

Muhsin Bey (Mr. Muhsin) 1987

Yavuz Turgul

Overview

Muhsin Bey was both written and directed by Yavuz Turgul and was his second film. The film depicts the relationship between a music promoter named Muhsin Kanadıkırık, who is an old-fashioned Istanbul gentlemen and not good at dealing with financial issues but he is keen on classical Turkish music (à la turca), and a young musician named Ali Nazik who comes from Urfa in eastern Turkey and who wants to make long-playing records and is eager to find a place in the music industry; he is particularly keen on arabesque music. In this relationship, the changing cultural climate of Turkey and how individuals re-adjust themselves to these changes is narrated. This relationship between these two characters represents the two different moral codes, ethical approaches and two different social classes which could be seen in 1980s Turkey. By setting this cultural conflict in Istanbul, the director depicts the major changes in the modern urban life of the period.

In a questionnaire about the best films in Turkish film history published in Sinema Journal in 2014, which had five thousand readers, Muhsin Bey was voted in eighth place. Indeed, this film has a special position not only in Turkish film history but also in the director's filmography in terms of its cast, screenplay and storyline. In Muhsin Bey, Turgul used the structural changes in the music industry, which had started in the 1970s but gained visibility in the 1980s, as a space where the conflict in society can be seen in conflict between à la turca and arabesque music. Also, the music and the dialogues which were used to portray the cultural climate of 1980s Turkey, the locations and the costumes which were used to symbolise the cultural conflict between the old and the new forms of the industry provide a sociological analysis of the social model depicted in the film.

Visual Language

Yavuz Turgul cinema is a cinema that uses mainstream narrative structure. Visual narrative strategy is a cinematic language that emerges from the harmony of time, space and action based on film language of continuity. He is a director who puts the actor's body in the center, tries to take the soul of the scene from the centered actor's body, therefore, he always keeps the actor in focus by not using blind areas and de-frames. The cinematic language Turgul uses in Muhsin Bey's movie has same features that he uses in his other films. For this reason, he usually works with the same technical team, especially Şener Şen, who has a good collaboration in his films. Although the cinematographer and art design team changes from film to film, the style that repeats itself in each film is also reflected in this film. The mise-en-scène in his films is generally designed to take the audience's attention on the actor. The main carrier of his stories is the character's motivation.

Cultural Significance

In order to understand the social changes which are depicted in the film, it is necessary to look at the cultural climate of 1980s Turkey. The cultural environment of the 1980s can be separated into two parts. The early 1980s were years under military control maintained by oppression. The second part of the 1980s was marked by neo-liberalism which gave people a false sense of freedom along with freedom of consumption. So the 1980s was a decade of contradictions.

Nurdan Gürbilek (1992) commented that the 1980s was the era when those who were repressed returned. However, Turkey witnessed the reality that the things which returned were not the same as the things which had been repressed before. In order to understand this change, the term 'discontinuity' can be used and Foucault's writing can enhance this discussion. For Foucault (1972: 217), discontinuity meant that "in a transition from one historical era to another, things are no longer perceived, described, expressed, characterised, classified, and known in the same way". The new things, which had been repressed by the 1960 coup and which returned in the 1980s, involved anger at the modernisation which had repressed the Turkish people and an insistent desire for power.

This was the context in which the new arabesque culture became the popular culture of the era. According to Meral Özbek (2012), arabesque music began in the 1970s as music for people who had left their traditional life in rural areas but never found their place as new dwellers in the cities. In other words, arabesque music was made by and for inhabitants who were neither/both traditional nor/and modern: who were in between. This first wave of arabesque was proud and satiated. In the second wave of arabesque in the 1980s, however, people began to call modernisation to account for its repression and demanded that their desires be satisfied (Gürbilek 1992; 2001; Özbek 2012).

