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# Aaahh Belinda (1986)

Atif Yılmaz

## OVERVIEW

*Aaahh Belinda* is named after the shampoo brand from the film's narrative about a television advertisement. One of the main concerns of the film is the association of a family's happiness with the shampoo used by the housewife, who prioritizes her roles as a mother and wife. Another plot is about a woman forced to inhabit a world that is very different from what she is used to. While the first narrative turns into a theme exploring the woman's representation in media, the second one is not related to any specific debate or reflexive attitude. Rather, it seems like a punishment for Serap who belongs to the intellectual art world but is then forced to inhabit the world of an ordinary middle-class woman. However, this contrast ends when Serap awakens from this punishment like a nightmare. When the shooting of the advertisement ends and Serap returns to her own world, when her relationship with Naciye's ordinary world is severed, she does not go through any questioning or conflict within herself. Perhaps what *Aaahh Belinda* struggles to do is to compare these two women from two opposite worlds and encourage the audience to reflect on the situation. Another idea we get from this contrast is the disconnection of those who produce important works about women in the art world from the reality of life. However, the narrative of the film still needs a slightly more thoughtful conclusion.

The film belongs to the period in Atif Yılmaz's career when he started making films criticizing representations of women in art and media, and the roles imposed on them in real life. It belongs to that period which arguably begins with his film *Mine* from the first half of 1980's.

## CINEMATIC STORYTELLING

The film places itself into three different narratives of reality: Serap's world, Naciye's world, and the world of the audience included in Serap's world. The first two belong to the fictional world of the movie, while the last one belongs to the real world of the viewers watching the film. Serap and Naciye are fictional characters. The conversations of the fictional theater group in the movie's rehearsals mention *Dostlar Tiyatrosu* (The Friends Theatre). This is the real-life theatre group that Zeliha Berksoy played the character of Asiye in the play *Asiye Nasıl Kurtulur* (How Can Asiye be Saved?) for the first time in real life, which transports her from the audience's world into the film's fictional one. These crossovers between the worlds of fictional characters and the inclusion of the real world in the fiction is achieved through a successful screenplay by Barış Pirhasan.

Orhan Oğuz, the cinematographer of the film, is also one of the renowned directors of Turkish cinema. As a cinematographer he has many significant films under his belt, such as *Anayurt Otel* (Motherland Hotel), *Amansız Yol* (The Cruel Road), and *Adı Vasfiye* (Her Name is Vasfiye).

## CHARACTERS

Serap	A theater actor in her thirties. Not married.
Naciye	A bank clerk in her thirties. Married with two children.
Hulusi	In his thirties. Naciye's spouse.
Feride	A bank clerk in her thirties. Married with two children. Naciye's colleague, neighbor.
Suat	A theater actor in his thirties.
Fatoş	A theater actor in her thirties.

## STORY

Theater actor Serap has agreed to play in a commercial film just to make some money. Although her friends in the theater group criticize her, the pay is too large to refuse. The shooting begins. The director makes her repeat a scene several times for a more convincing take. In the scene where she is

washing her hair in the bathroom, Serap has her eyes closed, shampooing her hair under the shower but when she opens her eyes, she realizes that she is transported to a real house. She is no longer Serap, but Naciye from the commercial. She begins living Naciye's life and cannot convince anyone that she is in fact Serap. Neither her boyfriend Suat, nor her friends in the theater group recognize her. With nowhere to go, she returns to the house where she woke up as Naciye. Naciye is a clerk at a bank. Hulusi, who plays Naciye's husband in the commercial film, expects her to do housework and take care of the children. Serap struggles to lead this unfamiliar life that does not fit her values or her lifestyle. She finds Suat asks his help to join the theater group as an actress. The director tries Naciye and likes her. During a rehearsal, Hulusi arrives with parents and neighbors in tow, forcibly takes her out of the theater and takes her to Naciye's father's house where he lives alone. However, he immediately regrets what he did and apologizes to Naciye. Serap seems to have given up being herself or finding a way out as we see her playing the role of Naciye with joy and happiness. At that moment, the director's voice is heard shouting, "Cut!" and the shooting is over. Serap has returned to her real life.

