

Hunger (1974)

Bilge Olgaç

OVERVIEW

Hunger, written and directed by Bilge Olgaç, is a 1974 production which depicts the social and economic problems experienced during that period. It tells a story about the position of women within a feudal relationship and in particular about the ever-present hunger and famine which can be considered the top of the hierarchy of needs. Although it has been stated that the film can be regarded as a successful production which has an annoying effect on the audience, it was a production which failed to achieve success in its period.

The film has been criticized in many ways. The biggest criticism is that *Hunger* tried to deal with many issues at the same time – hunger, feudal relations, the status of women, sexual assault and so on - almost all of which are addressed in a superficial way. Although the film tried to explain many subjects in relation to each other, it could not establish an organic connection between the events. The problematic rhythm of the script, the dramatic structure built on a single character, Meryem, and the presentation of the other characters as individuals with no depth all caused the film to be criticized. Nevertheless, it is a film which has been admired for its success in telling the limits which man can break through in his fight against hunger, which is his most vital need.

CINEMATIC NARRATION

Olgaç did not lean towards the dominant film language of the period but tried to develop a narrative and style of her own in *Hunger*. The first half of the film is constructed with a remarkable parallel fiction and by this technique an emotional union is established between the lives of Meryem in the house of the Ağa and Hasan in the village. In addition, trying to explain the background of the film in the generic part gives the film an important place in terms of style.

At the beginning of the film, the director succeeds in disturbing the audience with the sounds of children crying and it can be assumed that they are crying because of hunger. The director gradually increases the sound of a crying child in the film and prepares the audience for the sad ending. In addition, the narration of the film is interrupted in places because it is the subject of a long process and Olgaç tries to depict long time intervals by skipping the narration of the film.

In addition, in the film, sections from the real lives of real villagers are often used so that they create the effect of watching a documentary film.

CHARACTERS

Meryem The main character of the film, she is the mother of two children who had been sold into servitude when she was a child, and after being raped by the village Ağa, she married Hasan, a naive and poor young man of the village.

Hasan The simple and poor young man to whom Meryem was married

The Ağa The brutal, sex-obsessed Ağa of the village

Father Hasan's widowed father who lives with his son

SYNOPSIS

Meryem is the daughter of a poor village family which has many children. Their mother cannot feed so many children at home so she sends the young teenaged Meryem to work in the house of the village Ağa; in other words, her mother sold Meryem to the Ağa. Throughout her childhood, Meryem did

housework and became one of the servants in the Ağa's house in return for a bowl of food and a bed. Even though she is a young girl, she starts to attract the attention of the Ağa, who exploits the girls working for him because he thinks that the workers in his house are his property. He begins to watch Meryem for a long time, not sending her to the fields but keeping her with him constantly. One day, when they are alone, he rapes Meryem. After that, Meryem tries to leave his house. Meanwhile, the naive but kind-hearted Hasan, who lives alone with his father just outside the village, is looking for a girl to marry, but because of his poverty and his innocence, he cannot find anyone to marry. He goes to ask the Ağa for advice. Meryem is looking for a way to get out of the house so she agrees to marry Hasan. She now has a house of her own and a well-intentioned husband as its head. Hasan has found a wife who will help him with the housework and share his life with him. The years go by and they have two children. Then a drought happens; things go from bad to worse and famine spreads throughout the village. Everyone is looking for a piece of bread. The Ağa comes into Meryem's mind as a last chance. As the price of losing her virginity, she takes a basket of food from the Ağa's warehouse which is full of food. As she reaches home to give it to her children, the peasants notice the food; they ransack Meryem's house to get the food and Meryem is killed.

PLOT

The background of the story The background of the story is given during the credits. Meryem's mother is boiling empty pots in an attempt to feed her children; the babies in the house are constantly crying. Her mother has to make a decision, so she discards Meryem, her eldest daughter, with pity and tears. She sends Meryem to the house of the village Ağa to work there as a servant and in return, she receives money and can feed the remaining hungry children in the house. Still a child, Meryem starts to eat a bowl of food away from her home and has a mattress to sleep on in return for working for the Ağa.

The House of the Ağa Meryem grows up doing all kinds of heavy work in the Ağa's house and fields and turns into a young beautiful girl. The Ağa regards the girls working for him as his own property; he can abuse any girl he wants to whenever he wants. Although everyone is uncomfortable with this situation, nobody dares to speak against it.

