



## ***Kerem and Aslı* as An Eastern Narrative and Melodramatic Turkish Cinema**

Bir Doğu Anlatısı Olarak *Kerem ile Aslı Hikâyesi* ve Melodramatik Türk Sineması

**Emre Doğan\***

### **Abstract**

The Eastern narrative tradition represents an output of the world of Eastern cultural mentality. Oral, open-form, interactive, replete with superficial contrasts and tenuous constructed rational cause-and-effect relationships, Eastern works are considered technically flawed, yet creative in content. These characteristics of the Eastern narrative are similar to those of the cinematic melodrama genre. Melodrama, one of the most performed genres of Turkish cinema, conveys moral messages, superficially reiterates various patterns/clichés, appeals to emotions and employs contrasts, and frequently includes elements such as coincidence and surprise, with a narrative that is largely devoid of cause-and-effect relationships. In this study, I tried to analyze the relationship between Eastern narrative and Turkish melodrama through the story of *Kerem and Aslı*,

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\* Dr. Öğr. Üyesi, İstanbul Gelişim Üniversitesi Güzel Sanatlar Fakültesi Radyo TV ve Sinema Bölümü. İstanbul-Türkiye/Assist.Prof.Dr., İstanbul Gelişim University Faculty of Fine Arts Radio TV and Cinema Department. emrdoğan@gelisim.edu.tr. ORCID ID: 0000-0003-3965-2340

and the film (1971). The conclusion I reached is that the formal and contextual elements of the Eastern narratives have commonalities Turkish melodramas. I believe that this is because the mentality of the Eastern cultural circle feeds from the same source or has similarities with the traditional mentality that constructs melodrama. In the study, I suggest that this similarity should be considered as an opportunity for creativity. In the study, I used the descriptive method and genre film criticism.

**Keywords:** *eastern, narrative, melodrama, Kerem and Aslı, Turkish cinema*

## Öz

Doğu anlatı geleneği, Doğu kültür dairesinin ve zihniyet dünyasının bir çıktısı niteliğindedir. Sözlü, açık biçimli (açık uçlu), interaktif, yüzeysel karşıtlıklarla dolu ve rasyonel neden-sonuç ilişkisinin zayıf bir şekilde kurgulandığı Doğu anlatısı eserleri, teknik olarak çoğunlukla kusurlu fakat içerik olarak yaratıcı kabul edilir. Doğu anlatısının bu özellikleri, kültürel ve tarihsel açıdan Doğu anlatısı geleneğiyle organik bir bağa sahip olan melodram türüyle ve melodram türünün Türk sinemasındaki karşılığıyla pek çok açıdan benzeşmektedir. Yüzyılı aşan Türk sineması macerasının komedi türü ile birlikte en çok icra edilen ve en yaygın türü konumunda bulunan melodram; ahlaki mesajlar vermekte, yüzeysel bir şekilde çeşitli kalıpları ve klişeleri tekrar etmekte, duygulara hitap ederek karşıtlıklar üretmekte ve rasyonel neden-sonuç ilişkisinin zayıf olduğu bir öyküleme yapısı içerisinde tesadüf ve sürpriz gibi çeşitli unsurlara sürekli olarak yer vermektedir. Bu çalışmada; Doğu anlatı geleneğiyle melodram türünün Türk sinemasındaki izdüşümünün ilişkisini, bir Doğu anlatı geleneği ürünü olan ve bu anlatı geleneğinin neredeyse tüm özelliklerini ve unsurlarını taşıyan Kerem ile Aslı hikâyesi ve bu hikâyeden uyarlanan 1971 yılı yapımlı Orhan Elmas'ın Kerem ile Aslı filmi üzerinden çözümlemeye çalıştım. Çalışmada elde ettiğim sonuç; Doğu anlatı geleneğinin biçimsel ve içeriksel unsurlarının, melodram türüyle ve bu türün Türk sinemasında kullanış biçimiyle ortaklıklar taşıdığıdır. Bunun nedeni olarak gördüğüm ve ifade ettiğim düşünce ise Doğu anlatı geleneğini inşa eden Doğu kültür dairesi zihniyetinin melodram türünü kurgulayan geleneksel zihniyet dünyasıyla aynı kaynaktan beslendiği veya aynılık taşıdığıdır. Çalışmayı bu ortaklığın ve benzerliğin yaratıcılık ve kültürel çeşitlilik açısından fırsat olarak değerlendirilmesi önerisiyle sona erdirdim. Çalışmada deskriptif yöntemi ve tür filmi eleştirisi yaklaşımını kullandım.

