

ABSTRACT

The Transformation of the Representations of Motherhood in Turkish Cinema:

From Angelic to Voluptuous Mothers

Melis Umut

melisumut@su.sabanciuniv.edu

This essay explores the transformation of the representations of motherhood in Turkish Cinema over the last half century. The naive belief of an angelic mother, desexualized and purified from all feminine and earthly desires, a common characteristic of the Turkish melodramas between 50s and 70s, was cut abruptly with the emergence of the sexually active and even voluptuous mother representations. We, especially, encounter this new type of mothers in the so-called men's films starting from the late 1990s. Nuri Bilge Ceylan's *Uc Maymun (Three Monkeys)* portrays one of the most controversial mother figures in Turkish Cinema. Mostly accentuating on this film, I will analyze how the lustful mother figure engenders a challenge against the heteronormative trilogy; mother, father, and the child(ren). More pressingly, how sexualization of a mother figure is portrayed as the sole cause of the masculine traumas in these men's films is argued in this essay.

Keywords: Femininity, Motherhood, Melodrama, Men's Films, Turkish Cinema.

The Transformation of the Representations of Motherhood in Turkish Cinema: From Angelic to Voluptuous Mothers

Would you tell me about my mother again daddy?

Your mother was an angel my kid.

(A well-known and repeated dialog in the Turkish melodramas)

This essay explores the transformation of the maternal representations in Turkish cinema over the last half century. The main focus will be on the melodramas between the 1950s and 70s and the so called men's films¹ starting from the late 1990s. My first aim is to reveal how maternal representations have always been problematic in its context. Using Irigaray's categorization of women into three social roles; mother, virgin, and prostitute, I will reveal how these roles are intertwined with each other which excludes the women from either role in the end. My second argument is to reveal the common misogynistic approach to femininity in both genre. Despite the usage of different mechanisms, both the angelic and the voluptuous mother are the products of the misogynistic attitude in general. I will accentuate on the actual death of the mother in the melodramatic genre and the silencing / metaphorical death of the mother in the men's films respectively. While analyzing the obscure femme fatale mother representations of the later period, I will focus on Nuri Bilge Ceylan's *Uc Maymun (Three Monkeys)*.

In Irigaray's understanding, there are three main social roles imposed on women in the symbolic order. These are the roles of mother, virgin, and prostitute. A woman should belong to only one category and if not, she threatens the very social order. If we look at these these social

¹ Men's films have emerged as a reaction to the women's films of the 1980s. They can be compared with the American buddy films of the 1960s and 70s which emphasize on the friendship between two or more men. However, some theorists such as Asuman Suner points out that these films are the dark melodramas or the men's melodramas.

roles, we see that virgin is the role every women have to adopt for a certain period of time while the others are optional. According to Irigaray, a virgin has a pure exchange value as she offers a wide range of possibilities. She is like the fantasy of every men but once deflowered, she loses this fantastic quality as is forced to be the private property of her partner. Once impregnated, the woman adopts her maternal role. From now on, she no longer offers any joy value to the society but is apt to remain on the side of the reproductive nature. While a mother is the private property and excluded from the exchange of men, prostitute is the opposite, a common property whose value increases directly proportional with the usage of exchange. While a mother should have no interest in any kind of sexual pleasure, a prostitute is apt to give sexual pleasure. However, as Irigaray indicates, there is a prerequisite to be a woman regardless of the social roles they adopt. All of these three social roles prohibit women to gain pleasure for her own sake (Irigaray, 1985). Even though Turkish cinema offers more obscure and complicated female portrayals, feminine lack of pleasure is sustained in the films as will be discussed.

The period between 1950s and 70s witnessed the golden age of the Turkish melodramas. The two decades were stamped with the excessive caricaturization of the portrayals, the common feature of the melodramatic genre. The emphasis on the categorized portrayals result in the profoundly gendered representations also. Despite the classical dichotomies such as good / bad, and rich / poor, man / woman becomes a major dichotomy the melodramatic genre is nourished upon. However, it is the polarization of women into two strict categories that determines her social role in the melodramas. A woman is portrayed either as the ultimate good; caring, altruistic, loving, monogamous, and emotional, or the ultimate bad; egoist, self-centered, polygamous, and insensitive. This makes it easy for the women to be categorized in either of the roles Irigaray suggests. Thus, the naive and the innocent virgin, the altruistic and the loving mother, and the ravenous and the evilish prostitute / femme fatale² can clearly be distinguished by the spectator.

² By prostitute, I am referring to the femme fatale. A femme fatale is mostly referred and perceived as a prostitute by the male protagonist and the spectator in the Turkish melodramas.