Meryem is raped The Ağa has his eye on Meryem. He watches her during long, extended scenes. Although Meryem is uncomfortable with this, she cannot say anything. He does not send Meryem out when all the others are going to work in the fields and he is always looking for ways to be alone with her. Eventually, he traps her alone and rapes her. Meryem shouts a lot and asks for help. Everyone in the house can hear her shouts and share her pain, but no-one can interfere. Silence envelops the whole house. After this incident, the Ağa's house becomes an even bigger hell for Meryem.

Hasan's life In the meantime, Hasan's life is also depicted as a parallel story. Hasan lives with his father in a house just outside the village. Ever since his mother died, the chores of the house and the field have been left to him. He does all the cooking and washing and he also works in the fields. He is also taking care of his elderly father. Consequently, nothing is ever completed. Hasan wants to marry a girl who will help him at home, but because he is naïve and lives in poverty and filth, and because he lives outside the village, he is unable to find a girl. He explains the situation to his father and decides to ask the Ağa what he should do.

Marriage When Hasan and his father go to the Ağa's house to ask for a girl, none of the girls look favourably on the prospect of marrying Hasan. Only Meryem will do whatever it takes for her to get away from the house. She wants both her own food and her own bed, in short, a life of her own. She says she wants this marriage. They get married and when Meryem enters their lives, Hasan and his father's conditions also start to improve. Their home and their lives get in order. They are cleaned and purified. Meryem is happy to be doing what she did in the Ağa's house for her own family. Her husband is a well-meaning man with a good heart. Eventually then they have two children. Meryem helps Hasan in the fields, does all the housework and raises her children.

Famine The village is hit by a drought, the harvest fails and famine overtakes the village. First, they consume what is left in their own store. Then they collect wild greens from the countryside and forests and cook them. Their last resort is to slaughter the ox which they use for ploughing the fields. Finally all the possibilities are exhausted, and hunger has reached a serious level. Hasan goes from the village to the city to get construction work, but the money which he earns is only enough to keep him alive from day to day.

The Ağa's warehouse Meryem, left alone with her old father-in-law and two babies to feed, sees the Ağa as her only solution; she goes to his warehouse armed with a gun and raids the house. She wants to eat in return for losing her virginity to the Ağa. His warehouse is full of food – vegetables, meats, fruits While the villagers are struggling with hunger, the Ağa's house has everything in abundance. Meryem loads up her basket and sets off home.

Murder Without letting the villagers know what she has got, she tries to get the basket of food home, but she attracts the attention of the villagers. The women of the village come to her home and at first, they start calmly knocking on the door. When Meryem does not open it, they force the door open and rush in. They all start grabbing the food in her basket and things quickly get out of hand. The mob starts to go wild and they throw one of the children aside and trample the other one underfoot. When Meryem sees this, she tries to attack the women with a shovel but they crush her to death. At the end of the film, we see Meryem lying in a pool of blood; the house and the precious food have been plundered. Just as at the beginning of the film, the stark image is accompanied by the sound of children crying.

THEMES

Hunger. It can be said that the main theme of the film is hunger, as the title suggests. What starving people can do in the face of vital needs such as hunger is in the principal dramatic thrust of the film; it depicts desperate people who lose all moral and civilized scruples and act like wild animals when it comes to hunger. Meryem, who got married and escaped from the house where she was raped, does not hesitate to raid the house of Ağa and ask for compensation for the taking of her virginity in the face of the hunger of her children. Facing hunger in this way renders all moral subtleties no longer important. When the villagers raid her house, there is no way to prevent things from getting out of control. They only want a piece of bread, but when they don't get what they want, they can't stop from committing a collective crime with a group psychology. Hungry people see neither children nor old fathers. They see everyone who comes in their way as an obstacle between them and food and they crush them. They do not realize the damage that they are doing, they only have one motivation: hunger. Hunger dehumanizes them.

The Ağa Another thematic topic on which the film focuses is system of a hierarchy controlled by an Ağa . In the film, the Ağa is portrayed as a ruthless landowner and a rapist. Any kind behaviour by this Ağa is non-existent. He can do whatever he likes to 'his' peasants. The villagers in the film accept this situation and obey him. But when they are starving, they turn on each other thoughtlessly. His warehouse is full of food and in this sense, the Ağa has committed theft himself and his greed crushes the villagers both materially and spiritually.