**Anahtar sözcükler:** *doğu anlatı geleneği, melodram, Kerem ile Aslı, Türk sineması*

## Introduction

The delineation of Eastern cultural circle is contingent upon the capacity to elucidate the specific ways in which the East diverges from the West. This dichotomy, which is a consequence of the West's dialectical mode of thought, comprises a 'naming' process conducted by the West. As Mahçupyan (2000: 42) asserts, although this differentiation is subjective from the Western perspective, it is evident that there is a fundamental distinction between the East and the West at the level of mentality.

The whatness of this difference, which manifests at the level of mentality, can only be explained by considering the historical processes that shape mentalities (Doğan, 2020: 589). The Eastern cultural circle, which did not undergo the historical processes that the West experienced, such as the advent of modernity and the Enlightenment, had to gradually take in concepts like rationality and scientific knowledge from external sources. This is an attempt to narrate, to transform into a discourse, the opposition of the understanding of civilization of Western modernity based on nation-state/capitalism/rationality, the mission of Western capitalism to develop the underdeveloped, on the other hand, and the non-Western sphere consisting of societies that need to learn the desire to be traditional and modern, on the other (Kahraman and Keyman, 2000: 65). Consequently, the Eastern cultural circle has been unable to benefit from the outputs of these concepts, including rational thought, positivist determinism, and the scientific method.

The two cultural circles in question exhibit disparate social structures and modes of thought as a consequence of their disparate historical processes and the divergent outcomes of these processes. This situation can also be explained by the reflection of the fact that the material or physical conditions of these two cultural circles are not identical on their intellectual processes (Adanır, 2017: 109). One illustrative example is the replacement of the dialectical, other-oriented way of thinking that developed in the Western cultural circle with a spiral, introverted, and self-absorbed way of thinking and understanding in the Eastern cultural circle (Mahçupyan, 2000: 42). This difference in the mode of thinking has resulted in disparate evolutions in how the West and the East respond to and seek solutions to diverse questions and problems. This discrepancy in thinking, in turn, gives rise to contrasting modes of narration.

The folk story *Kerem and Aslı* (Kerem ile Aslı), a product of the Eastern narrative tradition, is believed to have originated from the Eastern cultural circle and the world of mentality. It is thought that this story was created by a troubadour named Aşık Kerem or Kerem Dede. He is believed to have lived during the 16th century. Alternatively, the work is regarded as an anonymous piece whose source is not fully documented (Durdıyeva, 1999: 87). This tradition represents an output of the Eastern cultural circle and mentality, and at times exhibits poetic features. The subject of this study, *Kerem and Aslı*, serves the functions of cultural reflection and carrier that are typical of a folk story. This is the reason why the story of *Kerem and Aslı*, which has its origins in Anatolia, Northern Mesopotamia, and Azerbaijan, continues to capture the interest of the public, is the subject of ongoing research, and remains a referenced material in the context of the high and popular culture. However, another factor

may be identified as a potential explanation for this situation. This factor is the melodramatic elements that are notably present in the structure and content of *Kerem and Aslı*. The story may be characterised as a primitive melodrama or as exhibiting the cultural characteristics of melodrama suitable for the Eastern narrative tradition. This is evident in the qualities of its characters, its story structure and the message it ultimately conveys.

This study will initially delineate the boundaries of the Eastern narrative tradition and subsequently elucidate the existing relationship between the melodrama genre and its reflection in Turkish cinema. Subsequently, to exemplify this relationship, information regarding the historical origin of *Kerem and Aslı*, which is the subject of the article, will be provided, along with a brief summary of the narrative. Additionally, the melodramatic elements of the story will be identified. In conclusion, the 1971 film *Kerem and Aslı*, directed by Orhan Elmas, will be subjected to genre film criticism through the lens of melodrama.