## PLOT

### SERAP'S WORLD

*From theater actor to television commercial star.* Serap, is going to star as the lead of Vasif Öngören's play *How can Asiye be Saved?* which is one of the masterpieces of Turkish theater. The rehearsals for the play are ongoing. While trying to maintain a fit body by exercising, Serap continues her relationship with Suat, deals with the jealousy of fellow actor Fatoş and suffers criticism for accepting to act in an advertisement.

*The TV commercial set.* Serap does her best to adapt to this new world of acting, but the director demands several takes of the same shot. In a sense, the director wants Serap to truly become Naciye, the character she portrays in the ad. Except Serap is unsympathetic to the character in the script who struggles to meet the demands of her husband and children while being a working woman. Such a life disgusts her.



## NACIYE'S WORLD

*Naciye's bathroom.* During the shoot, Serap is in a bathtub, washing her hair with the shampoo that the commercial advertises for. When she opens her eyes, she realizes that she is in a real bathroom in a real house. She has become Naciye. In the living room Hulusi sits with their children, waiting for her to prepare dinner.



*Traditional style picnic.* Naciye and her family go on a picnic with Feride's family. While the men watch the game on a portable television, the women prepare the food. Feride is also a colleague at the bank. Naciye talks to her about acting in a theater and asks for her help to attend rehearsals.



## STRUGGLING TO BECOME SERAP

*Don't you know me?* Naciye takes a taxi to the apartment of Serap's boyfriend, the bar where her friends hang out, and her own home. Nobody recognizes her as Serap. Another couple is now living in her old house. Naciye returns home as the mother of two children, Hulusi's wife, and a bank clerk.

*Who's smarter?* Naciye tells her story to the doctors at the hospital in order to convince them that she is not actually Naciye. She even performs a piece from the play *How Could Asiye be Saved?* in front of them to convince them that she is the actress Serap. Hulusi is waiting outside. They give Naciye a tranquilizer injection. While the treatment process continues, she convinces the doctors that she knows she is Naciye by acting out her role. They discharge her, thinking she has recovered.



*To evaporate.* Naciye goes back to the theater. She meets Suat. While they have coffee together, Naciye tells Suat things about him that no one else could know. Impressed by her charm and the things she knows about him, Suat takes Naciye to his home and they have sex. However, there is no trace of Serap in Suat's house anymore. As she puts it, "she has been erased, evaporated". Naciye asks Suat to help her prove her acting skills.

*Opportunity.* One of the women in the theater group gets sick. Suat takes Naciye to the rehearsal to try out her acting. The director likes Naciye very much and invites her to the rehearsals.





*In the same bed.* Naciye comes back from the rehearsal. Everyone at home is sleeping. Hulusi, who has been sleeping on the couch in the living room for a while at Naciye's request, gets up and lies down on his own bed because his own father has come to stay there after arguing with his mother. Oblivious to these events, Naciye goes to sleep but screams when Hulusi embraces her in. Her son hears the scream and comes in to the room. Naciye avoids having sex with Hulusi by going to her son's room to sleep with him.

*Leaving the house.* Writing a farewell letter to Hulusi, Naciye leaves the house. Hulusi crushes the theater rehearsal with his family, Feride and her husband. When it's Naciye's turn to perform, Hulusi jumps on stage, grabs her by the arm and forcibly brings her to her father's house.



*Hulusi's Regret.* Naciye's father is very happy when he sees his daughter in front of him. He thinks he has been forgiven for leaving home and falling in love with a woman who worked in a nightclub years ago. They visit Naciye's mother's grave together. Hulusi apologizes to Naciye at the cemetery and asks her to come back home. With her father's support, Naciye realizes that she has no other choice and accepts her fate with tears.

Serap, who has to continue with her daily life as Naciye, is aware that she is not really Naciye. Throughout all these events, only the Serap character and the audience know this. In a sense, the audience is an accomplice with the Serap character.



