

## Şehnaz, Elmas, Mina, and the Others Who Kill the Angel in Their Houses

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My mother was killed by the Angel in our house. I know many other women who were killed in the same way. Either to kill the Angel or be killed by her ... It is a matter of life and death for us, for the women of Turkey. In this video-essay, I introduce you to some of us: Şehnaz, Elmas, Mina, and several others who dare to choose life. They are the fictional female characters of the new wave films produced by the new generation of female directors from Turkey. I invite you to listen to their stories in which they tell the secrets of their houses. Their abiding by not the Angel but themselves might be a strategy to stay alive, even a method of radical existence.

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### Research Statement

My mother was killed by the Angel<sup>1</sup> in our house. I know many other women who were killed in the same way. Either to kill the Angel or be killed by her ... It is a matter of life and death for us, for the women of Turkey. In this video-essay, I introduce you to some of us: Şehnaz, Elmas, Mina, and several others who dare to choose life. They are the fictional female characters of the new wave films produced by the new generation of female directors from Turkey. I invite you to listen to their stories in which they tell the secrets of their houses. Their abiding by not the Angel but themselves might be a strategy to stay alive, even a method of radical existence.

### Background And Context

As is the case in many non-Western regions, the first time a woman filmmaker directed a film in Turkey was in 1951, despite films having been produced by the national industry since 1896.<sup>2</sup> Until the 1950s, Turkey's cinema was dominated exclusively by male directors, including women as actresses and audience but excluding them from being active in the process of making films as directors. This situation turned women into passive components, being looked at from the viewfinders and watched on the screen. The dominance of male directors created a national cinema lacking the female experience and female point of view (Fontini 2017, 1).

In the 1950s, women filmmakers started directing films but the participation of women directors in the cinematic realm did not immediately result in a feminist

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<sup>1</sup> The popular Victorian picture of the perfect wife/woman became known as "the Angel in the House"; she was expected to be devoted and subservient to her husband. The Angel was passive and helpless, humble, lovely, graceful, empathetic, selfless, pious, and, above all, pure. To understand the characteristics of the Angel, see Virginia Woolf (1942).

<sup>2</sup> Understanding the reasons for such delays necessitates considering the socio-political context as well as the dynamics of the male-dominated film industry. Please see *Celluloid Ceiling: Women Film Directors Breaking Through* (Kelly & Robson 2014) for an extensive evaluation of non-Western female directors and pioneers.

discourse or feminist filmmaking style. For decades, Turkey's cinema was dominated by the patriarchal discourse constructing a female identity characterized by suffering, passivity, loyalty, and obedience. Since the second half of the 1990s, however, a generation of auteur directors have taken the first steps towards developing a distinct style within New Cinema Movement<sup>3</sup> and its women directors not only contribute to the movement but also give rise to feminist film culture. I claim that for the first time in the history of Turkey's cinema, women filmmakers occupy their own space, producing a feminist cinema with fresh perspectives.

Contemporary female filmmakers in Turkey attempt a feminist film culture despite the increasing authoritarianism in Turkey. The policies of the current Turkish government do not recognize women as equal beings, instead considering them solely in their roles as wives, mothers, and daughters (İlkkaracan 2017, 62). The current socio-political atmosphere restricts the freedom of expression, especially of women, queer people, religious minorities and Kurds, and opposing views are marginalized. Producing their films under such circumstances, contemporary female filmmakers reject the roles assigned to women by making their voices heard. They portray complex female characters and their multiple experiences in narratives where the female characters occupy the subject position. The active subjectivity of female characters challenges women's subordination within oppressive forms. In this sense, contemporary women directors create a world where we can look at women from Turkey with new eyes. These female protagonists are the indicators of a new era in the cinematic landscape of Turkey and their active presence voices an extensive socio-political criticism of the current atmosphere. Their subjectivity functions as a tool of resistance.

### **Method: Leaking As A Form Of Filmmaking**

This video-essay is entangled with my own subjective experience as a queer, female scholar and filmmaker who lives in Australia due to the socio-political pressure restricting individual freedoms of expression in my home country of Turkey. My aim in editing this video is entirely in line with the contemporary women directors I focus: to construct a critical and creative resistance to both the repressive and patriarchal ruling regime. Focusing my attention on female figures who leave their house after

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<sup>3</sup> In the mid-1990s, a new mode of filmmaking called the New Cinema Movement emerged in Turkey. The films belonging to this mode of production have personalised narratives and an independent, minimalistic style (Suner 2006, 33). It is a self-reflective cinema issuing themes related to cultural, social and national identity and belonging (Ottone 2017, 9-12). Unlike the mainstream films produced and distributed by major companies such as UIP, WB and Özen, these independent films were funded by newly emerging funding and festival networks such as The Cultural Ministry, TRT, and Eurimages.

