

Paper prepared for

The 7th Euroacademia International Conference

Identities and Identifications: Politicized Uses of Collective Identities

Lucca, Italy

14 – 15 June 2018

This paper is a draft

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The Troublesome Interaction of Two Languages: *On the Way to School*

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ABSTRACT

Republic of Turkey was established on the remnants of a collapsed empire that was composed of diverse ethnic and religious identities. The founding ideology of the new state by 1923 was based on 'Turkish national identity' besides adopting a westernized and secular world view. Though the national identity was a civic-territorial project rather than an ethnic-genealogic one, as classified by Anthony Smith, one can argue that Turkish ethnic core practically dominated and excluded all the 'others' in the outlook of Turkish nationalism. The side effects of nationalism have been ignoring some languages, religious beliefs, life styles etc.; those have been the ones counted outside the national identity. This exclusion has extensively been observed in politics, literature, cinema as well as in daily life. Nevertheless, counter discourses and patterns of representation have always existed, more in recent years.

One of those representations, the film entitled *On the Way to School* (2009), displays one year's course of an elementary school teacher appointed to a 'remote' Kurdish populated village in southeastern Turkey. While presenting the troublesome interaction between the teacher who does not speak Kurdish and the kids who do not know a single word of the official Turkish language, the film reminds many aspects of identity construction, including dialogism, the term coined by Mikhail Bakhtin. My paper first provides a historical background for the construction of Turkish national identity, its representation in cinema, and then analyzes the abovementioned film which incites the spectator to question this problematic issue.

Keywords: Turkish cinema, Kurdish problem, representation, identity

Introduction

Aiming to put forth a troublesome interaction between two languages, this paper studies a prominent film of Turkish cinema, entitled *On the Way to School*. Before focusing on the film, I will first provide a short historical background for the establishment of Republic of Turkey as a nation-state and its predecessor Ottoman Empire. Then general information about Kurdish problem – as it is experienced in Turkey – will come. This will be followed by the cinematic representation of Kurds. Finally, I will proceed to the film and disclose how it handles a crucial problem of Turkey through language difference.

Historical background

The antecedent of today's Republic of Turkey was the Ottoman Empire. Spread on three continents and composed of a wide range of ethnicities and religious identities, the empire had adopted a governing system that bestowed relative autonomy to its subject peoples. As long as they did not hinder to pay their taxes, the subject peoples (or nations to call in modern sense) enjoyed the autonomy to practice their religious beliefs, languages, customs etc. The local governors for Muslim populations and religious leaders for non-Muslim groups were responsible to collect the taxes on behalf of the state on the one hand, these agents functioned to keep their peoples under control not to rebel against the empire on the other.

The nationalist consciousness first emerged among the Christian ethnicities in the 19th century, which was followed by the revolt of Muslim Arabs during the World War I. Ottoman Empire had already lost lands in the Balkan peninsula and in North Africa just before the great war. The defeat in the World War I made the Ottoman land further shrink and it was followed by the invasion of the country by the winning parties. The invasion was reacted by the War of Independence, which lasted more than three years, between 1919 and 1922. Started in 1911 by Balkan War and ended in 1922 by the victory in War of Independence, the result of those long years' warfare was the shrinkage and collapse of the Ottoman Empire. 30% of the population was lost due to mortality and migration (Zürcher 1993, 171). The empire was now displaying quite a different demography. The majority of Christian groups such as Greeks and Armenians were no longer present and 80% Muslim rate before the wars had risen to 98%; mainly two large linguistic groups, Turks and Kurds, were composing the post-war population in Turkey (Zürcher 1993, 172).