The second half of the 1980s was a time when the “meta/grand/master narratives” (Lyotard 1979) which had been believed to be the sources of Turkish national identity collapsed. Kemalism and its modernising and westernising ideas as meta-narratives which had been used to legitimize who would be excluded and who would be included gave way to pluralities and marginalities. Not only Kemalism and its meta-narratives, but also Marxism and the Turkish revolutionist movement settled in fragmented narratives through eclecticism as a nostalgic image. They took their part in the new pop history. Desires which were different from each other came together and Turkish citizens witnessed the migration of ideas as nomadic. Collapse, non-continuation, temporariness and chaos are words which describe the 1980s cultural environment. Briefly, it can be said that the contemporary discussion of postmodernism can be seen easily in Turkish cultural life of the 1980s.

Characters

Muhsin Bey: he is the main character of the film who gives his name to the title. The character is played by Şener Şen. Muhsin is a music promoter.

Ali Nazik: is played by Uğur Yücel; he comes from eastern Turkey and wants to be a singer.

Sevda Hanım: is a solo singer with whom Muhsin falls in love.

Orhan: is Muhsin’s assistant who persuades him to help Ali.

Şakir: is Muhsin’s rival; he wants to sign up Ali to perform in his music hall.

Afitap Hanım: is an elderly classical music singer who lives on her own in an old person’s home.

Summary

Muhsin Bey is an old-fashioned music organizer who lives in an old Greek house as the tenant of Madame Aghavni in Istanbul and is platonically in love with his neighbor, Sevda Hanım. Due to the fact that his apprentice Osman invested his office rent in horse races, our space was left and he started to carry out his business from the neighborhood coffee house. For this reason, he was ridiculed by his rivals and lost his former reputation. The flow of the movie, which started with the problems in his daily life, changes with the insistence of Ali Nazik, who comes from Urfa, to become a singer. Ali Nazik keeps chasing Muhsin Bey, who is the military friend of his uncle in the village, and tries to persuade him to make a long play. Muhsin Bey, who was reluctant to make a folk music long play because of his financial difficulties and his fondness for classical Turkish music, established a bond between them when Ali Nazik helped him on the night of his toothache and Muhsin Bey was convinced about producing a long play. However a difficult process awaits them. First, he persuades a producer to listen to him. But the night he took the stage, Ali Nazik was excited and messed up. Later, Muhsin Bey, who wanted to bring Ali Nazik to TRT, was defrauded. Finally, they decide to organize a sound competition. They will also make cassettes to Ali Nazik with the money they collect for the application. But they fail at that too. Thinking that this is a fraud, Muhsin Bey surrenders to the police and goes to prison. While he was in prison, Ali Nazik chooses a life that disregards all the values that Muhsin Bey has emphasized since the beginning of the film. He begins to perform in the pavilion of the rival Şakir. Despite the promise he made to Muhsin Bey, he started to perform arabesque, which is the trend of the period. He makes Sevda his lover. He treats Sevda who Muhsin Bey does not dare to look into her eyes. At the end of the movie, Muhsin Bey throws the long play in which Nazik violated all the values he imprisoned for the sake of him, and takes Sevda Hanım and her daughter and sets out for a new life.

Story

Meeting Muhsin Kanadıkırık is a music promoter in Istanbul who admires classical Turkish music; he is an old-fashioned Istanbul gentleman who enjoys his flowers and has a platonic relationship with his neighbour, a singer named Sevda Hanım. Ali Nazik, a young man from Urfa, asks Muhsin to help him to become a singer. Although at the beginning of the film Muhsin refuses to help him because of

the style of his music, he cannot withstand the insistence of his assistant Orhan and he agrees to help Ali on one condition - that Ali must not sing arabesque music anywhere, anytime. Ali cannot sing classical Turkish music but he is good at Türkü (traditional local folk music), so Muhsin decides to produce a türkü long-playing record.

Financial Problems They face many financial obstacles, but there is one particular problem. The Muhsin's rival Şakir tries to entice Ali to his music hall to sing arabesque, where Ali could earn more money than from a türkü long player because the increasing trend of the period is arabesque singing. Muhsin is completely opposed to this new arabesque trend, claiming that it is killing all musical values and that the culture spread by arabesque in city life is vulgar. Muhsin and Ali make great efforts to overcome the financial hurdles, but without success.

Contest Eventually, they decide to organise a song contest. They collect money from would-be entrants for the contest, but Muhsin cannot get the contest organised and uses the money which they have collected from the contestants who wanted to become popular and celebrities to produce the long-player for Ali.