The position of the woman The position of women is represented as the lowest social level among the villagers, as well as in the landlord's ruthless regime. Whether a woman is working for the Ağa or in her husband's house, she is always the servant of the place where she is. She is always a woman who does the cooking, does the cleaning, gives birth by herself, raises children by herself, is responsible for the care of the old people in the society, and helps her husband in the fields in the rest of her time. In this film, there is also a representation of a woman as a sexual object available to the service of both the Ağa and her husband. The Ağa has the freedom to have any woman whenever he wants. Women have no right to speak against either the Ağa or the men in their house. It can be said that the male characters have a clear or harsh authority over the female characters. Hasan's walking in front of Meryem as he takes her to his own house is a symbol of his superiority over her. Scenes like this can be seen throughout the film. For example, Meryem, who is responsible for all the housework and who works with her husband in the fields to help him, always walks behind him everywhere they go. Her relationship with the old man in the house is in a way a continuation of this. In that patriarchal structure, the right to speak belongs to the eldest man in the family. While he is alive, his word is acknowledged and respected. This is the case in *Hunger*; the right to have the last word in the family is left to the old man and his decisions are respected. In fact, despite the representation of Meryem as a stronger character than all the male characters in the film, she is always positioned inferior to them because of her gender.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Meryem is the main character of the film; it is built around her. She was sold to the Ağa as a child and started to work as a servant in his house. After she was raped by the Ağa, she was married to Hasan, a poor boy of the village, and they had two children. She puts her family above everything else and tries to protect her home in every situation. She has a strong, altruistic, loving and possessive character. She even goes to the Ağa to try to feed her children, disregarding her own honour.

Strong Meryem is a strong character. She is the only girl who can rebel against Ağa in his own house and we start from there to witness her power. She has the power to make her own life even when she is beset by hunger and poverty. She exhibits the same power at home after her marriage. She does all the work on her own and she continues to help her husband in the fields. She uses this power to protect and sustain her family. When her husband goes to work in the city, she takes on the burden of the house, two young children and the old man. When they are struggling with hunger, the fact that she raids the Ağa's house with a gun and obtains food which she tries to save for her children at the cost of her life is always due to this power.

Altruism Meryem is a devoted woman. When they are struggling with hunger, it is Meryem who says that they should slaughter the ox and eat it. This is a real sacrifice because without the ox, she will have to do the ploughing herself. There is always a sacrifice involved for her – protecting the food at the expense of her life after she has gone to the house where she was raped to find food for her children, shouldering all the burdens after her marriage, even giving birth alone at home without asking for the midwife can all be regarded as examples of sacrifice.

Possessive Since her childhood, Meryem has not lived in a family but she has always longed for a home and family of her own. This is why she takes on the house of the man she marries as her own house, his father as her own father. She cultivates the field like her own. She even ploughs the field with her own hands after they slaughter the ox. She enjoys serving them as if she is serving herself. She wants to be a family with them.

Hasan The leading male character is Hasan, an introverted and even naive young man who lives in a world of his own. After his mother died, his whole life has revolved around a small piece of land, the work of his own hands and his elderly father. He manages his life between working in the fields, caring for his father and looking after the house. Hasan, who has never had much of a relationship with other villagers, includes his wife and children in this life after his marriage.

Soft-tempered Hasan does not assert himself. In fact, when he tries to compare himself to the men he sees around him and takes his father as an example, he often falls into comical situations because he does not have the tough stance that other men and his father have. He is a loving, compassionate and understanding man beyond the authority and power that being a man puts on his shoulders. The bond of love and respect which he feels for his wife is the result of this. Although he loves his wife in every sense and is happy with her, he nevertheless thinks about what the villagers would say about a girl who was brought from the Ağa's house, and this can affect him. This is an indication that Hasan does not have a very strong psychological structure.

Childish Hasan has a childish and warm nature; he is a sincere, self-sacrificing man who tries to do his best for other people. Although he sometimes tries to restrain his childish excitement, he has difficulty in controlling this emotion. When he tries to exercise the power which he cannot have, his childishness emerges more obviously. His warm and excitable nature also enables him to have a friendly attitude towards the people with whom he communicates. Although he is good at getting what he wants, it is not his stubborn and strong personality that enables this, but his warm and friendly nature.