The Treaty of Lausanne, signed with Britain, France, Italy, Japan, Greece, Romania and the Serb-Croat-Slovene State in 1923, was the document that recognized Turkey, the successor of the Ottoman empire, as a sovereign state. This document brought educational and linguistic protection of non-Muslim minorities and guaranteed their equal rights with other Turkish nationals. On the other hand, all Muslim groups were implicitly considered one and the same (i.e. Turkish nationals). Three months after the Treaty of Lausanne, the new state had to be established under these circumstances as a republic on the remnants of the Ottoman Empire. That was a nation-state adopting a secular and

westernized world view. Although Anatolia - Asia Minor where Turkish language was spoken – was called ‘Turkey’ by the Europeans since the 11th century, the year 1923 was the first time it appeared as the official name of the state (Lewis 2015, 3-4). However, it would not be an easy mission to found a solid nation-state that is free of ethnic problems.

Anthony Smith (1991) distinguishes two types of nationalism: ethnic-genealogic and civic-territorial. Rather specific to eastern and/or pre-modern societies, ethnic-genealogic nationalism refers to race and descent. Civic-territorial nationalism is more pervasive in today’s world; it has nothing to do with races and it is the basis of many modern nation-states. Though an ethnic core imposes her language as the official one and dominates the founding ideology of the state, civic-territorial nationalism accepts the nation as all of the living citizens inside clearly defined boundaries, who has equal and civil rights. Republic of Turkey was established as a civic-territorial nation-state in this sense. Turkish nationalism was conceived as a unifying element that encompasses all of the ethnic identities, Muslim or non-Muslim, ethnically Turk or not. The Constitution of 1924 defined the term ‘Turk’ as follows: “Everybody in Turkey, without distinction of religion and race, is called ‘Turk’ with regard to citizenship” (TBMM n.d., article 88). The themes ‘Ottoman’ and ‘Turk’ were antithetical in this sense; after being subjects of a multi-ethnic, cosmopolitan empire for hundreds of years, the status of people was now changing into citizens of a republic (Mardin 2002, 115).

Despite protective measurements for non-Muslim minorities and equal citizenship for ethnic/religious minority groups, the new republic has never been unproblematic in terms of respecting its multifarious identities. The implementation of Turkish nationalism could not escape criticisms; one can argue that it is in the nature of every nationalism. The state has often been condemned for practically excluding all the identities that fall outside or that is perceived to stay outside Turkish nationalism. These groups have primarily been Greeks, Armenians, Jews and Kurds. A series of demographic, historical, and political reasons behind the ‘exclusion’ of these groups can be explored and found. Since our topic (the film) displays the language difference and the problems related to it in a Kurdish populated village, this paper will narrow its focus on the Kurdish question context.

‘Kurdish’ problem

‘Kurd’ was a suspect word in Turkey until the 1990s. Probably the everlasting uprisings during the Ottoman period as well as in the republican era and their relatively high population among minority ethnic groups (the second largest ethnicity of the country) have always nurtured the perception of a Kurdish threat to the unity of the nation-state by the governing elites.¹ The Treaty of Lausanne that counts all the Muslim identities one and the same on the one hand, the endeavor of forming a state based on Turkish nationalism on the other, caused either the total negligence of Kurdish identity or considering them under the umbrella of ‘Turkishness’.

Composing the majority of the population in Eastern and Southeastern Anatolia, the ratio of Kurdish ethnicity in overall Turkey is contentious. In 1965 census when their native language was asked to the citizens the last time, the total number of people who stated Kurdish as their native or second language was approximately 4 million; the population of the country was 31.4 million then. That makes a ratio of 12.7%. A research made in 2006 found out that 8.6% of the people state their ethnic origin, and 12% their native language as Kurdish (Turkcewiki n.d.; Buran 2011, 54). One has to note that the communities named as ‘Kurd’ have different origins indeed; they are hybrid, and they do not have a single common language but a variety of dialects (Buran 2011; Kolcak 2015).

Compatible with Turkification policies, the names of Kurdish villages have been changed into Turkish. Kurdish names for newborns, usage of this language in public spaces, and pro-Kurdish political parties have been banned. Human rights violations have been justified for the struggle against ‘terror’. State oppression on Kurdish identity have particularly increased during the periods after the military coups, i.e. 1960, 1971, and 1980. The Kurdish uprisings throughout history had very different political stances, from Islamic to Marxist. The last and ongoing uprising started in the early 1980s and left more than forty-thousand dead people till today.