Prison Muhsin, however, is an honourable, moral man and he is stricken with remorse at the theft, so he confesses to the police and ends up going to prison. While he is in prison, Ali becomes an arabesque singer and enters into a singing contract with Şakir. He seduces Sevda and treats her badly. Briefly, while Muhsin is away in prison, Ali becomes the very opposite of him.

After Prison At the end of the film, Muhsin, released from prison, visits Şakir's music hall, and gives the long-player to Ali for which he has abandoned all his moral principles. Sevda decides to go with Muhsin Bey away for a new life together.

Themes

Social change: The main thematic base of almost all of Turgul's films is social change and how it can be practised in the everyday experiences of the characters. In Muhsin Bey, the main theme is the social change which all Turks faced during the 1980s Muhsin Bey was produced in this period of cultural change, and these changes are the main theme of the film. This main theme is structured by the use of two different characters: Muhsin Bey represents the collapse of the meta-narrative about the model of Turkish modernisation and Ali Nazik represents the new city dwellers who demand that their desires be satisfied.

Resistance to the zeitgeist: In Muhsin Bey, Muhsin Kanadıkırık is someone who is resisting the changes in his own way. He lives in nostalgia although he is living in Beyoğlu, one of the main places of change. He observes these changes by commenting that "all Istanbul looks like a kebab house now". However, resisting gives him an identity with which he can survive until he meets Ali Nazik. When he meets Ali, he tries to change his cultural belonging in order to help him. Either way, resisting or accepting change, however, he loses his means of living despite the changes. There is no more space for old-fashioned thinking in this new world.

Conflicting moral values: The perception of world held by these two characters and how they describe it is another sub-theme of the film. In one scene, they imagine together what kind of future they want to have. Although they seem to be talking to each other, their dialogue turns into monologues: Ali describes the future which he intends to get, saying that "We can buy a car for you, I can close a kebab house so that they cook only for me. I can buy a silk shirt which is pink and a gold necklace like Ibrahim Tatlıses. I can fuck many women. They can eat me like a kebab". Muhsin summarises his expected future by saying "I'll buy a house in Üsküdar where I can see the Kızkulesi. I have had enough of enduring Beyoğlu. I can meet all my old friends and we can sing fasıl. I'll invite Sevda Hanım only if she wants to join me". The futures which they want to achieve portray two different worlds and these different worlds represent the two different moral values of the period. Ali wants to show himself off with a flamboyant appearance whereas Muhsin prefers a calm life in Üsküdar, which is the oldest historical part of Istanbul where the Kızkulesi, one of the symbols of the historical old Istanbul, can be seen. Their approaches to women also show conflicting moral values. Muhsin pays attention to the willingness of the woman who he wants to be with, like a sacred and romantic love without any sexuality, whereas Ali's approach is based on multiple sexual partners with no romance and only selfish love. Muhsin has absolute moral values whereas Ali has rationale moral values.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Muhsin Bey: Character He is an old-fashioned Istanbul gentleman who enjoys Turkish classical music and his flowers. His character represents resistance against the new arabesque culture. He is against social change and cannot adjust himself to the new social organisation and culture. He is a very kind and romantic man who has fallen in love with his neighbour Sevda Hanım, but their relationship is platonic and he cannot tell her how he feels.

Traditional Muhsin symbolises a world which is collapsing in the face of the new form. At the beginning of the film, this situation is represented in his daily life experiences: he uses the toilet but the flush does not work; he cannot stop to his watch alarm from going off; he lives in an old-type apartment where ethnic minorities live whose position in the city is precarious; his car is very old and hardly working; and his clothes make him look as if he has come from a time machine, with his hat and coat: in short, at the beginning of the film he is portrayed in a collapsing environment. From the dialogue, however, we learn that he was once an important, highly reputed and prestigious man. These dialogues and the relationship between him and his old friends tell us that his unsuccessful life is not through any fault of his own, but rather because of the social changes. He resists these changes and this resistance is the basis of all his actions. Again, at the beginning of the film, we understand that he has been living in same home for twenty years and that he has been driving the same car for a long time. He is not very open to new things.

