

# gender<ed> thoughts

New Perspectives in  
Gender Research

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2018, Volume 1

Tebessüm Yılmaz

**Song of My Mother.  
Remembering and Representing  
the Forced Displacement  
and Resettlement of  
Kurdish Women**

With a Commentary by  
Tül Sualp Akbal



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## **Song of My Mother**

### **Remembering and Representing the Forced Displacement and Resettlement of Kurdish Women**

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### **Abstract**

In the 1990s, Bakur (also known as ‘Turkish Kurdistan’) was exposed to mass state-inflicted violence. To suppress the Kurdish insurgence and cut off the logistic support of the PKK (the Kurdistan Workers’ Party; Kurdish: *Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê*), the Turkish state introduced new war strategies, such as forced disappearances and village evacuations executed by its security forces (TSK) and state-fostered counter-paramilitary forces (JITEM, Hizbullah), leading to the displacement of three million people. Within a couple of years, thousands of Kurdish people were tortured, mutilated and forcibly disappeared. Their whereabouts remain unknown. This article investigates how state violence in the 1990s is depicted, represented, and recreated via cinematic narration. Erol Mintaş’s first feature film *Song of My Mother* (*Annemin Şarkısı*/2014) serves as a case study to analyse how forced displacement and resettlement of Kurds are visualised. Further, this account focuses on how the violence is remembered, represented, and recreated and which emotions are revealed while dealing with the traumatic events of the past and, finally, how the past is imagined and commemorated in the present. The visualisation and memorialisation of the 1990s in Kurdish culture contrast with the official Turkish discourse on memory and also provide a basis for collective societal confrontation.

### **Keywords**

state violence; forced displacement; resistance; Kurdish collective memory; remembrance; trauma

### **Zusammenfassung**

In den 1990er Jahren war Bakur (auch als „türkisches Kurdistan“ bekannt) Massengewalt ausgesetzt. Um den kurdischen Aufstand zu unterdrücken und die logistische Unterstützung der PKK (Kurdische Arbeiterpartei; Kurdisch: *Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê*) abzuschneiden, führte der türkische Staat neue Kriegsstrategien ein, wie das Verschwindenlassen und Evakuieren von Dörfern durch seine Sicherheitskräfte (TSK) und staatlich geförderte paramilitärische Einheiten (JITEM, Hizbullah), die zur Vertreibung von drei Millionen Menschen führten. Innerhalb weniger Jahre wurden Tausende Kurden gefoltert, verstümmelt und gewaltsam verschwunden. Ihr Aufenthaltsort bleibt unbekannt. Dieser Artikel untersucht, wie die staatliche Gewalt der 1990er Jahren durch filmische Erzählung erinnert, dargestellt und neu erschaffen wird. Erol Mintaş erster Spielfilm *Song of My Mother* (*Annemin Şarkısı*/2014) dient als Fallstudie, um zu analysieren, wie Zwangsvertreibung und Umsiedlung von Kurden sichtbar gemacht werden. Darüber hinaus konzentriert sich dieser Artikel darauf, wie die

Gewalt erinnert, dargestellt und neu geschaffen wird und welche Emotionen sich bei der Bewältigung der traumatischen Ereignisse der Vergangenheit zeigen, und wie die Vergangenheit in der Gegenwart vorgestellt und geahndet wird. Die Visualisierung und Erinnerung der 1990er Jahre in der kurdischen Kultur kontrastiert mit dem offiziellen türkischen Gedächtnisdiskurs und bietet auch eine Grundlage für kollektive gesellschaftliche Konfrontation.

## Schlagworte

staatliche Gewalt, Zwangsvertreibung, Widerstand, kurdisches kollektives Gedächtnis, Erinnerung, Trauma

## Introduction

In this article,<sup>1</sup> I examine how the past is remembered and represented in the present in relation to the state violence of the 1990s in Erol Mintaş's first feature film *Song of My Mother* (2014). The atrocities that took place in Bakur (also known as 'Turkish Kurdistan') in the 1990s play a significant role in Kurdish remembrance and in Kurdish collective memory. Human rights institutions report that 1,353 people were forcibly disappeared (Göral 2017: 122), more than 3,700 villages were evacuated and three million people were displaced (Yıldırım 2012). Yet the Turkish state has failed to acknowledge its responsibility. Instead, it fostered a discourse on memory based on denial of what happened. This research paper focuses on how gendered experiences of forced migration and resettlement are visualised, what type of coping strategies are deployed via cinematic [re]presentation, and, finally, what kind of narratives are [re]produced to confront the official state discourse.