### **1. Eastern narrative tradition and melodrama genre in Turkish cinema**

The narrative tradition of the Eastern world is fundamentally characterized by an oral narrative structure (Başgöz, 2008: 3). Eastern narratives, which are transmitted orally, have survived to the present day by taking on the characteristics of the cultures in which they exist. It is also pertinent to mention the role of *nakkals*, or *storytellers*. As travelers from the East, storytellers have maintained this enduring narrative tradition, which is situated between the modern novel and the ancient epic in terms of its developmental trajectory, for centuries within the oral tradition. It is important to note that the storytellers were professionals who made storytelling their livelihood (Boratav, 2013: 341). Furthermore, it is important to note that the storytellers, who disseminate their narratives and messages through spoken discourse and direct address to the general public, are regarded as the sages of Eastern societies (Tosun, 2014: 57-60). The fact that storytellers serve as a model of wisdom reinforces the moral structure of these narratives by establishing consistency between the narratives' moral messages and outcomes, which are predominantly structured around the dichotomy of good and evil.

The oral narratives of the East are carried by *storytellers*, or troubadours, who embody both the role of distributor and producer in the practice of *telling a story to others* (Başgöz, 2008: 17). Boratav offers the following insight regarding *nakkals*:

The storyteller did not merely bring simple people to life and have them “speak” by moving them through a series of events. He also made them speak the language of his own society, expressing the joys, troubles, and jokes of that society explicitly or implicitly in various ways. (2009: 17)

The oral narratives of the East, conveyed by storytellers who imbue stories with life, offer insights into the structure of the societies from which they emerge. These narratives are distinguished by an open-form structure. This is also a consequence of the East's belief in the sanctity of the word. In contrast to the written word, which can render the spoken narrative dull and static, oral cultures permit a multiplicity of forms through which a story may be conveyed, including the addition of emotional nuances and gestural expressions. In oral tradition, there are numerous versions of a story (Tosun, 2014: 68). This has resulted

in a multitude of oral narratives from the Eastern tradition, including *Kerem and Aslı*, which exhibit a variety of versions (Tulu, 1994, 52; Edis Aydoğan, 2019: 463). Storytellers introduced alterations and innovations to these narratives through their open-form stories and interactive storytelling in the regions they traversed (Başgöz, 2008: 19). The aim is to direct the audience to a certain interaction, to make the audience react by putting the story in a unique situation in each telling (Ong, 2005: 41).

The open-ended nature of Eastern narratives, a consequence of their orality, also gives rise to certain technical disadvantages. It is important to note that open-ended narratives often lack clear boundaries between chapters. These boundaries are often ambiguous, uncollected, fragmented, and pointing beyond themselves. Actions do not conclude in a linear fashion. Many events occur in rapid succession, and they are constructed without any continuity. The story universe and the protagonist can exhibit new features in every scene; they color and diversify the primary effect, but they do not alter it, creating a repetitive cycle (Sözen, 2009: 135).

It is also important to note that the Eastern narrative, which is characterised by a lack of continuity, differs from the Western narrative in terms of its perspective on cause and effect. In contrast to the Western narrative, which is shaped by modernity and is based on cause-and-effect relationships, the Eastern narrative rarely acknowledges the existence of such relationships between actions. This results in a narrative structure that appeals to emotions rather than reason, while also leading to the intensive use of irrational elements, coincidence, and surprises, thus emphasizing emotionality (Sözen, 2009: 134).

In the Eastern narrative tradition, absence of a robust cause-and-effect relationship and the resulting prevalence of surprises, specially, coincidences, underscores the prominence of fatalism. Furthermore, the consequence of the absence of rationality and the inability to establish a cause-effect relationship is that the heroes in Eastern narratives exhibit *type* characteristics rather than *character* (Duymaz, 2021: 17). The *types* encountered in almost all traditional narratives are heroes whose only main characteristics are given and not deepened. This usage enables the creation of various oppositions, especially good and evil, and the narrative to be built on these oppositions.