It was by the 1990s that the existence of a ‘Kurdish problem’ was admitted by the highest rank state authorities. Since then, presidents, prime ministers and many political party leaders vocalized the ‘problem’ and promised to solve it. It should not be surprising that all of the presidency candidates for the upcoming 2018 elections touch this issue in their public speeches.

From the beginning till today, the source of the ‘problem’ has been sought in different realms, such as economy, culture, and politics. More palpable steps (compared to the 1990s when it was admitted by the state authorities) in favor of a ‘solution’ have been taken in the 2000s. Besides others, Turkey’s intention and progress to access the European Union membership was a prominent impulse behind the practical developments in recent years. To count some of what the state has done to recognize the cultural rights of Kurdish ethnicity: state-owned TV company (TRT – Turkish Radio and Television Corporation) started broadcasting in Kurdish, Arabic, Bosnian and Circassian languages (2004); Kurdish language courses for ordinary citizens and degree programs in Kurdish language started in some

universities (2009); elective Kurdish courses started in primary schools (2012) and Kurdish as the language of instruction in private schools has been legalized (2014); law permitted to give Kurdish names to newborns, including the letters which exist in Kurdish alphabet but do not exist in Turkish alphabet, such as Q, W, and X (2014) (Kolcak 2015, 71-75). To note, the official language of the country has been Turkish since the Constitution of 1876 during the Ottoman period.

The practice of the abovementioned legislations has not escaped criticisms; bureaucratic obstacles by the local governors or inadequacy of the amount of time spared for language teaching have been vocalized by pro-Kurdish circles. The topic 'Kurdish problem' has historical roots and is contentious for long years. One can find a variety of academic researches and popular publications on this issue. An exhaustive discussion of it is beyond the scope of this paper, since I aim to bring a cinematic focus. I have provided some high lights and will proceed to the representation of Kurdish identity in Turkish cinema (or the cinema of Turkey) in the next section.

Representation

From the beginning till the 1990s, Kurdish identity was represented in Turkish cinema in a stereotyped manner. Rather than focusing on their economical, political, or cultural problems, the films mostly displayed the citizens with Kurdish ethnic origin as an element of humor; they were poor, illiterate, and speaking Turkish language with a broken and vulgar accent. Their ethnicity was not uttered in the films but implied. The names of the protagonists (that associate with Kurds) were often changed when the film was an adaptation from a novel or a story. A very apparent reason - among many others each of which can be a subject of research - behind adopting such an attitude for representation was the censorship which was a real obstacle for the filmmakers. The censorship limited the films to a very narrow discursive space that they could hardly question any socio-economic/political dimension of the problems faced by disadvantaged groups. Therefore, it can be argued that cinema followed a path parallel to the official state ideology.

It is by the 1990s that films started to utter and display more on Kurdish problem. This was because the pressure of censorship on cinema (though it was not totally abandoned) was decreased by a legal regulation in the second half of the 1980s. Actually, the visibility of Kurds in cinema had increased with the rise of labor class and migration to big cities; though their identity was not disclosed, their origin geographies were denoted in films (Yücel 2008, 35). This was by the 1950s and the 1960s. Another type of representation was of the guest workers (the ones with Kurdish ethnic origin) who went to Europe, especially to Germany. The cinema of the 1970s gave place to Kurdish identity in a context of backwardness, customs, etc. (Yücel 2008, 36). Some of the prominent films in which Kurds appear are *Blood of the Earth (Toprağın Kanı)*, dir. Atif Yılmaz, 1966), *The Second Wife (Kuma)*, dir. Atif Yılmaz, 1974), *The Bad Spirits of the Euphrates (Fırat'ın Cinleri)*, dir. Korhan Yurtsever, 1977), *Feyzo, the Polite One (Kibar Feyzo)*, dir. Atif Yılmaz, 1978), *The Herd (Sürü)*, Zeki Ökten, 1979), *The Way (Yol)*, dir. Şerif Gören and Yılmaz Güney, 1982), *A Season in Hakkari (Hakkari'de Bir Mevsim)*, dir. Erden Kıral, 1983), and *The Mule Drivers (Katrucular)*, dir. Şerif Gören, 1987). Their cinematic existence, however, was mostly ignoring their identities, languages, and names.