This article aims to contribute to the contemporary academic debate on Kurdish-related topics by combining trauma and memory studies with critical film studies. By focusing on

Mintaş's film, I hope to fill a gap in related studies, which have been focusing mainly on historical aspects of the so-called Kurdish question. Considering the fact that the films released in the 1990s idealised Kurdish national identity and reproduced melancholic victim narratives, it is crucial to focus on the productions of the 2000s, in which Kurdish film-makers deconstruct and reverse victim narratives and turn them into acts of resistance by recognising the agency of the Kurds (Sustam 2016: 218-19).

In the following pages, the theoretical foundation of memory studies will be presented in order to explain the research questions and the choice of methodology within the theoretical framework. Then, the paper will move on to a brief discussion of contemporary academic work related to Kurdish studies. This part will be followed by a section on Kurdish filmmaking in Turkey, especially regarding its potential to challenge an official state discourse and reveal different aspects of Kurdish collective memory. Finally, at the beginning of the analysis of Mintaş's *Song of My Mother*, the film is introduced to the reader by means of a synopsis.

## 1. Memory studies and studying Kurdish memory

Memory has always been a topic present in academic work, but only since the 1980s have scholars from the humanities and social sciences increasingly started to consider "memory" as a central concept in their critical research (see Olick 1999; Kansteiner 2002; Erl 2008; Antze and Lambek 2016; Casper and Wertheimer 2016). It has even been suggested that in parallel

<sup>1</sup> This article is dedicated to Rozerin Çukur who was shot to death at age sixteen by Turkish snipers in the Sur district of Amed/Diyarbakir in 2016. Her parents were denied receiving her body for months. I am grateful to Erol Mintaş, Jakob Wilke, Tuncay Şur, and Çağhan Kızıl for their critique and input as well as for encouraging and supporting me throughout the way. I also extend my thanks to the two anonymous reviewers whose helpful comments aided me in further developing this paper.

with global social developments, the rise of the so-called “memory studies” points to a more global tendency, “*the transition from forgetting culture to remembering culture*” (Sancar 2010). The rising focus on alternative histories, history-telling, and performances of counter-memory stemming from collective memory (Halbwachs 1992) has been a recurring theme in recent years (Antze-Lambek 2016). Indeed, the attempts to disregard collective experiences of minority groups, particularly those resulting from oppression and state-inflicted violence, does not mean that they are eliminated from the people’s collective memory. Inevitably, also the possible perpetrators of violence will be part of forging memory, thus, imposing a certain discourse of memory on those sharing it. This continues to be reflected in inter-ethnic relations in contemporary Turkey.

I claim that memory studies in Turkey give a different point of view to contemporary sociopolitical and cultural analysis. A review of existing literature suggests that these studies predominantly deal with communities that were exposed to mass state violence in processes of Turkish nation state-building and identity-making (Neyzi 2002; Neyzi 2008; Neyzi 2010), such as the Greek Orthodox, Jews, and Armenians. Although these studies shed light on counter-memory narratives, their scholarly interest mostly remains focused on communities that are ‘physically gone’. However, research on Kurdish communities in Turkey has recently intersected with memory studies, for example, in relation to the Armenian genocide (Çelik 2015; Çelik and Dinç 2015; Çelik and Öpengin 2016). One of the main reasons why this is a rather recent development, is the extreme state violence forced on the Kurds and the fact that it has, thus far, not been fully acknowledged by both the authorities and the Turkish communities, therefore remaining exempt from punishment (Atılğan and Işık 2011). Consequently, the memories and experiences of survivors of mass violence have been suppressed and silenced. A further reason is connected to the multidirectional features of memory (Rotberg

2009). While oral history, personal narrative, and life course research on the above-mentioned topics sparked public discussion (Neyzi 2010), they also form a substantive and symbolic basis for other excluded groups’ demands for justice (Çelik 2017). Thus, their memories become a space for resistance. Contemporary research on the cultural and political resistance of the Kurdish communities in Turkey has shown that the official state discourse on memory has been challenged and contested by the Kurdish counter-memory narratives.