The virgin and the mother are the ultimate good while the prostitute is portrayed as the definition of evil. A virgin is the one whom everyone tries to possess from the beginning of the film. A prostitute / femme fatale, mostly presented as an in-between woman, is valuable for a certain time. A mother is the holistic representation of womanhood. If the plot evolves around the virginal representation of the main woman character, the formula is the same. This virgin is represented as the desire of every man but it is always the leading actor (*jeune premier*) who achieves to possess her in the end. He might be fooled by a femme fatale for a time but he realizes his mistake and returns to the naive and the innocent virgin. This is usually the end of the story which is in accordance with Zizek's formulation who suggests that happy ending is only possible with the first woman (Zizek, 83). The woman who achieves to defer her desire always wins the game, the prize of which is the inclusion in the heteronormative order, as the virgin is awarded with marriage and a probable future motherhood as the film ends.

The virgin is rescued due to her asexual but promising representation. However, the plot does not offer such happy endings for the other two types; the mother and the prostitute as they share the same destiny which is death most of the time. They are both sacrificed in order to maintain the symbolic order. The main reason is the potential threat a sexualized woman might impose to the symbolic order. Thus, sexuality does not go together with love in the Turkish melodramas. Even a modicum of sexuality or any connotation to it is prohibited in this genre (Yumul, 51). While the melodramatic plot mostly revolves around the concept of family, we cannot talk about a safe place when we are talking about the family as family is the source of all the most undischarged emotions and hysterical crisis. Family is the uncanny element in these films most of the time. However, it is the unification of the family that the male protagonist struggles to achieve but fails most of the time as most films end with a loss, mostly the loss of the beloved woman.

The easiest way to desexualize and purify a woman from all feminine and earthly desires is to kill her. In most of the films the mother is dead which gives an angelic characteristic to her. A dead woman has no value as she no longer offers any possibility to the society. She is nothing but a memory. The problem arises when this memory gains an iconic feature which is a special character of the Turkish melodramas. The name of the mother is activated and vocalized by the father as he adopts this maternal memoir, passive but at the same time powerful. By stating “Your mother was an angel my kid”, the father tries to reconstruct the social order, shattered by the absence of the mother. By being dead, a woman becomes his story as the spectator encounters her through the words of the father, the patriarchal voice of the authority. He can recreate her fantasy woman, bestowing her the ultimate moral values, and the spectator is misled by this imaginary woman who has supposedly once lived. At the same time, the spectator also feels haunted by this fantastic and holy mother image. She becomes the asexual fantasy of the society, not the kind of asexuality the virgin represents as she is unpromising unlike the virgin. Thus, the dead mother has no sexual value but a virtual one for the spectator. She is also valuable for the male protagonist as she becomes the ultimate masculine desire, a woman who has done her feminine job by giving birth before death which achieves to desexualize her in the ultimate way. Desexualization goes together with the elevation of the angelic dead mother to the sublime place. She becomes a part of his-story, a story that he repeatedly tells his children and more significantly, to the society. She becomes a value of his integrity, his successful past. She becomes the representation of “there is always a woman behind every successful men”. Thus, she becomes his success.

The men's films starting from the second half of the 1990s portray different kind of femininities. As the name of this phase suggests, these films focus on masculine relationships. Contrary to the melodramatic persona who constructs his masculinity over his relationship with a woman, the new type of masculinity is constructed on homosocial relationships. Therefore, misogynistic approach is unavoidable in these films. The myth of the angelic mother is dead so is

the virgin but rather these films portray morbid representations of femininity oscillating between motherhood and prostitution. The main focus is on the middle aged men's traumatic lives and shattered juvenile dreams behind which a femme fatale figure is always present. However, this female portrayal is slightly different than the caricature-like femme fatale of the melodramatic genre. The neo femme fatale appears as a down-to-earth, preferably a mother, figure in the beginning of the film. As the plot evolves, she is sexualized through extramarital encounters with strangers. However, this so-perceived misbehaviour is punished with the complete desexualization of the woman in the end. This type of mother, contrary to the angelic mother represented as part of his-story, a ghostly figure behind his success, is represented as the sole cause of the male protagonist's misery and failure in life.

Nuri Bilge Ceylan's 2008 film *Uc Maymun (Three Monkeys)* portrays one of the most controversial mother figures, a mother caught in the act of adultery by her own son. The film portrays a poor family, a mother, a father, and a son whose routinely dull life is shaken up by an unexpected incident. Eyüp (Yavuz Bingol) takes the blame for his boss' car accident and sentenced for a short period of time in exchange of a monthly stipend and a collective money he is to obtain when he gets out. While he is behind the bars, his unemployed son, Ismail (Rifat Sungar), forces her mother, Hacer (Hatice Aslan), to ask for some advance on the money from the boss, Servet (Ercan Kesal), in order to buy a car. However, Hacer, seduced by the boss, starts an affair with him which perturbs the ordinary life they are living. This affair does not last long and Servet puts an end to it ignoring Hacer's love and obsession for him. When Eyüp gets out and everybody learns about this supposedly secret affair, it is Ismail that puts an end to this commotion by killing Servet. His murder is covered by the same method Servet used before as Eyüp finds someone else to take the fall and life goes on.