## BECOMING SERAP AGAIN

*Transformation.* Naciye sets the table, acting like a happy wife, a happy mother. Her father and Hulusi's parents are also at the table. She serves them cheerfully. After the guests leave and when Hulusi is about to take his pillow to sleep in the living room, Naciye calls him to bed and starts to seduce him. Stop! Cut! These commands we hear are spoken by the director on the shooting set. We realize that we have returned to Serap's world and the team who worked until morning has now finished shooting the final scene. Serap looks around and tries to understand if she is really on the set. Outside, her boyfriend Suat is waiting for her.



## THEMES

### **Gender**

*Representation of women in the media.* The fact that women are forced to play the roles imposed on them, that they are being perceived as sexual objects, and their labor inside the household being ignored are not problems solely created by the media. However, the media should be considered as one of the main culprits for reproducing the perspectives and assumptions that have been established for centuries, and maintaining the traditional gender roles. Not only radio, television, and digital platforms, but also popular art and therefore popular cinema share the blame. The representations of women adopted by the traditional male hegemonic ideology, which largely feeds on religion and power structures, and disregards women's human rights, are constantly and with extraordinary frequency repeated in films, commercials, radio and television programs, and on internet platforms. In this regard, television advertisements made in the 1980s are not that much different from contemporary ones. The representations of women produced by this ideology, which depict women as the only one responsible for the cleanliness of the house, cooking, laundry, caring for children, and ultimately the happiness of her husband and family, are frequently used in selling all kinds of goods, but especially beauty and cleaning products. The film largely takes place on the set of a shampoo commercial. The scenario of the commercial emphasizes how the woman's use of this particular shampoo leads to the happiness of her husband and therefore her family.

*The roles imposed on women.* The gender roles imposed on women are composed of structures that have been constructed over long periods of time, permeating institutions and individuals' lives, and are therefore not easy to break down or change. It has always been very difficult for women to make choices that go against the dictates of dominant ideologies. This reality is related to the notion of class while at the same time it goes beyond class structures. For example, while Serap may appear to be a more liberated woman, Naciye is a woman who cannot imagine any other way of life than assuming these roles although she occasionally complains. When they dissolve into each other's identities, the fact emerges that class differences do not change a woman's position very much. In other words, being from an upper class does not prevent a woman from experiencing violence, but it does offer more opportunities for resistance or getting away from the man who subjects her to violence. Similarly, an

upper-class woman who does not have a job may be free from housework, but she is responsible for hiring another woman to do it. She is still responsible for maintaining the household order, ironing her husband's clothes, and providing for her children's needs. Therefore, gender roles constitute a problem that is related to the notion of class as it goes beyond them.

### **Poverty**

*Actors and money.* In Turkey, the fact that artists cannot make enough money from the products they create leads some of them to work in different jobs such as advertising, television series, or voice-over in order to make a living. These side jobs, which are taken on for achieving better living conditions, sometimes overshadow the artist's main pursuit, and earning money becomes the main goal. Some artists have been forced to make money from these side jobs just to make theater or film the way they want to. Serap does not need to earn a living, but since she has come across such an opportunity, she tries to earn as much money as she can in just a few days, much more than she would make from the theater. Some of the actors in the theater group mockingly criticize Serap for appearing in an advertisement. But this is not serious criticism or opposition. They all know if they had the chance, they would take advantage of such an opportunity. Like Fatoş, who is one of Serap's critics and her rival in the theater, who also does voice-overs in films and television series. During the shooting of the commercial, we also see that the communication between Serap and the director is different from that in the theater. The set is more ruthless; each shot is repeated several times, not to make better art, but to persuade the audience to buy the product. It's as if Serap is being punished to suffer such a nightmarish day for accepting that acting job in advertisement.

### CHARACTER ANALYSIS

**Serap** Serap is a theater actress in her thirties who is confident, ambitious, and successful. She can be a bit condescending when it comes to ordinary lives.