Despite the great interest in memory and trauma studies (particularly, Holocaust studies), the complexity of research on traumatic events remains a challenge to many scholars (Yıldız 2015: 105). Although there are a number of studies focusing on the cultural aspects of the Kurdish question, they have not said much about the traumatic experiences of Kurds. Those that analyse the ongoing war through a post-colonial studies perspective (Sustam 2015; Sustam 2016) still omit the memory aspect associated with reconciling. On the other hand, studies on cultural productions have omitted the political reflections of their research objects. For instance, critical studies on Kurdish films have mostly focused on their artistic value but not on their political connotations – in other words, they mostly failed to acknowledge their political meaning (Sönmez 2015).<sup>2</sup>

There is a need for new methodological and theoretical approaches, and this need has inspired collaborations among different disciplines and research areas (Albano 2016), such as film and memory studies and the social sciences, particularly sociology. Although conflicts and wars have widely been presented, represented, and discussed on screen for a long time, visual research in sociology has been neglected for decades (Harper 2015). However, visual sociology as a young discipline (Sztompka 2015) takes a strong interest in the intersection of film and memory and trauma studies.

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<sup>2</sup> Ayça Çiftçi’s (2015) unpublished doctoral thesis remains an exceptional work.

This article aims to analyse the representations of state violence against the Kurdish communities of Turkey through the lens of the feature film *Song of My Mother*. I dissect the role of Kurdish language in the transmission of memory, how the past and present are remembered and represented, how trauma caused by state violence is represented and interpreted, what kind of emotions are performed, and what kind of negotiations are taking place in daily practices of forced displacement. I suggest that the Turkish state is represented as a despotic colonial power in Kurdish remembrance. Furthermore, because existing literature on gendered trauma experiences mostly conceptualises women as a ‘particularly vulnerable social group’ and their political existence has been overlooked (Fiddian-Qasmideh 2014), it is essential to adopt a feminist approach to the matter. Therefore, this article focuses on how gendered experiences of forced migration and resettlement are visualised, what type of coping strategies are deployed via cinematic [re]presentation, and what kind of narratives are [re]produced to confront the official state discourse. Finally, the topics of identity crisis and notions of being in-between and being incomplete will be looked into to understand their impact on Kurdish collective memory and identity.

I will build my hypothesis by applying critical visual analysis (Pauwels 2011; Rose 2016: 1-47). As investigating various themes, signs, and codes requires different research methods to complement each other, a variety of research methods, such as visual semiotics, contextual and conceptual analysis, deep interpretational analysis, and intertextual analysis will be combined within the theoretical purview of memory and trauma studies. In addition to that, some interviews with the director Mintaş will be included, where further information is needed regarding the socio-political background of the film.

I believe that the use of multiple different visual research methods will not only provide a better picture of the socio-political context of

the chosen film but will also mitigate the possible inadequacies of each method.

## 2. Kurdish film-making as a site for cultural resistance

Kurdish cinema in Turkey emerged in the 1990s, in the midst of the armed conflict between the Turkish state and the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK).<sup>3</sup> However, the conflict already is rooted in the forerun to and in the first years of the Turkish Republic. The dynamics of this longstanding conflict changed significantly after the first armed attack of the PKK in 1984 (Açık 2013), which later led to a paradigm shift in the Turkish state’s war strategies. As a result of this change in strategy, Kurds were exposed to intense violence perpetuated by both the state and state-sponsored counter-guerilla paramilitary forces. Widespread, systematic and multi-layered state violence defined the Kurds as deserving punishment, execution, and annihilation<sup>4</sup> (Göral 2016: 115; Çelik 2016: 91). State killings, murders by unknown perpetrators, forced disappearances, village evacuations, sexual violence, and forced displacement of Kurds were introduced and used as war tools by the Kurdish Hizbullah<sup>5</sup>, JİTEM (Gendarmerie Intelligence and Counter-Terrorism)<sup>6</sup> or the

<sup>3</sup> Kurdish: *Partiya Karkeşên Kurdistanê*.

<sup>4</sup> Meanwhile, the state supported a media portrayal of Kurds as terrorists and, by dehumanising them (Şur 2016; Gönen 2016), degraded them to bare lives (Agamben 1998) that have “to be neutralised” and “terminated”. The need for self-representation on the Kurdish side thus stems from that as well.

<sup>5</sup> The Hizbollah is a Sunni Islamist militant organisation active in Turkish Kurdistan. The organisation is also referred to as Kurdish or Turkish Hizbollah and has been supported by the Turkish state and its security forces during its conflict with the PKK (Göral, Işık and Kaya 2013: 23).