Once the fundamental characteristics of the Eastern narrative tradition have been elucidated, a transition should be made to the melodrama genre in Turkish cinema. These underlined details of the Eastern narrative tradition intersect with the structural features of the melodrama genre. It can be stated that melodrama is a genre that –in the context of reality– employs folk stories from the oral narrative tradition of the pre-modern era (Arslan, 2005: 19). Besides, inability to establish a rational cause-and-effect relationship in oral narratives is analogous to the contentual characteristics of the melodrama genre. Oral narratives, a product of the pre-modern era, do not adhere to the convention of establishing a cause-and-effect relationship in accordance with rational thought to explain the situation of the modern individual (Adanır, 2012: 83-86). Consequently, the oral Eastern narrative tradition, as a representation of the emotional realm inhabited by pre-modern traditional and/or primitive communities, prioritizes emotionality as a defining aspect, despite the presence of logical thought and behavior (Adanır, 2012: 16). Moreover, the melodrama genre is also

defined by its inability to establish a cause-and-effect relationship, which is instead replaced by an emotional approach. Additionally, it is evident that the roots of the melodrama genre in Turkish cinema can be traced back to ancient times, to oral culture products such as fairy tales and love stories (Akbulut, 2008: 93).

Melodrama, alongside comedy, has emerged as the most preferred and most loved genre in Turkish cinema. It has been a dominant force in the Turkish film industry and can be considered a fundamental element of Turkish cinema. Turkish cinema has historically exhibited a proclivity for melodrama, as evidenced by the prevalence of such films during the Muhsin Ertuğrul era (1922-1939). The melodrama genre reached its quantitative peak with a record-breaking production in the 1960s, and among the most notable examples of this genre are the films *Küçük Hanımefendi* (1961), by Nejat Saydam; *Kezban* (1963), by Arşavir Alyanak; *Hıçkırık* (1965), by Orhan Aksoy; and *Vesikalı Yarım* (1968), by Lütfi Ömer Akad. This period, experienced some breaks only in the 1980s. As a result of this rupture in cinema, the melodrama genre, which began to manifest itself in television series, has diversified as evidenced by the current state of the genre (Akbulut, 2012: 17).

The melodramatic genre's narrative simplicity in terms of script and characters, its conservative view of society and the social and moral messages it conveys in this context, its superficiality in dealing with emotions, and its structure that promises a lot of tears filled with long songs have harmonized with the viewing habits of Turkish cinema audiences and, simultaneously, shape these habits. This suggests that the way Turkish society perceives and thinks exhibits melodramatic tendencies.

A closer examination of the melodrama genre in Turkish cinema reveals several noteworthy aspects. The initial point to be made is that melodrama films are constructed with the intention of conveying moral messages. In Turkish melodramas, which, like numerous other national cinematic traditions, espouse a conservative and patriarchal morality in which moral conduct is rewarded and immoral actions are punished in the end, gender stereotypes, primarily manifested through female characters, are used to codify women for men and in accordance with male expectations (Akbulut, 2008: 356).

A second point to be addressed in this context is that Turkish melodramas are based on certain patterns in the standard of moral messages previously mentioned. Nijat Özön asserts that melodramas, which he characterizes as *the cancer of Turkish cinema*, exhibit a tendency to reiterate similar patterns, with few exceptions. These elements include the portrayal of children born out of wedlock, rape, women who stray from the traditional role, children caught in the middle, mothers who endure hardship for their children, jealous lovers, and malevolent characters who disrupt romantic relationships (Özön, 1995: 85). This universe of stereotypes, manifested in formal and contextual terms, has a structure that contains a multitude of clichés and repetitions. To enumerate the clichés and repetitions that are commonly observed in the Yeşilçam period of Turkish cinema, one might cite the following examples: the opposition of good and evil, the dichotomy of wealth and poverty, the gender binary, misunderstandings, coincidences, irrational behaviors, exaggerated emotional reactions, the glorification of pain, the element of surprise, and the occurrence of miracles.

Another point that can be made about Turkish melodramas is that they are intensely emotional and appeal almost entirely to emotions. The element of excess that emerges as a result of this causes everything in melodrama to appear to be more than it really is. The emotional experiences of the protagonists, including pain, sacrifice, and coincidence, are depicted as being more extreme than what could be considered realistic (Suner, 2006: 185). Furthermore, the inclusion of songs in Turkish melodramas serves to augment the emotional intensity. The songs that are played for extended periods within the context of the film assume a narrative function, articulating the sentiments of love, anguish, sorrow, and longing that the characters are unable to express verbally (Akbulut, 2012: 101).