The striking difference between the melodramas and the men's films is that while the

former ones have a strict ending, the latter ones mostly do not have a specific ending. As aforementioned, the melodramas can either have a happy ending, including a newly wed couple or a reunification of a family, or a sad ending, the death of the beloved one but both leave the spectator with a sympathetic attitude towards the characters. A newly wed woman is a future mother while a dead mother is the desexualized and angelized form of womanhood a spectator feels pity for. We feel pity because everything is said and done on stage. *Nothing is spared because nothing is left unsaid.* (Brooks, 4). The only surplus left for the spectator is the future promise. However, the men's films leave the spectator with unanswered questions, promising nothing but a continuity of the maelstrom the characters are drawn into. The title of the film in question refers to the three wise monkeys who together embody the proverbial maxim "hear no evil, speak no evil, see no evil". The lack of communication between the characters and the reluctance to share their inner feelings makes it hard for the spectator to have any sympathy for them. Thus, pity is not the feeling evoked in the spectator, especially towards the female characters. Hacer becomes nothing but an abjected entity. In accordance with Kristeva's notion of abjection, she becomes *a weight of meaningless.* (Kristeva, 390). The spectator is led to feel that she is going to deal with her ennui forever because it seems there is no departure and cannot feel so much sympathy towards her as she has been represented as the sole cause of all the commotion. It is either indifference or disgust the spectator is led to feel towards her at the end of the film.

The confounded spectator is led to blame the woman for everything happened as who the victim is blurred through several mechanisms. One of them is the synchronicity between the money transaction and Hacer's affair. The affair starts right after she obtains the money as an advance from Servet. When Eyüp takes the collective money in full amount in the end, Servet insinuates him that the advance payment was a gesture. Though Hacer is the least affected by the money in question among all, she becomes the source of the transaction, the embodiment over which the undeserved money is transacted. In the eyes of her husband and son, her act gains a prostitudinal quality as her

sexual desire is misrepresented. Her sexual act, together with the money transaction, doubly prostitute her.

The other mechanism that maintains the misrepresentation of the women is the emphasis on the visualization of the masculine traumas. In the men's films, female betrayal is never a feminine issue but masculinized through the traumatic experiences the men have to go through. The background story of the women's betrayal is either secondary or absent as the main focus is on the trauma of the husband or the lover. In the men's world, the women's betrayal is silenced. The deed of the woman becomes a metaphor and the betrayal is evoked either in the men's unconscious or through his homosocial relationships. In *Three Monkeys*, this trauma is represented by the repressions and regressions both the father and the son deal with.

The peak moment of the film is when Ismail catches a glimpse of his mother having sexual intercourse through the keyhole of her bedroom. This enactment causes a regression to the primal scene which is followed by the hallucination of the dead brother, probably drawn when he was four or five. Right after the metaphorical primal scene, the camera moves to the kitchen revealing a knife. Ismail stares at this knife, planning to commit murder as if he tries to overcome his castration but instead he is haunted by the memory of his dead brother. In the end, he ends up killing Servet who has castrated both him and his father. However, in this Oedipal scenario, the father is still alive trying to maintain the symbolic order by finding someone else to take the fall for his son's murder. What Eyüp goes through is similar to his son's experience. Right after he is ensured about the inauspicious affair between his wife and his own boss, he is haunted by the ghost of his dead son. The ghost of the child hugs him from behind while Eyüp is sobbing in his son's bed, the same place Ismail had a similar hallucination.

The return of the repressed is embodied in the dead son of whom none of the characters

talk about except the scene where Eyüp and Ismail visit his grave. The compassionate visit to the grave is not accompanied by Hacer, similar to her reluctance to visit her husband in prison. Her indifferent attitude engenders a strong homosocial relationship between the father and the son who find themselves dealing with the uneasiness together. It is remarkable to add that the men's films of the decade rely on the homosocial relationships which substitutes the father and son relationship most of the time. The male protagonist finds an idealized embodiment in an older man who is supposed to rescue him from being an orphan. (Ulusay, 152). *Three Monkeys* is one of the few examples of the decade which portray the actual father – son relationship. The basis of the homosocial relationship in question is the hatred and disgust towards the mother figure, the portrayal of the demon who had castrated both men. Kimmel points out that the masculinity is a homosocial enactment, rooted in the pre-oedipal stage, when the little boy, still identified with the mother, sees the father as a combination of awe, wonder, terror, and desire through the mother's eyes. The repression of the homoerotic desire for the father leads to homophobia which manifests itself in the later homosocial relationships men sustain. (Kimmel, 2004). According to Foucault, it is the desire-in-uneasiness that shapes the homosocial relationships among men. (Foucault, 309). This desire-in-uneasiness is overshadowed with an imaginary or an actual woman, a guarantor of the heterosexual matrix. However, the hatred towards Hacer that maintains this relationship also have a homoerotic and incestuous reference which is not the subject this paper investigates. Nevertheless, it should be kept in mind that it is the portrayal of Hacer that causes these men face their darkest unconscious desires.