<sup>6</sup> JİTEM (*Jandarma İstibbarat ve Terörle Mücadele*; English: Gendarmerie Intelligence and Counterterrorism) is an intelligence agency under the command of the Turkish Gendarmerie. The agency was unofficially involved in the Turkish-Kurdish conflict and its existence was denied by Turkish authorities until 2005 when the organisation was restructured and renamed JİT (Göral, Işık and Kaya 2013: 22).



village guard system.<sup>7</sup> Although the level of indifference, banality, and brutality lend a unique character to the 1990s' state violence, it is necessary to acknowledge the continuity of state violence regarding the Kurdish question. As Bahar Şahin Fırat notes, its effects on the victims continue to be reproduced on a daily basis (Şahin Fırat 2014: 390). Demands for compensation, efficient investigation and prosecution, and, most importantly, for taking public responsibility for the crimes are still pending. Therefore, the 1990s need to be treated as a dynamic and boundless period of time, whose victims are still suffering from the aftershocks. When excessive violence overtakes every aspect of life, what happened becomes unspeakable to its victims (Şahin Fırat 2014: 390). It is no coincidence that the traumatic experiences of the 1990s were to become constitutive elements of Kurdish collective memory.

The *Mesopotamia Cultural Center* (MKM), a milestone in the history of Kurdish resistance and Kurdish memory, was founded in 1991 in Istanbul and suddenly became a social hub for many young Kurds (Candan 2016: 5). A group of Kurds came together here and formed the *Mesopotamia Cinema Collective* (Candan 2016: 6) in 1996 and started making documentary films. These documentary films were the first examples of testimonial cinema.<sup>8</sup> In this way, Kurdish documentary film-making became a tool for speaking the truth (Şengül 2016). As Cuma Çiçek argues:

*Kurdish cinema produced in Turkey is a site where certain unrepresented facts about Turkish history are revealed...Kurdish films reveal certain "histories" of Turkish and Kurdish people and carry an archival potential that shapes the memories of both Kurdish and non-Kurdish people (Çiçek 2016: 75).*

<sup>7</sup> For an in-depth analysis on the village guard system in Turkey please see: Balta Paker and Akça (2013), Gürcan (2014), and Önder (2015).

<sup>8</sup> According to Álvarez (2014) earlier documentary films merely captured historical events in order to visually archive them. Later productions then shifted towards including subjects and their testimonies – hence the testimonial character of cinema.

The question of how to translate, transfer, or represent trauma into a cinematic narrative, gives Kurdish feature films a similar character. By applying various narrative forms and techniques and different aesthetic approaches, it becomes apparent that they are distinguished from mainstream film-making in Turkey. Not only political agendas and claims found their voice in Kurdish feature films, also different Kurdish subjectivities came into focus. In other respects, film-makers have claimed their own agencies through self-representation. While film-makers, as Kurdish subjects, distill their personal experiences into a cinematic narrative, they, at the same time, become performers of collective memory by being both contributors and preservers.

Erol Mintaş, the director of *Song of My Mother*, may fall into this category. While he confronts identity issues, state violence, and performances of collective remembering in his films, Mintaş's own life story bears a resemblance to his cinematic narrations. In particular, the mother tongue question in Mintaş's cinema is a cross-reference to his personal experiences as well as a symbol of the ban on the Kurdish language in Turkey.

### **3. Song of My Mother: remembering and representing the atrocities of the 1990s**

Erol Mintaş's first feature film, *Song of My Mother* was released in 2014 and, according to box office numbers, it reached a wide audience.<sup>9</sup> Feyyaz Duman (Ali), Zübeyde Ronahi (Nigâr), and Nesrin Cavadzade (Zeynep) played the leading roles. The film was granted several national and international film awards and gained public attention.

The last episode of a mother-son trilogy,<sup>10</sup> *Song of My Mother* sheds light on the forced migration and resettlement of Kurds in relation

<sup>9</sup> It reached a number of 11,480 viewers within 13 weeks in Turkey (Box Office Türkiye 2018).

<sup>10</sup> The first two films of the trilogy are *Butimar* (2008) and *Snow* (2010).

to ongoing gentrification processes in Turkey. A young teacher Ali lives with his elderly mother Nigâr in Istanbul's Tarlabaşı district, well-known for its Kurdish immigrant population since the 1990s. When the ongoing gentrification of the old city forces them to move for a second time, as many others, they move to a high-rise building in the city suburbs. Being forced to move again brings out Nigâr's old traumata. She insists on going back to their village in Bakur and is convinced that her old neighbours have all already moved back there. Every day, she packs her belongings, takes her missing son's picture, and seeks ways to return to Doğubeyazıt, while Ali struggles to please his mother. He attempts to locate a *dengbêj* (Kurdish: folk singer) whose song his mother keeps humming and gives her rides to their old neighbourhood. However, he fails to keep up with his personal life and wavers between his mother and his girlfriend.