Furthermore, Turkish melodramas are founded upon dichotomous concepts stemming from the influence of moralism, structuralism based on stereotypes, and sentimentality. As previously stated, the primary objective of the opposition, which is largely constituted by the concepts of good and evil, is to present a comparison between the two by demonstrating the immoral in its own manner. Consequently, in melodrama narratives, moral and immoral are distinctly separated from one another through the use of pronounced contrasts (Turgay, 2019: 404).

The primary factor that influences and defines these elements is the absence of a structured causal relationship within the melodrama genre of Turkish cinema. This is explained on the basis of the observation that audiences in societies that have not completed the modernization process do not prioritize logical relationships and connections. Indeed, they often exhibit a mentality that can easily neglect such considerations. This determination is associated with the fact that the lack of a robust rational system in a society that is unable to undergo meaningful modernization affects the audience's capacity to abstract. An individual who is unable to perceive and feel the existence of a rational system in their daily life cannot be expected to demand the opposite from melodramas (Adanır, 2012: 83-86).

The absence of a rational cause-and-effect relationship in the melodrama genre of Turkish cinema is evidenced by the prevalence of elements of coincidence and surprise in the narratives. In the absence of a realistic fictional structure, in which causal relationships are established, a flow is maintained in which logical events follow one another, and which progresses in line with the internal conflicts of the characters, Turkish melodramas are driven by irrational, extraordinary coincidences and misunderstandings. At this juncture, fate is emphasized in the films, underscoring the notion that the individual is constrained by their destiny (Çakır, 2017: 98).

## **2. *Kerem and Aslı* as a story and a movie**

### **2.1. *Kerem and Aslı*: A story and its melodramatic components**

In order to illustrate these fundamental concepts pertaining to the Eastern narrative tradition and the melodrama genre in Turkish cinema, it is essential to proceed with an analysis of the story, which serves as the subject of this study. Although its historical origins date back to the 13th century (Elçin, 2010: 13), *Kerem and Aslı*, which is believed to have originated from the poems of a troubadour named Kerem Dede or Aşık Kerem, who is believed to have lived in the 16th century, has found the opportunity to spread over a wide geography due to

the fact that it is a very old narrative (Öztürk, 2012: 1). *Kerem and Aslı*, which has found life in a geography from Eastern Iran to Central Anatolia, from the Caucasus to Aleppo, can generally be said to be an Eastern Anatolian story (Duymaz, 2021: 20). Considering the common cities mentioned in many different versions and the ethnic origins of the characters (Aslı is Armenian, etc.), the overall picture shows the Eastern Anatolian region and especially the Erzurum-Kars Plateau.

Although there is not much information about Kerem Dede's life, the general judgement is that he may be from Anatolia, Erzurum, Iran-Azerbaijan region, Ganja or Karabakh and that he made a series of journeys (Duymaz, 2021: 29-30). When viewed through the lens of historical and regional analysis, it becomes evident that this hypothesis has a high likelihood of being accurate. Isfahan and its surrounding area have a longstanding tradition of storytelling and troubadour culture, with a history of persons traversing the region, much like their counterparts in the past. For example, Narmanlı Sümmani (Sümmani from Narman), a 19th-century troubadour, undertook a series of journeys in a similar manner to Kerem Dede in order to locate his beloved, Gülperi (Erkal, 2007). In consideration of the extensive geographical distribution and prolonged oral transmission of the narrative (Bars, 2015: 22), it can be observed that there are essentially three versions and numerous variations thereof. For example, in a version dated 1840, Kerem is the son of a lord in Aleppo, in the Anatolian and Istanbul versions he is the son of the Shah of Isfahan, in the manuscript he is the son of the Shah of Shiraz Süruri Khan, and in the Azerbaijani version he is the son of Ziyat Khan, the khan of Ganja. Aslı's father, the Armenian monk, is mentioned as the treasurer of the shah or khan or as a wealthy man from Aleppo (Öztürk, 2012: V; Boratav, 2002: 125).