Romantic Muhsin Bey is in love with Mrs. Sevda, but their relationship is completely platonic. While she talks, music plays in his head. He looks at her like the flowers that he admires. He does not dare to open up to her. He's afraid of hurting her. But he is always with her and even behind her. Unable to make a request from anyone for himself, Muhsin Bey asked his friend to take her to the stage in his casino. Muhsin Bey is an old-fashioned romantic. He is a romantic who cannot touch his loved one. The sexual love of the new era is far from him.

Loyal He is very loyal man. He frequently visits an old singer in an old people's home even though she is forgotten and has been left aside by the new cultural life. He thinks that he owes her a debt of gratitude because he had once listened to her sing and enjoyed her songs. It was because of her that he fell in love with classical Turkish music, so he cannot forget her like other people have.

Ethical He is very ethical man. In all his actions, his main concern is being ethically correct, but in the new world, his concern seems childish and impractical. Even so, he cannot adjust himself to live any differently. Although he tries to organise a song contest, he refuses to show any favour to Ali, and he refuses to let an arabesque singer enter the contest even though he is aware that without the entry fee from arabesque singers, he will go bankrupt.

Ali Nazik: Character He has come from distant Urfa to Istanbul in order to become a singer. He admires Ibrahim Tatlıses, who was the most popular arabesque singer of the period and was regarded as a symbol of the changing cultural climate of 1980s Turkey. Ali finds Muhsin and wants him to help him to become a singer.

Childish He is childish man in his understanding of the world. He says nothing against all the humiliation which Muhsin endures as if Muhsin is his father. His childish nature is strongly highlighted at the beginning of the film. For example, even though it is raining, he waits for Muhsin outside the door of his apartment, and when Muhsin asks him why he is waiting in the rain, he admits that he wanted to pile on the agony to get more sympathy.

Determined Ali is very insistent. Even though Muhsin refuses his request many times, he follows him around all day in order to persuade him. It can therefore be said that he is very determined man. His character symbolises the social changes which are happening in society. He wants to become popular and rich and does not care how he can achieve it. He shows no ethical concerns or moral values.

Transformed We watch the transformation of his character over the film. Although at the beginning he is a childish, somehow innocent man, he transforms into a man who is able to use every means to get what he wants. At the beginning of the film, he acts according to Muhsin's advice, step-by-step and childishly, but by the end of the film, he has become a person of the new system. He has started to sing arabesque music in the music hall of Muhsin's rival, Şakir. He takes up with Sevda and treats her badly.

Sevda Hanım: Character She is the only female character in the film. She is divorced and lives as a single mother with her daughter; she sings in a music hall and although her voice is not trained, Muhsin

has called in a favour from the music hall owner so that she can work there. Muhsin falls in love with her, but their relationship is entirely platonic. Illustrative moments

Non-subject Her character does not enhance the narrative but is used in the film as a currency which can be exchange between the men. That is why when she starts to talk, music starts to play in Muhsin's head. He cannot listen to her but instead he looks at her admiringly with the music playing in his mind. She is like one of Muhsin's flowers which he looks after very carefully and is very proud of. She is like an object that brings life and joy to its environment but needs care and water. In short, Sevda Hanım is a character designed as a decorative object that represents a value in the film.

Disloyal When Muhsin goes to prison she changes her direction and becomes Ali's lover despite all his humiliating and cruel treatment of her. This is why it can be said that in this film, the representation of a woman is problematic. She cannot make her presence felt, but is depicted as if the only kind of existence she has is that she can be exchanged between men.

Talkative actually talks a lot but is not listened to by anyone. Neither his performance on the stage nor his daily speeches will be heard by anyone. But unlike Keje, who resists the silence in the Bandit, he continues to talk a lot, although he often understands that he is not rested. Speaking is an area of resistance for him.

References

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While Sevda Hanım and Muhsin Bey were waiting for Ali Nazik to appear on the stage



Muhsin Bey often visits the sound artist, whom he is a fan of, in the nursing home.



Muhsin Bey and Ali Nazik run away from the unjust applicants of the vocal contest.



Muhsin Bey prepares Ali Nazik for the stage.