In order to provide a better sociological analysis of the film, it will be examined by focusing on the different technical and aesthetic choices of the film-maker, the film soundtrack, various themes, topics, and emotions by applying a critical visual analysis. Furthermore, I will draw on the concepts of intercontextuality and intertextuality in film studies (Mazierska 2011) as well as Douglas Kellner's *multi-dimensional film reading* approach (Kellner 1991). Mazierska argues that cinema transforms historical events into a more attractive form for its audience and that cinema itself becomes a new historical discourse. According to Kellner (1991: 9-10), by considering films as cultural texts, it becomes possible to explore challenging discourses, different narratives and their representations, concepts and images, theoretical positions and myths as they mirror everyday life and contemporary political struggles. Through intertextuality, different film narratives are able to 'talk' and refer to each other as well as to other socio-cultural productions, which makes social analysis possible. As Akbal Süalp notes:

*The nature of ideological cultural reproduction creates intertextuality on all levels of human experience. Every*

*mode of production carries some characteristics from the other modes of production, some of them being articulated to the existing forms and some surviving in the dynamics of the cultural reproductions as repressed and hidden forms. These survivals are taken away from their historical context or survive in fantasies, utopias, which might belong to the future, and their reproduction occurs through transformations, remembrance, repression, influence, reference, quotation, representation, misunderstanding, misreading, and also transgression. We also might have the opportunity to have a broader space for dialogues of inter-cultural environment that can also open up a resistant, avant-garde, freed space of representation of technologies and ideologies of the dominant (Akbal Süalp 2009).*

We encounter several themes that enable us to perform a sociological analysis of Mintaş's film. In the first place, we observe that the Kurdish language, which is the memory and bearer of Kurdish culture, is both preferred as a cinematic language and used as a reference system pointing towards Kurdish culture – a culture that relies mostly on oral culture due to prohibitions and oppression. I claim that the choice of the director is intimately related to his personal history and collective Kurdish identity.

Erol Mintaş was born and raised in Bakur and went to western Turkey for his studies, where he experienced precarious working and living conditions (Melek and Neyir 2014). Even though the ban on the Kurdish language was lifted in 1991 (Açık 2013), speaking Kurdish in public was (and still is) criminalised.<sup>11</sup> Therefore, he was constantly exposed to the Turkish language. The representations of the feeling of "being stuck in-between" in his films may partly be derived from that. He was also stuck between his mother tongue and basic means of communication, Kurdish, and the widely spoken everyday language, Turkish. Therefore, it is

<sup>11</sup> Even though they were never explicitly banned, Kurdish language and culture have been de facto criminalised since the earliest years of the Turkish Republic. The current Constitution, ratified after the military coup of 1980, recognises only Turkish as the country's official language, thus limiting the possible use of local minority tongues. From 1983 until 1991, the speaking of Kurdish in public was outlawed, and people were arrested for even so much as the possession of a Kurdish music cassette. In 1991 the use of Kurdish in broadcasting and publishing was legalised.



no coincidence that the question of language is problematised within an identity and memory framework. The right to one's mother tongue is often depicted in relation to cultural memory on a filmic level. Moreover, in Mintaş's cinematic expression, language is also used as a signifier of the state-fostered Turkification (Güneş 2014: 263) processes.

Beginning with the first sequence of the film, the Kurdish language and its use is depicted both as a symbol of the resistance against state violence and as a symbol of Kurdish identity-making. As is widely known, the rejection and prohibition of the Kurdish language by the Turkish authorities, on the one hand, resulted in the denial of Kurdish identity by different sectors of society and, on the other hand, characterised Kurdish identity as a symbol of resistance against state violence and societal oppression. In the opening scene of the film, a teacher at a village school in Doğubeyazıt tells the story of a crow, which, having fallen for the looks of a peacock, tries to look like it and forgets its own beauty. What we understand from the blackboard is that this is a Turkish language class, which is obligatory in all schools. It is definitely no coincidence that Mintaş, who stated that Kurdish plays an important role in Kurdish oral history, chose this story for the opening scene. Indeed, this first scene is important for the continuation of the film, as it opens the discussion for aspects of state violence and social pressure depicted in the film.

