

Feminism and Women's Film History in Turkey: the 1980s

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In this paper I will focus on the relationship between feminism and women's film history. I take women's film history to mean not only the history of women filmmakers or the history of films made by women, but also to refer to the discovery of film histories that have a direct relationship to feminism and women. I will provide an historical overview of the 1980s feminist movement and cinema in Turkey, in an attempt to make this under-explored history visible. The first part of the paper focuses on the women's movement; the second part focuses on film. My objective is to examine the relationship between feminism and cinema while focusing on the women's movement and women's films of the 1980s. In thinking about the nature and implications of the representation of women constructed in Turkish cinema and the issues addressed by the women's movement, I argue that there are connections to be made on an historical, analytical and theoretical level between the two sets of practices.

Following a decade of increased and violent polarisation between Left and Right in Turkish politics, during which each side attacked the other, both sides attacked the institutions of the state, which in turn attacked them, traditionally perceived to be the guardian of the Turkish state and constitution, the army decided to intervene to put an end to what appeared to be incipient civil war. The military intervention of September 12th 1980 repressed both the radical Left as well as the radical Right in Turkey whilst aiming towards a period of depoliticisation in society. It crushed all political parties and particularly leftist organisations, while temporarily suspending democracy and thereby bringing normal political life to a complete halt. The coup attempted a systematic depoliticisation of the masses.

In the 80s atmosphere of repression, the first social movement which demonstrated the courage to be in opposition and to articulate its demands was the women's movement. But, how did feminism operate in this depoliticised space as a political movement? Did the movement not seek to seem political or did it seek to appear non-political? Did the movement emerge as non-political intentionally or unintentionally? Or, was it simply not perceived as political?

The attempts to answer these questions create a considerable amount of debate. On one hand are scholars, like Tekeli, Gülendem, Gelgeç-Gürpınar, who claim that feminism could only

have come to the forefront after 1980 military coup.¹ In other words, they believe that if the leftist movement had not been hit so severely by the coup, women would not have been able to question the hegemony of the male leaders. On the other hand, some argue that if the left wing movements had not been crushed, the women involved in them would anyway have discovered women's oppression as Western feminists did.

In the context of the military regime of the 1980s, women were privileged in the sense that other groups, including labour, students, civil servants, and political parties were suppressed, yet women were able to be engaged in politics. Whether it was because women's groups and their activism were thought insignificant or because the vague concept of women's rights could root its legitimacy in Kemalist reforms, women could raise their voice. In accordance with this claim Yesim Arat points out that during a period when political will was curtailed these women were able to exercise their political will.² By doing so, they underlined the significance of becoming politicised; and as a consequence they directly contributed to the process of re-democratisation.

Indeed, the movement stood against the authoritarian state, protesting against it for its restricted civil rights and liberties regarding women.³ In other words, while women's groups were able to survive in the political framework of the 1980s, they challenged the state tradition, as well as the patriarchal system. Therefore, as opposed to expecting the state to liberate women, major activities of the movement were organised against state policies, laws and the regime itself. This in itself was a significant contribution to the process of democratisation.

Nevertheless, it is important to note that the women's movement shouldered a different democratic function in the 1980s. Arat refers to this distinction while asserting that the movement was not democratic merely because a small group of women assumed an active democratic role in politics. Women's activism played its role on the transition from authoritarianism to democracy.⁴ Arat argues that the emergence of the movement was due to

¹ This claim of feminism being the child of the coup was not the only argument that was asserted by these scholars.

² Yeşim Arat, 'Women's Movement of the 1980s in Turkey: Radical Outcome of Liberal Kemalism?', in Fatma Müge Göcek and Shiva Balaghi (eds) *Reconstructing Gender in the Middle East: Tradition, Identity and Power* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), p. 107.