Siyabend and Xece (Siyabend û Xecê), dir. Şahin Gök, 1991) and *Mem and Zîn (Mem û Zîn)*, dir. Ümit Elçi, 1991) are the first films that narrate Kurdish tales in the cinema of Turkey. Although they are adaptations of Kurdish epics, the language spoken in these two films are Turkish. *Mem û Zîn* is later dubbed in Kurdish. As mentioned above, the 1990s witnessed the start of films that question and problematize the 'issue'. Probably the first film in which characters speak Kurdish language is *Let There Be Light (Işıklar Sönmesin)*, dir. Reis Çelik), made in 1996. Kurdish names exceptionally were heard before, in a few films such as *The Bride of the Earth (Seyyit Han: Toprağın Gelini)*, dir. Yılmaz Güney, 1968) and *The Way (Özgüç 2005, 271-72)*. Many films problematized Kurdish question by and after the 1990s, among which *Journey to the Sun (Güneşe Yolculuk)*, dir. Yeşim Ustaoglu, 2000), *Big Man Little Love (Büyük Adam Küçük Aşk)*, dir. Handan İpekçi, 2001), *The Photograph (Fotoğraf)*, dir. Kazım Öz, 2001), *Toss Up (Yazı Tura)*, dir. Uğur Yücel, 2004), *On the Way to School (İki Dil Bir Bavul)*, dir. Özgür Doğan and Orhan Eskiköy, 2008), *My Marlon and Brando (Gitmek: Benim Marlon ve Brandom)*, dir. Hüseyin Karabey, 2008), and *I saw the Sun (Güneşi Gördüm)*, dir. Mahsun Kırmızıgül, 2009). Now I proceed to the film *On the Way to School*.

On the Way to School

The film starts with a view of infertile land. The protagonist, an elementary school teacher, goes to his first-time duty in a Kurdish-populated remote village. The teacher leaves the minibus by the village. He enters the school building, which has not served for a long time. Turkish flags and a portrait of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the founder of the republic, are easily noticeable on the classroom wall.

The teacher is from Denizli, a relatively industrialized city in western Anatolia. He is frustrated because of the life conditions in the village. He calls his mother, as he does throughout the film, and complains: "There is nothing here. I knew I would come to a village but I expected to have some water at least. There is no water."

After preparing the school for education, the teacher waits for the pupils to attend but none of them appears. Thereupon he visits the homes of the pupils to invite; most of them are not present because they work somewhere else. Since he cannot communicate with the pupils, a translator helps him. The pupils attend the class next day. All of them, 1st, 2nd, 3rd and 4th grades are in the same classroom. The 1st year students do not know a single word of Turkish, but their mother tongue Kurdish. Elder ones understand and speak Turkish better, though not very well, since they got education before.

The teacher shows some illustrations to the pupils and ask them to tell what those pictures represent. The pupils mostly do not know or cannot express their knowledge. Some of them vocalize the pictures in Kurdish. The teacher forbids to speak Kurdish in the classroom. He explains this on the ground that he does not understand them, and he adds that they will be educated in Turkish language for the next eight years. So, it is better for them to learn and speak in Turkish. While speaking to his mother on the phone, he tells that the pupils understand nothing. Moreover, even the parents of some students do not understand and speak Turkish language.