The first domain with which the audience interacts is the school – a place which Althusser (2001) defines as one of the ideological tools of the state. In this context, the school is a representation not only of spatial repression but also of the state's Turkification and civilisation policies. Furthermore, Mintaş, with the story accompanying this scene, clearly refers to those who left their Kurdish identity behind, taking on a Turkish identity due to state assimilation policies.<sup>12</sup> Through the cinematic discourse, the

director, on the one hand, reveals the oppression of the state but, on the other hand, simply mocks it. With this representation, a transition from the realm of violence to the realm of resistance is made with children's laughter mixed with the teacher's Kurdish story. Kurdish, which was transmitted from generation to generation with forms of oral culture, is now being transmitted to a next generation by the teacher's storytelling. In this context, the Kurdish language serves as a source and medium for constructing a collective memory which is transmitted over generations.

Kurdish, presented as a tool of discourse and communication in the bilingual film, is also portrayed as the language that strengthens the mother-son relationship and acts as a source for the transfer of collective memory. Starting from the imagination that women are the makers and bearers of culture, the character of Nigâr emerges as the maker and bearer of Kurdish (oral) culture. Women, who are assumed to "naturally" belong to the cultural sphere in patriarchal nationalist discourse (Winter 2016; Yuval-Davis 2002), are in part depicted as trapped in such roles as a result of state violence. While Mintaş states that he owes Kurdish film-making to his mother (Lora 2014), he in fact regenerates the roles of making and bearing that are attributed to women. However, it is noteworthy that based on the representations in the film, the role ascribed to Nigâr correlates with a social reality (Açık 2013). This is to say that continuing to speak Kurdish as an ethnic group, whose language, culture, and memory are threatened to be erased and struggle to exist, points towards the significance of language in the difficult process of revitalising the culture. Thus, Nigâr, through the cinematic narrative of Mintaş, is not only the passive bearer of a culture but also becomes a maker of culture and a symbol of the identity struggle of Kurdish women and their resistance against state oppression.

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<sup>12</sup> By drawing attention to the fluid nature of ethnic identity during conflicts, Adnan Çelik identifies the process of gaining a new identity at the expense of an old one (ethnic identity change) as ethnic asylum. This

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kind of asylum involves the abandonment of an identity and acquisition of a new one after violent attacks against a person's original identity (Çelik 2014: 105).

Kurdish is depicted as a language that is confined to homes, Kurdish cultural centres, and associations rather than a language being taught in school. As some studies have demonstrated (Çağlayan, Özar and Doğan 2011), Kurdish associations are of utmost importance to Kurds who were banished to cities in western Turkey in the 1990s and for the Kurdish resistance movement. Many Kurdish women who lost male relatives such as husbands, sons, fathers, countered their feelings of loss of language and experience with the Kurdish associations, when they first appeared in the city centre's public sphere, where Turkish had to be spoken (Çağlayan, Özar and Doğan 2011). The women who socialised in associations started to be involved in decision-making processes while learning Turkish and also started to participate in local politics through Kurdish political parties (Çağlayan, Özar and Doğan 2011). Paradoxically, state violence led to the unforeseen consequence of the empowerment of Kurdish women, who began to speak up for their own needs, make demands, and negotiate, hence, ultimately, strengthening their capacities to sustain their daily lives.

Nigâr is described as a woman who has the upper hand in day-to-day arguments with her son Ali. Her insistence on returning to the village is one of the determinants of Ali's tense relationship with his partner and mother. Nigâr's resistant attitude results in her success in negotiating small gains; for instance, she gets Ali to frequently take her to visit acquaintances in the old neighbourhood. At the same time the identity crisis Ali experiences is also revealed. His mother's desire to return to the past and to the village makes it difficult for Ali to turn the page and focus on the future. There is no life for Ali in the village because he is settled in urban life. He teaches Kurdish to children at an association but he has to speak Turkish in the public sphere. As an author writing Kurdish stories, Ali oscillates between Turkish and Kurdish. For similar reasons, he has a tense relationship with his partner, who is portrayed as an insignificant personality. For Nigâr, however, returning to the village would mean returning to a time be-

fore her other son's abduction and days prior to violence. Nigâr remembers and recreates Doğubeyazıt in her mind in the present. The village is simply a place of memory that is frozen and static. Since she does not know about her son's fate, like most Kurdish women, her right to mourn is also abrogated (Yalçinkaya 2016: 62; Göral 2016: 130). Her son does not have a grave but there is a framed photograph of her son that she wipes the dust off of and carries along whenever she sets out to travel back to the village. She frequently irons her son's clothes as if she wants him to find them ready if he were to come back.