The synopsis of the story<sup>1</sup> can be succinctly stated as follows: In ancient times, a Shah lived in Isfahan, and an Armenian Monk served as his treasurer. Neither of them had children, and the Shah was concerned about the succession to the throne. One day, the Shah and the Monk's wife took a sapling, which had been provided to them by an elderly man they had encountered, and planted it. The little sapling produced just one apple, which the Shah's wife and the Monk's wife then shared and enjoyed together. That night, they became pregnant. The Shah's wife gave birth to a male child, while the Monk's wife gave birth to a female child. The boy was named Ahmed Mirza, and the girl was named Kara Sultan. Prior to the children's births, the Shah's wife and the Monk's wife reached an agreement that, upon reaching adulthood, they would wed each other. The Monk was of the opinion that his daughter's beauty would potentially lead to difficulties, and thus he departed from Isfahan and took up residence in Zengi. Meanwhile, Ahmed Mirza had a vision of Kara Sultan, experiencing a powerful surge of affection. In Zengi, he encountered Kara Sultan and recognized her from his dream. After a brief conversation, she experienced a profound connection with him too. When Ahmad Mirza, also known as Kerem, returned to Isfahan, he was overcome with a deep sense of sadness. The Shah called the Monk to him. Initially, he declined the proposal on the grounds of religious differences. Subsequently, The monk then fled from Zengi with his wife and daughter. Kerem subsequently departed in pursuit of Monk, bearing his saz and accompanied by his associate Sofu. They traversed numerous



cities, enduring myriad deprivations and hardships. At last, Kerem found Aslı in Kayseri and got into their house by saying he needed dental care. Kerem, whose thirty-two teeth had been extracted with his head on Aslı's lap, was identified by Aslı as she wiped the blood from his mouth. Two lovers were resolved to flee together during the night. During that night, Kerem was apprehended by the men of the Bey of Kayseri, who were searching for him, and thrown into the dungeon. Kerem was spared from execution by Hasna, the Bey's sister. The Monk once again managed to evade capture. Kerem undertook a series of journeys from one city to another, ultimately arriving in Aleppo. When it appeared that Aslı would be saved by being engaged to an Armenian youth, Kerem kidnapped her with the assistance of the Pasha of Aleppo, thereby achieving his wish. The Monk devised a final strategy: he crafted a magical *fistan* (dress) for Aslı to wear on the wedding night. On the nuptial night, the magic *fistan* could not be opened, and Kerem was burned by the fire that emanated from his mouth. Upon learning of this, the Pasha of Aleppo had the Monk and his wife killed. Aslı, who waited for forty days by Kerem's ashes, was set alight by a spark and burned to ashes while attempting to sweep the scattered ashes with her hair. Aslı's ashes were mixed with Kerem's ashes, and they were finally reunited (Elçin 2010; Öztürk, 2012).

In light of the summary, an analysis of the elements of the story that intersect with the melodramatic structure of Turkish cinema is necessitated. The initial point of focus is the observation that the general structure of melodrama is moralizing, a concept that has been previously underscored. This transference, which manifests itself in Turkish cinema on the basis of conservative and patriarchal morality, emerges in the story as a clear moral stance that is adopted as a melodramatic outcome. As evidenced by the synopsis of the short story, the narrative exhibits a non-objective stance toward the character of the Monk, who endeavors to impede the reunion of the lovers and engages in malevolent actions. The moral structure of the narrative is fully revealed through the punishment of the Monk and his wife at the conclusion.

Indeed, it may be argued that, in a similar manner to the replacement of portraits with stereotypes in melodrama, morality is a self-proclaimed cliché (the opposite of immoral). Everything natural is translated into a self-proclaimed 'morality' that needs no definition. (Atayman and Çetinkaya, 2016: 266)

A second point to be made regarding the intersection of the story with the melodramatic structure of Turkish cinema is that it is based on patterns and clichés. In this regard, the narrative, which incorporates motifs such as *childless sultan*, *tooth extraction*, *burning*, *dervish*, *apple*, and *falling in love in a dream*, which are commonly found in traditional narratives, is regarded as comprising a combination of extraordinary elements drawn from folk tradition (Elçin, 2010: 29; Bars, 2010: 22). This situation is reminiscent of the repetitive patterns and clichés that are characteristic of Turkish melodrama films. Moreover, the plot exhibits a correlation with the functions delineated by Vladimir Propp, which he defines as the thirty-one functions of characters in fairy tales. In this context, *the hero is presented with a series of challenges, including tests, interrogations, attacks, and other obstacles, which ultimately lead to the acquisition of a magical object or helper. Additionally, the hero's journey often involves breaking a prohibition, with a family member moving away from*

home or the hero being offered a difficult task. Reactions to these challenges, including the hero's own actions, also play a crucial role in the narrative. These functions include the actions of the person who will donate to him in the future, the fulfillment of a difficult task, the defeat of an aggressor, the provision of assistance to a hero, and the deceptive exploitation of a victim by an enemy. This situation serves to substantiate Propp's assertion, as presented in the same volume, that "in fairy tales, the functions of persons and the types of fairy tale structure do not change" (Propp, 2008).