The hatred and disgust towards Hacer is tried to be evoked in the spectator by all possible means. While both men are haunted by the 'return of the repressed', Hacer is represented as a fool in love, acting egoistically, caring for no one but her own sexuality. Her insane delusion manifests itself in her improper behaviour, such as her following Servet around his house where she encounters him with his wife and new-born child. This scene is the manifestation of her possible

corruption of the two families, her and Servet's, and thus a threat to the heteronormative order. She is represented as the 'other woman', mostly referred as the prostitute which irritates the spectator. Hacer is portrayed as a femme fatale figure as is relevant with Zizek's formulation. As he points out, a femme fatale ruins the lives of men and at the same time, she is the victim of her own lust. While she damages the ones around her, she becomes a slave to some third, ambiguous man. Her morbid representation makes the spectator unsure of her emotions, whether she enjoys or suffers or whether she is the manipulator or the victim of manipulation. (Zizek, 65). However, as Zizek also points out, femme fatale is always a fantasy figure. She is easily distinguished by her attitude, looks, and sexual charm all of which are missing in Hacer. The common feature of the men's films is the the unclassical representations of the femme fatale. Hacer is not the dazzling woman who can easily seduce the spectator and probably no spectator wants to catch a glimpse of the ennui of her everyday life, working in a dull job, doing housework. The spectator might easily be overwhelmed by the charm of a femme fatale regardless of her misbehaviour and evilish plans. However, Hacer, by being a plain woman promising no further interest and represented as a menace to the society, is unable to obtain the sympathy of the spectator.

Hacer cannot be classified in accordance with Irigaray's categorization as adopting the mother and the prostitute roles at the same time excludes her from both of them. A woman, once prostituted, cannot return to her maternal role and as a prostitute, Hacer also loses her value as is rejected by both of the two men she is involved with as her lover abandons her and her husband rejects to have any intimacy with her. She is nothing but an abjected entity, a disposal trying to be get rid of by all the men in her life, her husband, son, and lover, all of whom are by no means the immaculate characters the film portrays. However, none of the masculine misdoings are represented as destructive as the female sexuality. Nothing can be more perilous than a desirous woman so her desire is to be eliminated. If she is still in the flesh, unlike the angelic mother, she has to be abandoned by the patriarchal authority. Thus, Irigaray's suggestion that pleasure is forbidden to each

and every women regardless of the social roles they adopt is supported by these two mother representations.

The aforementioned two mother representations are both the products of the misogynistic approach. Angelization of a mother is misogynistic in its attempt as it enhances the production of the fantasy woman, a woman that does not exist. This fantastic woman is used as an object of the male success, a part of his-story. However, the voluptuous mother offers the contrary. Compared with the prude melodramatic woman, uneasy with everything about sexuality, the neo femme fatale is represented the reverse with her readiness for any sexual encounter without giving second thoughts. This perilous woman also becomes the part of his-story but a story of failure as she is perceived as the initiator and the perpetuator of the male protagonist's traumas.

REFERENCES

Brooks, Peter. *The Melodramatic Imagination*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1976.

Foucault, Michel. *Foucault Live: Interviews, 1961-1984*. ed. Sylvere Lotringer; trans. Lysa Hochroth and John Johnston. New York: Semiotext(e), 1996.

Irigaray, Luce. *This Sex Which is Not One*. New York: Cornell University Press, 1985.

Kristeva, Julia. “Approaching Abjection” *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, European Perspectives. New York: Columbia University Press, 1982.

Suner, Asuman. *Hayalet Ev: Yeni Türk Sinemasında Aidiyet, Kimlik ve Bellek*. İstanbul: Metis Yayınları, 2006.

Ulusay, Nejat. “Günümüz Türk sinemasında “erkek filmleri”nin yükselişi ve erkeklik krizi” *Toplum ve Bilim*. Vol:101, Fall, 2004, İstanbul: 144-61.

Yumul, Arus. “Türk Sinemasında Aşk ve Ahlak” *Türk Film Araştırmalarında Yeni Yönelimler 1* Ed. Deniz Derman. İstanbul, Bağlam Yayınları, 2001.

Zizek, Slavoj. *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan Through Popular Culture*, London: The MIT Press, 1991.