Low-status Hasan is a peasant who has a lower status in power relations. He only barely gets along with his father with their very limited means of livelihood. When famine strikes, he goes to Istanbul to get a job as a construction worker, but he can hardly make a living there and he still has a lower status there. Even though his father shares the same conditions as him, his father has a higher status than Hasan because of the power endowed by his age, and this is the reason why Hasan generally has a submissive attitude towards his father. He does not disagree with him much, does not object that the old man makes the final decisions, and leaves even the choice of the girl he will marry to his father. Even though he occasionally contradicts his father, he eventually always gives in to his

father's wishes. He usually behaves in a soft, persuasive manner towards his father and he has a similar attitude to the Ağa, who has a much higher status than him. Faced with the Ağa, he appears submissive; he is very aware of the power which the Ağa's position gives him and he submits to that power. His submissive attitude towards the Ağa when he arrives to take a girl whom he can marry clearly shows Hasan's awareness of his low status. It can be said for the male character in the leading role that he is respectful towards men who are at a higher level due to his lowest status, he knows his own position and he has a timid nature. The village has a slightly different structure than just everyone knowing his or her place; Hasan does not go to the rain prayer meeting even though almost all of the villagers have prayed for rain when the drought affects them.

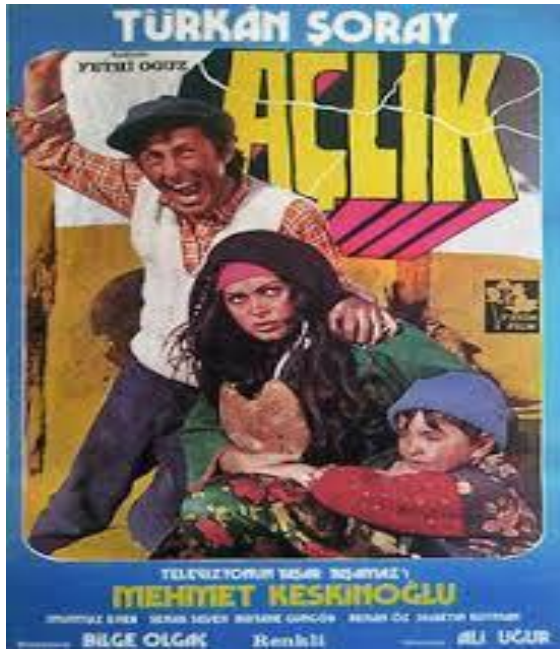
The Ağa The Ağa character is represented in the film as a type without depth. This character is fed by cliché representations. For this reason, he treats the peasants with the utmost disrespect, he shows disrespect for everyone on his property who works for a wage and he spends his whole day in idle luxury. While his peasants are starving, he sleeps comfortably with his warehouse full of food.

Sexuality It can be said that the most defining feature of the Ağa is his addiction to sexuality. Throughout the film, we only see the Ağa taking advantage of the girls working in his service, abusing them physically and even raping them. The poverty and neediness of the villagers stimulate the Ağa even more. Even though everybody, even his wife, knows what is happening, nobody can oppose the Ağa. In fact, while Meryem is being raped, she shouts a lot and asks for help but even though the people in the house can hear her, they are unable to help her.

Selfish The Ağa is selfish enough to lie in his warm bed knowing that his house is full of food and he continues to molest the girls in the house while the whole village is starving. The situation of the villagers does not concern him at all. Even when Meryem marries Hasan in the middle of the film, he still harasses her; he even makes her kiss his hand before she leaves the house.

Father After his wife died, the old man and his son Hasan lived in their house some way outside the village with a small piece of land. With the advantage of his age and his power over his son, he does not bother to do anything but leaves the burden of his whole life on his son's shoulders. When his son wants to marry, we realise that he intends to be dependent on his daughter-in-law. He has a selfish side and he likes to complain.

Childish and selfish In his old age, Hasan's father shows a mixture of childishness and selfishness. For example, he can fight with one of his grandchildren just like a child at the beginning of a meal. This is one of those scenes which clearly show his childish and his selfish side. Because he is both old and male, he uses his power to the full when he comes to telling Hasan and Meryem how to work, but when Hasan goes to the city to work as a labourer, he does not mind putting all the burden of the house on Meryem. He even expects her to rescue them from the hunger. Despite this, he positions himself higher than both his son and his daughter-in-law and tries to rule them. In a way, he is also the Ağa of their house.



The poster for the film



Meryem returning from the Ağa's house with the basket of food.



Meryem feeds her children and father -in -law