Another aspect of the story that is reflected in the melodrama films of Turkish cinema is the emphasis on sentimentality. The narrative of the story is essentially that of an impossible love and reunion, and the decisive role of emotions and sentimentality in the pivotal moments of the story, particularly in the 'peripeteia' that generates the conflict (the Monk's reluctance to give his daughter away), is evident. The emotional ambience evoked by the songs in Turkish melodrama films is derived from the verses of troubadour-style folk literature, predominantly performed by Kerem on the saz, thereby reinforcing the lyrical atmosphere (Durdıyeva, 1999: 98).

Another illustration of this emphasis on sentimentality is the *suffering archetype*, which is a common trope in Turkish melodramas. Indeed, the archetype of suffering, which draws upon religious texts, has become an indispensable element of melodrama and a dominant feature of its dramatic structure in Yeşilçam. It reflects a moral perspective that *taking pleasure from pain* is acceptable, and has been pivotal in maintaining a pervasive emphasis on acute distress throughout the film rather than a subtle sadness (Tunalı, 2006: 229-230). At this juncture, the notion that accepting one's fate in the face of suffering is a virtuous act and will ultimately be rewarded by God is predominant. Given the cultural legacy of the melodrama genre and its close association with conservative moral values, it is not surprising to find the archetype of *the blessing of suffering* in the story, which exemplifies the characteristics of a melodrama. Throughout the narrative, Kerem, who is searching for his beloved, and Aslı, who is waiting for her, are glorified due to their suffering, patience, and perseverance.

Another common element in Turkish melodrama films and the story is the use of contrasting elements. In Turkish melodrama cinema, the action and moral structure of the story are constructed through the use of contrasts, which are most often manifested in the characters and the actions that they directly affect (Brooks, 1995: 93). The characters are consistently presented as sharply delineated, and their characteristics remain uncompromising throughout the narrative. This characteristic is also frequently evident in the story. The most salient dichotomy in the story is that between good and evil. The character of the Monk represents the malevolent aspect of the narrative, precipitating a series of calamities. Additionally, the character of the Monk's wife represents another element that contributes to the development of the main opposition in the narrative. The number of characters who exist in the story as the good in opposition to the bad is considerable. These include Kerem, Aslı, Sofu, Kerem's parents, Bey of Kayseri and Aleppo, Hasna, and so forth. They may be considered to represent the forces of good in the story.

In addition to the fact that the story is based on oppositions, as is typical of domestic melodramas, another related point to be mentioned is the superficial treatment of these characters, who are constructed on the basis of opposites, as *types*. This situation, which is a hallmark of Turkish melodramas, has precluded the creation of nuanced film characters, rendering the heroes as two-dimensional figures and contributing to the pervasive perception that all characters in Yeşilçam are archetypes (Elmacı, 2013: 269). The story is similarly characterized by a pronounced melodramatic quality. The narrative typifies the characters, with minimal or no attention devoted to portrayal. To illustrate, the characters of Shah and Sofu are initially and finally described in a single sentence: “There was a just Shah in the city of Isfahan” or “Sofu was a child with a quick wit.” Additionally, the story does not delve into the psychological aspects of its protagonists, *Kerem and Aslı*.

One of the hallmarks of Turkish melodramas is the absence of cause and effect, which, as previously discussed, is largely evident in the surprises and coincidences that shape the narrative trajectory (Agocuk, 2012: 64). In the case of *Kerem and Aslı*, the lack of a robust causal structure ensures the recurrence of coincidences. In the course of his journey, Kerem encounters a number of coincidental occurrences, including the girl he loves, Aslı, whom he stumbles upon in the garden. Furthermore, Kerem coincidentally meets the Pasha of Aleppo, who serves as a catalyst for a long-overdue resolution. These instances illustrate the pivotal role that coincidence plays in the story.