Nigâr is one of the "Saturday people",<sup>13</sup> protestors who have been appealing to the state for many years at Istanbul's Galatasaray Square to account for their lost ones (Çağlayan 2006: 184). Driven to find answers for the disappearance of her son, Nigâr is insistent on returning to the village. She requests her son Ali to find a *dengbêj* (bard) she had listened to in her youth. An important figure in Kurdish oral culture, a *dengbêj*, is not only considered a person who sings but also an individual who gives life and shape to the voice (Scalbert-Yücel 2017). The *dengbêj* Nigâr had listened to in her village, on the one hand, refers to a culture in danger of extinction and the foundational role of songs in the collective Kurdish memory and, on the other hand, implies that those who stake a claim on memory are women/mothers who are the makers and bearers of the culture. When she unsuccessfully searches for the *dengbêj*'s tape, she tells her son: "*Everything gets lost, everything... Oh, a cruel fate!*" (10:04).

What is lost is not only *dengbêj* Seydoye Silo's tape<sup>14</sup> but also Nigâr's familiar environment, to some extent. Being displaced by the state's policies from her second home in Tarlabası where she socialises with other Kurds, Nigâr was forced to move with her son to newly erected

<sup>13</sup> The current name of a human rights group, formerly known as "Saturday Mothers".

<sup>14</sup> The film's pressbook characterises Seydoye Silo's work as follows: "*She [Nigâr] hangs onto this idea of finding Dengbêj Seydoye Silo... a song that perhaps never existed or is a forgotten, an archaic echo from the past.*"

buildings in Esenyurt.<sup>15</sup> Gentrification is a traumatic trigger for Nigâr, who was detached from her environment. With camera angles and aesthetic perspectives, Nigâr's feelings of being detained within four walls are emphasised. Feelings such as claustrophobia and incarceration are the ones most frequently mentioned in studies conducted with Kurdish women (Çağlayan, Özar and Doğan 2011: 60-61; Çelik 2005: 146).

In Nigâr's case, being in Tarlabası eased the transition for her, whereas Esenyurt brings out her traumas. The feelings of isolation, desolation, and the fear of "dying between the walls" (35:32) reinforce her wish for returning to the village. Moreover, she is firmly convinced that everybody but her had returned. In her memories, 'the village' represents past habits of a familiar lifestyle, memories, and belongings. Nigâr's eagerness to return to the village is indeed a representation of the desire to be reunited with her disappeared son and to retrieve what they had there as a family. Losing her existing social circles, in particular, her neighbours and the Kurdish associations, deepens the trauma of being displaced. Even though 'returning to the village' is often romanticised and nostalgically represented on the screen, this fantasised image is razed in Mintaş's cinema. He disrupts Nigâr's desire by depicting that there is no village to return to and that it is a lost cause.

Like Nigâr, many Kurds identify with Tarlabası. Tarlabası is a well known district in Istanbul which has a large Kurdish migrant population. In *Song of My Mother*, the neighbourhood is acknowledged as a memory

space and represents the forced displacement of Kurds. The historical neighbourhood's drastic change by means of urban regeneration projects (Sakızhoğlu 2014; Sakızoğlu and Uitermark 2014; Öktem Ünsal 2015) has caused its residents – Romani, Kurds, and Africans – to be pushed out. Tarlabası and its residents have been stigmatised and silenced through ethnic criminalisation. In spite of having a bad reputation, Tarlabası promotes a sense of belonging to its Kurdish residents. It has become a social and cultural hub, a community to many Kurds where they can practice their ethnicity. The displacement of Nigâr and Ali as a consequence of gentrification triggers Nigâr's old traumata. Thus, Tarlabası is depicted as a multilayered and multidimensional space offering a social hub for many Kurds, a home, a reminder of Nigâr's village, a space for collective remembrance and commemoration but also a space for ameliorating traumatic experiences.

Despite the AKP<sup>16</sup> government's 'New Turkey' discourse and their claim to be different from previous regimes, I argue that only the form of violence has changed. That is to say, state violence has remained as a practice. With the rapid urban regeneration projects that are promoted by neoliberal policies, new forms of precarity have been introduced. In particular, gentrification processes that go hand in hand with assimilation strategies of the government, push the inhabitants away towards the suburbs of cities (Atkinson and Bridge 2005). Within the scope of this article, I regarded the gentrification of the Tarlabası district as a form of state-promoted violence.