revealing its secrets is my way of leaving my house and its secrets behind. By revealing the secrets of our houses, contemporary women filmmakers, their female protagonists and I “leak.” It is a leak because it breaks the codes of being a member of a family which requires keeping family secrets within the family and it also breaks the codes of belonging to a nation which requires keeping national secrets within the nation.<sup>4</sup> We reject the codes of “normal” morality and instead embrace the feminist ethics of responsibility. This is to “risk exposing that which the culture wants silenced” (Citron 1999, 273) to challenge the normative order.

Contemporary women filmmakers re-centralize Turkey’s cinema by decentring from the gaze of white, heterosexual men. They include the diverse experiences of women within their frame through decolonized lenses. However, their attempt here is not about reflecting the sociodemographic reality of Turkey (i.e., including Kurdish women, Muslim women, transsexual women, Alevi women, poor women, or Armenian and Greek women within the frame) but “to rethink and question what life and politics mean in terms of being Kurdish, Armenian, a transgender woman, or a poor woman” (Arslan 2022). In this sense, contemporary female filmmakers from Turkey also accept the challenge to review Turkish culture, society and history from the perspective of “others.” By choosing diverse female images in this video-essay, I also want to create a space in which we can think and question what life and politics mean for women coming from different backgrounds. While reviewing our own history is a form of responsibility, telling the stories of “others” that have never been told is a political act. Editing diverse stories of resisting women, this video-essay aims to reveal that women’s filmmaking in Turkey claims alterity as a form of resistance. Being personal and political and accepting personal and collective responsibility simultaneously, contemporary women filmmakers and I adopt a new ethical standpoint: neither the family nor the country is sacred; nothing needs to be kept secret, and all voices must be heard.<sup>5</sup>

## Final Words

In her influential book, *Çocukluğun Soğuk Geceleri* (1994), Turkish author Tezer Özlü expresses the relationship between women and their houses. To Özlü, since the house is shaped by the rules of society, it is a miniature of it. It is the power, order, and rules that she rebels against and wants to escape with her narrator-writer identity (Aktas 2019, 25). She says:

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<sup>4</sup> To understand the relationship between feminism and “leaking,” see Sara Ahmed’s lecture “Complaint as Feminist Pedagogy” (2021), which is published on her blog [feministkilljoys](https://feministkilljoys.com/).

<sup>5</sup> Here, I adapted some of the particularities of the new Israeli (feminist) documentary (Munk 2011) to my context.

As I pass through the streets ... if I see family fathers in pyjamas, if my eyes catch on to the smoking stove chimneys on rainy grey days in winter ... if steam covers the windows of the houses ... if I see the laundry hanging inside the rooms ... if the clouds are close to the wet tiles, if the rain is drizzling, if the radios are broadcasting football matches, the voices of the people arguing take to the streets. I always want to go, go, go, go. (Özlü 1994, 16)

The female figure of contemporary women's cinema, similar to Özlü, wants to go, go, go, go from the family fathers in pyjamas, from the streets wet under the rain, from the houses filled with voices of the people arguing, from their husbands, their children and from their homelands. She wants to snap from her home, her old self. In *Şimdiki Zaman/ Present Tense* (Söylemez, 2012), Mina wants to leave Turkey, a place that hinders her from realising herself; in *Tereddüt/Clair Obscur* (Ustaoğlu, 2015), Şehnaz leaves her husband who discourages her from enjoying her life; in *Bulutları Beklerken/Waiting for the Clouds* (Ustaoğlu, 2003), Ayşe/Eleni leaves Turkey, a country that oppresses her identity, to Greece so she is able to reclaim herself.

As Audre Lorde says, "We have been nurtured in a sick, abnormal society, and we should be in the process of reclaiming ourselves as well as the terms of that society" (2017, 4). This is how the female figure of contemporary women's cinema connects to her sick, abnormal society. By opening the "interior" spaces to the public, she reveals the secrets of the country and of her family. She then leaves these damaging ties behind. It is not only about breaking free from the father, from the mother, from the husband, it is also about starting a journey. Contemporary women directors from Turkey reclaim the terms of this society by constructing such characters. Cinema is the remedy, the resistance helping them handle the present time, the nightmare of history.

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## Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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- Waiting for the Clouds* (dir. Ustaoglu, Yeşim, 2003)