³ Arat argues that the movement was anti-authoritarian. *Ibid.*, p. 105-7.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 107.

the process of Westernisation; and that ‘the increasingly intensifying links with the Western world allowed a second wave of feminism to trickle into the country.’⁵

The women’s movement (as a political movement) could exist because it freed itself from what was considered *the political* at the time: the Right and the Left. The women of the 1980s’ Turkey began organising when it was illegal to organise politically in any form. They were important because they ventured into the public arena in their own name to seek legitimacy for women’s individualistic claims. Unless women gained the recognition they deserved as individuals, they would not be able to have the means to articulate various visions of better lives or pursue a common good.⁶ The movement was careful to remain independent of formally organised political parties. Moreover, it sought independence of social class; that is to say, no matter which social class, ethnic origin, level of education and profession, all women were welcome to participate. The movement was loosely organised and decentralisation was the basic principle. Women’s rights came to the forefront of debates and actions, and women began to discuss personal topics such as the use of violence against women in the domestic sphere, rape, and sexual harassment. Similar to the Western feminist movement, women in Turkey claimed that the state had to respect the private sphere as well as the decisions of women while protecting them from abuse and violence.

In fact, even when the movement was at its peak in terms of activism and publications, it was not perceived as political. On 10 May 1987 women’s groups in Ankara organised a meeting in the streets, under the title of ‘Dayağa Karşı Dayanışma Kampanyası’ (Campaign for Solidarity against Battering). Bora writes about this event:

On Mother’s day, we planned to sell flowers and badges on which it said ‘Do not beat mothers.’ Unluckily it poured rain that day. We could not get organised no matter how much we tried. Only a few of us women gathered in front of the Cultural Centre of Altındağ Municipality. We gave out badges to those walking past, we waved our placards. The media was there, but we were not happy with our meeting, because we could not reach women.⁷

⁵ Yeşim Arat, ‘From Emancipation to Liberation: the Changing Role of Women in Turkey’s Public Realm’ *Journal of International Affairs* 54.1 (2000), p. 112.

⁶ This argument also takes place in Arat, ‘Democracy and Women in Turkey’, p. 372.

⁷ Bora, a feminist activist and academic who took part in the movement of the 1980s, writes about this event in 1988, in *Sosyalist Feminist Kaktüs* (Socialist Feminist Cactus, a journal which started being published the same year, by those women who had worked together in *Women’s Circle* and in the *Solidarity against Battering*). It is also cited in Aksu Bora and Asena Günel, *90’larda Türkiye’de Feminizm* (Istanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2002), p. 24. (My translation)

The media's response to this event was a disappointing one. Journalists used headings including 'Yağmurda Yedi Güzel' (Seven Beauties under the Rain) while wondering in the news what those beautiful women were doing in the streets, in the public sphere. The popular newspaper *Hürriyet* wrote about the event with a discourse of teasing, ridiculing their attempt to stand against battering. On 11 May 1987, in a short paragraph they wrote:

Six feminist women gave a briefing to eight press members, arguing that 'the media, mosques, courts, customs, etc. they all protect men who beat.'... The feminists of Ankara gave away badges to people while claiming 'we do not want to live with the threat of being beaten', and 'domestic violence turns violence into an ideology.' They said there were quite a number of feminists in Ankara, but they intentionally organised individually rather than founding organisations. Among these women only one of them is married, the others said they did not think of marriage as yet.⁸

The media's coverage in general was similar to the above: its typical discourse was a teasing, satirising, and ridiculing approach to the movement. In the last sentence above, the media was ironically questioning how women, most of whom were not 'even' married, could understand violence and motherhood. Moreover, it is obvious from the first line that the women activists were being ridiculed by reference to their small numbers by comparison with their interviewers. The activities of the movement were either given little space, which led to its being under-represented, or were misrepresented or undervalued by the use of sarcasm regarding women.

No matter how it was perceived by the media, the women's movement kept on being successful in its activities, providing the opportunity for individuals as well as groups to stand up for women's interests and issues.

Profoundly affected by the social and political *milieu*, Turkish cinema went through a period of change in the 1980s. Overtly political or social realist films were censored, banned or destroyed as a result of the forcible depoliticisation in the aftermath of the coup. In other words, cultural representation was under pressure to change in consequence. Depoliticisation, then, can be seen as a key factor in the renewed focus on the individual during this period of filmmaking. In their attempt to avoid the 'political', filmmakers chose to focus on women, and this occurred in parallel to the emergence of the women's movement. The entrance of sophisticated characters and a focus on the individual informed the shift in representations of

⁸ *Hürriyet*, 11 May 1987 issue, cited in Aksu Bora and Asena Günel, *90'larda Türkiye'de Feminizm*, pp. 24-5. (Italics are my emphasis)

women in cinema. This shift was from one-dimensional to multi-dimensional characters. Until this point, good and bad qualities were never found together within a single character. Despite sporadic early attempts it is really only from the 1980s that film characters were freed from simple binary oppositions and allowed to move from superficiality to a greater degree of depth and complexity. Hence, the cinema began to liberate itself from the portrayal of conventional female characters and started concentrating on 'the human woman'.