## Conclusion

The political oppression against Kurds has been a widely discussed topic in Kurdish film-making in Turkey. Forced disappearances, village evacuations, torture, and the ban on the Kurdish language, are often represented and re-imagined as

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<sup>15</sup> Esenyurt is a district located on the European side of Istanbul, 35 km from the city centre. Since Esenyurt has a large Kurdish population, most of whom migrated from Kars, Ardahan, and Ağrı, the district is also called "Kars Vegas", "Esencilis" [a wordplay combining Esenyurt and Los Angeles], and the "Ghetto City", emphasising the segregation of Kurds. However, as a result of the construction boom and urban transformation plans, Esenyurt has become a 'paradise' of gated communities, skyscrapers, and (cheap) mass housing projects in recent years. This transformation does not only reveal the existing oppression, based on ethnic identities and socio-economic class affiliation, of Kurds but also new class dynamics.

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<sup>16</sup> Justice and Development Party (Turkish: *Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*).



a medium of state violence through cinematic narrations. I argue that the Turkish state, in the film, is represented as a repressive colonial power. Similar to other colonial powers, it forcibly exerts its power over its colonised subjects. When the film addresses the right to education in the mother tongue in its initial scene, the school appears as an apparatus for colonisation and becomes a symbol of the oppressive use of state power. While enforced teaching of the Turkish language and the ban on the Kurdish language are considered tools of assimilation, claiming the right to education in one's mother tongue becomes, in the eyes of the sovereign, a criminal act to be punished. The rebellious 'other' must be eliminated from the public sphere.<sup>17</sup>

The film *Song of My Mother* reflects what is still alive in Kurdish collective memory. Social traumata, caused by the collective experience of state violence and forced displacement, for instance, are 'intrusive' structures that result from the destructive incidents that a society or social group has experienced, which might continue to harm the collectivity of the group. Incidents, such as institutions fulfilling their functions, governments not providing security to society, or exposing certain groups to wide-ranging economic crises (Sönmez 2016: 23) are hard to confront, to deal with, and to reconcile. This continues to be reflected in inter-ethnic relations in contemporary Turkey.

This article suggests that diverse types of (alternative) narratives, including those produced in art, gain importance through the ways in which they deal with trauma, (re)present resistance, and narrate individual and collective experiences. While mainstream film narratives work as an extension of an official (at times nationalist) discourse and therefore are promoted and supported by ruling powers, alternative film-making by dissidents is often prohibited, since their alternative narratives of truth have the potential to challenge official

discourses. Given the fact that mainstream cinematic narrations could deepen traumata by falsifying memory and shelving the past, I argue that alternative film narratives have the potential to confront traumata and therefore enable communities to come to terms with the past. Thus, dissident films give voice not only to individual victims and their descendants but also to the community that has been the target of state violence. As *Song of My Mother* is an award-winning film that has sparked public discussions, it is clear that those who have remained silent have been made witnesses of the crimes through a cinematic narration of Kurdish testimonies. The film analysis shows that the cinematic performances provide a basis for commemoration and remembrance. Moreover, the examination of co-existing representations of how state violence is experienced and remembered in cinema highlights how Kurdish collective (and cultural) memory is conceptualised, preserved, and transmitted.

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<sup>17</sup> In Turkish media representations, Kurds are dehumanised by objectifying them as worthless bodies to be annihilated, eliminated, or terminated (Şur 2016; Gönen 2016).

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## Commentary

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Tebessüm Yılmaz's paper is an excellent introduction to new methodological and theoretical approaches to the collaborative study of film, memory and sociology. Specifically, it looks into visual sociology, memory and trauma in Bakur and Turkey from a gender studies perspective.

Yılmaz closely and carefully examines representations of state violence against Turkey's Kurdish communities in Kurdish films, particularly the film *Song of My Mother*. She discusses issues of memory, language, mother tongue and the gender positions in this tension, and how trauma works in such complicated experiences. Many issues, such as state violence, trauma, loss, forced displacement, and multiple forcible experiences of gender, in-between positions, migration and resettlement become interrogated, trespassed and interwoven when investigating such a subject and its forms of representation in film.

The author engages with very complicated material in her paper, using different approaches and perspectives appropriately, simultaneously treating her material in a very sensitive way. Through the analysis of the film *Song of My Mother*, she finds a chance to elaborate the issues of trauma, displacement and memory, and what it means to be a woman in this context of violence and destruction.

Additionally, she proves that once you have become a student of society, you cannot contain yourself within a single discipline; once you have started studying trauma, memory and experience, almost everything under the sun is related to each other and turns out to be relational and mutual. It is necessary to be inventive and find ways of tackling problems in a critical and analytical way.