*Confident.* In the theatre play *How Can Asiye Be Saved?* Serap plays the lead role of Asiye. She thinks that Fatoş, who also wants to act in the same role, cannot play the character of Asiye properly. During a conversation with Suat, she refers to Fatoş and says, "What an Asiye she would be!" When the director asks for retakes during the filming of the commercial, she expresses her frustration by saying, "Just tell me what's wrong!"

*Arrogant.* When discussing with her friends the character of Naciye as well as the actor who is going to play her husband in the commercial, Serap adopts a mocking and belittling attitude.

**Naciye** Naciye is a bank clerk in her thirties, married, and the mother of two children. She gives in to the demands of her husband and children without questioning them. She has decided to go along with the flow of life. She is a resigned character who fulfills the requirements of her role.



*Naciye as mother and wife.* When Serap cannot escape or control her situation, out of necessity she has to act like Naciye. Those who know Naciye can rest easy that she is back to her usual self when they see her like this. From her conversations with her neighbors, we understand that Naciye is a loving woman to her children and Hulusi, and a good cook. She works at the bank all day but does not complain about doing all these tasks in the evening. She knows that these are the requirements of her assigned role and does not dream of stepping outside of that role.

*Compliant.* From Hulusi's and other people's attitudes around him, it is understood that Naciye is a meek woman who tries to please everyone. When Hulusi wants to have sex with her, he cannot understand Naciye's excuses, nor can he understand her desire to be a theater actor or her demand to hire a maid, interpreting all these as acts that undermine his authority.

**Hulusi** A man in his thirties. Insensitive, ordinary, rude.



*Insensitive.* In the scene where Serap transforms into Naciye for the first time, Hulusi is sitting in the living room, solving a crosswords puzzle. The television is on. When Naciye enters the room, he asks her to prepare dinner. However, Naciye works at the bank. Instead of sharing the household chores, Hulusi expects his wife to do everything for him.

*Rude.* In one of the scenes, Hulusi breaks wind. When his wife reacts by saying, "I told you to go do that in the bathroom," he replies, "You're really crazy, after forty years of marriage..." He thinks that his wife should willingly endure this because they have been married for a long time.



*Ordinary.* Hulusi is an ordinary man who goes to work in the morning, comes home in the evening, sits down in his pajamas, waiting for his wife to prepare dinner while he solves the newspaper puzzle or watches television. He has no other interests.

**Feride** Feride is a bank clerk in her thirties, she is married and has one child. She is a helpful and reliable person who has accepted her life without questioning it, and she is afraid of her husband. She works at the same bank as Naciye and lives in the same apartment building.



*Helpful.* When Naciye asks for money, Feride gives without hesitation. When Naciye needs help with her theater rehearsals, she turns to Feride for help, and Feride lies to her husband in order to assist her.

*Reliable.* Feride has lied to her husband to help Naciye go to her theatre rehearsals and she has accompanied her. She keeps Naciye's secret until her husband beats her.

**Suat** A theater actor his thirties. He is an outgoing, sympathetic, and fair-minded person



*Fair-minded.* Fatoş makes biting remarks to Suat about Serap accepting to act in a commercial. Suat responds by saying "You do voice-over work too." During the same conversation, when Fatoş describes Serap's portrayal of the character Asiye as courageous since the role was made famous by the accomplished actress Zeliha Berksoy, Suat responds with "Is it easy for us to act after Dostlar?" These reactions show that Suat disapproves of people unjustly criticizing others.

**Fatoş**

A theater actor in her thirties, Fatoş is a jealous woman.



*Jealous.* Fatoş is jealous of Serap's success in acting, playing lead roles, and of her relationship with Suat. She is also jealous when Serap makes a lot of money from the commercial. She expresses her feelings of jealousy towards Serap by making sarcastic, mocking comments about her at every opportunity. In fact, when Naciye replaces a sick actor in the play, Fatoş even belittles her out of jealousy, emphasizing that she is only a temporary person in the theater by saying, "Darling, you really should have been a theater actor!"