In one scene the teacher writes the 'oath' on the blackboard and asks the pupils to read. This oath was the one and the same in all schools of the country which is read by one student and repeated by all the others every morning before class starts. The oath celebrates Turkishness and ends with the sentence "how happy is the one who says I am a Turk." As Michael Billig (1995) notes, the citizenry and the nationality are reminded every day in various ways in modern nations. As a way of reminding the national identity, to vocalize the 'Turkishness' of an ethnically Kurdish citizen has often been subject of debate. The defenders of the oath argue that 'Turkishness' does not refer to any race or ethnicity but to the common national identity, such as Americanness or Frenchness. Nevertheless, one can argue that an ethnically Kurdish person saying loudly s/he is a Turk looks a bit ironic.

When the teacher visits the parents of a pupil, the father narrates a lived story. Once he applied to go to Germany as a guest worker and filled a form. One of the questions was about the foreign languages the applicant knows. The father denotes that he knows two languages. Thereupon the official asks which foreign languages he knows and the man replies: Kurdish is his mother tongue and Turkish is the foreign one. The official's reaction is to laugh at this explanation. The father says he learned Turkish at the age of 10-15 and the primary reason for them to send their children to school is to teach Turkish language. The press noted some similar examples about the deputies in the parliament. After each election, the new deputies fill a form to give information about themselves, such as professional, educational, marital status etc. Some Kurdish deputies filled Turkish as the 'foreign language' they knew, the newspapers reported in the past.

The film ends as the term ends by late spring and the teacher leaves the village for his hometown, to come back next September. I need to recall Michael Bakhtin at this point, who argued the importance of mutual communication, or 'dialogism' as he explained. According to Bakhtin, dialogue, to be able to speak with the 'other', is much more than a linguistic exchange; it is interconnectedness, it means relation, and it is a never ending, ongoing process. Because, every encounter with the 'other' connects the individual to the outer world. This encounter provides a surplus of vision or seeing. It is the dialogue that constitutes the intense relationship and one's consciousness about another world. Dialogism is in the heart of sharing, as Bakhtin states (1984, 300):

The word, the living word, inseparably linked with dialogic communion, by its very nature wants to be heard and answered. By its very dialogic nature it presupposes an ultimate dialogic instancing. To receive the word, to be heard. The impermissibility of secondhand resolution. My word remains in the continuing dialogue, where it will be heard, answered and reinterpreted.

To express differently, the absence of the 'other' means absolute death of the self; *to be* means to communicate" (Gardiner 2014, 57). The film *On the Way to School*, while displaying the troublesome interaction of two languages through the relationship of a teacher and his pupils, draws attention to the existence of minimal conditions for establishing a dialogue. The absence of dialogue, due to linguistic difference as in our example or for any other reason, leads to 'real' trouble both individually and sociologically.² As the film shows, to fail to communicate means no intense relationship, no consciousness about another world, not being heard and not being answered. The pupils do not hear what the teacher utters and do not answer him and vice versa. Therefore it seems nearly impossible for both sides to set a consciousness about the 'other' and one can ask how a proper education might be executed in such a condition.

Conclusion

Established on the remnants of a collapsed, multi-ethnic and multi-religious empire, Republic of Turkey adopted 'Turkish nationalism' as a unifying element and as a melting pot for all citizens, without distinction of religion and race. Nevertheless, the nation-state practices could not escape criticisms for excluding the 'others' that stay or that are considered outside national identity. One of the problematic groups has been Kurdish ethnic identity.

Cinematic representation of Kurdish identity has been problematic until recently as well. They were either neglected, or stereotyped and humorized. The cinema censorship was a definite reason behind this type of representation. Beginning by the 1990s, more films that question Kurdish problem have been made. Among them, *On the Way to School* is a prominent example for displaying the troublesome interaction between two languages, the official Turkish and the pupils' Kurdish.

ENDNOTES

¹ Many researches and sources on this issue are accessible, among them: Mumcu 1991; Menon 1995; Rouleau 1996; Mutlu 1996.

² Another film that displays the language difference is *Big Man Little Love*. In that film, on the contrary to *On the Way to School*, dialogism is provided as the protagonist (a retired judge) learns Kurdish language in order to communicate a 5 year-old kid.

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