As one of the woman directors of this decade, Bilge Olgaç, appositely puts it, 'in the 1980s Turkish cinema changed; it came out of its shell and formed a new one.'⁹ The cinema was affected by the coup, and due to depoliticisation, filmmakers started dealing with topics which they had not critically dealt with until then. The main tendency was to focus on the individual. Not only sex films of the 1970s were banned, but also films of the previous decade dealing with social and political issues faced strict censorship and were even destroyed because of 'political concerns'.

In her article examining aesthetics and ideology in Turkish cinema in the 1980s, Necla Algan asserts that '80s cinema provided a virgin territory offering new possibilities. There was nothing that would link the filmmakers to the past. The political was dangerous and was in jail ... Filmmakers were as free as birds to do anything they wanted, as long as they stayed away from the political.'¹⁰ Indeed, Turkish cinema was profoundly affected by the coup and its aftermath. Filmmakers could not present overtly political material and were driven to a greater degree of subtlety in articulating their political viewpoints and positions.

Prominent among the film trends of the 1980s were films dealing with the coup's psychological effects on individuals (especially intellectuals) and women's films (in parallel with the rise of feminism in Turkey) with their depiction of female characters engaged in a search for identity and independence. With the entrance of 'the individual' to Turkish cinema, one issue that was dealt with in films was the individuality of the female identity. With the films of the 80s, Turkish cinema started focusing on the 'human woman,' by freeing itself from the previously dominant binary opposition of the good and the bad woman.

The motif of the independent woman was new to Turkish cinema. Representations of women (in melodrama in particular) were typically based on the binary opposition of the good and

⁹ Adanır, *Sinemada Anlam ve Anlatım*, p. 150.

¹⁰ Necla Algan, '80 Sonrasında Türk Sinemasında Estetik ve İdeoloji' (Aesthetics and Ideology in Turkish Cinema after 1980), *25.Kare*, No: 16, 1996, p. 5.

the bad. The good woman was one who served the male and who obeyed the traditional roles to which she had been assigned. The bad woman, on the other hand, was the femme fatale character who could kiss, have sex, and commit adultery on the screen. Since the 1980s, however, there has been a significant and discernible change in the representation of women from stereotypical 'good and bad' to the independent woman whose character is represented with its complexities.

I argue that the feminist movement of the 1980s, which seeks for equality between men and women, is the most prominent factor in the emergence of films which focus on women's issues and women's place in society. Social roles and conventions that hitherto had been imposed upon women by means of popular films were challenged and deconstructed by these new films.

Women's lives and issues became prominent in Turkish cinema and this led to the production of an extensive body of women's films. Here I use the term 'women's films' to refer to films which offer the narrative point-of-view of a female character and focus on concerns socially coded as feminine. I argue that despite these profound shifts in narrative and representation of character, the overall cinematic style, codes and conventions remained overwhelmingly traditional. Despite occasional appearances to the contrary, films continued to objectify women; to present them as having a necessarily limited range of choices in a patriarchal society; and remain ambivalent about whether women can be ultimately capable of exercising independent agency.

My argument here is then that the enforced depoliticisation introduced after the coup by the incoming military government is responsible for uniting feminism and film in 1980s Turkey. The feminist movement was able to flourish precisely because it was not perceived as political or politically significant. In a parallel move in the films of the 1980s there was an increased tendency to focus on the individual, on women's issues and lives in order to avoid the overtly political.

Women's films of the 1980s do not merely reflect some unitary patriarchal logic but are also sites of power relations and political processes through which gender hierarchies are both created and contested. These films empower women by representing them as strong and rebellious characters, and by dealing with women's issues, but at the same time they marginalise and objectify women with their cinematic style. Turkish cinema, in this sense, reveals powerful cross-currents producing complex and often contradictory effects, acting

both to reinforce and to oppose the manifestations of male dominance in different narratives and contexts. However despite these complexities, gender asymmetry in Turkish society is produced, represented and reproduced through filmic texts.