts draw out different facets of his legacy. Additionally, further research might delve into the role of literary translators, educators, and critics in shaping these cross-cultural artistic dialogues. In the Turkish case, figures like Reşat Nuri (both a novelist and a commentator on Tolstoy) acted as mediators who framed

Tolstoy's ideas for Turkish audiences. Understanding their influence could deepen our appreciation of how artistic ideas travel.

In conclusion, exploring "Tolstoy in Turkish Cinema" has shown that great art knows no borders. Tolstoy's novels, born in 19th-century Russia, have inspired creative minds in 20th and 21st-century Türkiye to produce films that, while entirely original, carry an echo of Tolstoy's voice. This speaks to the universality of Tolstoy's insight into the human condition – his portrayal of love, suffering, moral choice, and search for meaning strikes chords that are as relevant in Anatolia as in Russia. It also speaks to the openness of Turkish creative culture to foreign influences, synthesizing them into something new and locally resonant. The films discussed are, ultimately, works of Turkish cinema: they are rooted in Turkish landscapes, social issues, and cinematic traditions. Yet, by interpreting them through a Tolstoyan lens, we gain an added appreciation for their depth and for the rich tapestry of influences that nurtured them.

For practitioners and aficionados of cinema, this study reinforces the idea that understanding a director's literary and philosophical inspirations can greatly enhance our interpretation of their films. Recognizing a Tolstoyan element in a film like *Uzak* or *Küf* not only illuminates that film's themes but also contributes to a larger conversation about how cinematic storytelling can engage with classic literature in creative ways beyond straightforward adaptation. It shows that adaptation is not only about remaking plots; it can be about adapting ideas and sensibilities across cultures and media.

In a world often characterized by cultural polarization or the idea of an unbridgeable gap between East and West, the example set by these films is quietly inspiring. They remind us that storytelling transcends such divides. A father's grief in Anatolia can express a truth as profound as a count's existential crisis in Moscow; a well-told story in any language can speak to all of humanity. In bringing Tolstoy's humanist spirit into Turkish cinema, Turkish filmmakers have not only paid homage to a great writer but have also contributed to the universal human quest for meaning through art. As viewers and readers, we are enriched by this cross-cultural fertilization, and we are reminded of Tolstoy's own belief in the shared humanity that underlies all cultural differences.

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