## **2.2. *Kerem and Aslı* movie and its melodramatic elements**

The 1971 film *Kerem and Aslı*, directed by Orhan Elmas, produced by Memduh Ün, and starring Fatma Girik and Kadir İnanır, can be summarized as follows: Hakan, childless and discontented, has relinquished the reins of his country’s governance to his tyrannical vizier. One day, Hakan and Bektaş, Hakan’s childless blacksmith, are engaged in a hunting expedition when they encounter a dervish. The dervish informs Hakan that he will have a son, but requires him to pledge that he will henceforth refrain from oppressing the people of the country. Additionally, the Dervish bestows upon Bektaş the auspicious tidings of a daughter. Hakan, who fails to fulfill his pledge to Derviş, has a daughter, while Bektaş has a son. Hakan, reluctant to acknowledge the existence of his daughter, decides to raise her as a boy and introduce her to the world as such. Over the course of several years, Hakan’s daughter Aslan Bey and Bektaş’s son Kerem matured in parallel, developing into two courageous young men. One night, Kerem experiences an intense romantic attachment to a girl he has seen in a dream. This girl is, in fact, Hakan’s daughter. Kerem confides in Aslan Bey about his feelings. Subsequently, Derviş reappears, and Aslan Bey reverts to his original gender. Upon realizing that his son has reverted to his original gender, Hakan is unable to reconcile with this development and imprisons his daughter, Aslı Sultan, within the Maiden’s Tower. Aslı, who persists in clandestine meetings with Kerem, is apprehended by her father and sentenced to exile. Kerem’s eyes are obscured by a blindfold. Subsequently, Kerem departs on a quest to locate Aslı, armed only with his saz. After a period of time, Kerem encounters Aslı at an inn and reunites with his beloved. The Vizier captures Kerem and Aslı and spares Kerem’s life by proposing marriage to Aslı. The couple flees on their wedding day and reunites near a well, but the Vizier kills them both.



**Photograph 1:** *Kerem and Aslı* (1971) movie poster.

As can be observed, the film *Kerem and Aslı* differs from the original story in several respects such as ‘non-acceptance of the girl child’ and ‘obsession with the boy child’ and in various characters such as the malicious Vizier. Except for these, the film is generally an adaptation of the story or at most a rewriting of this story that undergoes formal and semantic transformations for the film (Edis Aydoğan, 2019: 475). Furthermore, it can be stated that the film employs the melodramatic elements of the story in their original form or transforms them in accordance with the conventional Yeşilçam codes, thus aligning with the viewing habits of the target audience. The primary reason for this phenomenon is that the Turkish film industry’s most expedient solution to the scarcity of subject matter is to reiterate established genres, themes, and templates that have been previously tested and proven effective. A trope is employed, a template is identified, and a genre that proved successful in attracting the audience of the period to the box office is immediately anonymized (Türk, as cited in Tunalı, 2006: 220). The pervasive familiarity with the story, which reiterates conventional narrative structures, provides the primary rationale for this phenomenon. Another reason for this situation is that in melodramatic narratives, everything in the film or television series seems *real* to ordinary people, because ordinary people compare themselves, their surroundings, even the door of the house where the family they see on the screen lives, to their own homes and lives (Oskay, 2014: 333). As evidenced by this passage, melodrama films resonate with

a broad audience, spanning modern and non-modern societies. They often portray primitive emotions and behaviors that defy rational explanation.

A linear analysis of the film reveals that the information presented in the initial sentence, delivered by the voice-over as the story is narrated to the audience, contributes to the film's fairy tale-like quality. This information introduces the motif of the *childless sultan*, a theme commonly encountered in Eastern narratives. In tracing this motif, which can be encountered dozens of times with a little retrospective research, stories or fairy tales "generally all love stories begin with a Sultan, Khan or Bey, usually a just one, who is beset with worry and grief over who will inherit his crown and throne after his death" (Elçin, 2010: 29). This motif, which is also present in the original story and transferred to the film in its original form, illustrates how melodrama films construct conflict (Durdıyeva, 1999: 93).

The second piece of information conveyed by the voice-over at the outset of the film is that the Vizier, another of the principal characters, is depicted as a cruel and oppressive ruler. The Vizier, a character absent from the source material, was incorporated into the film for the purpose of enhancing the melodramatic structure and intensifying the dichotomy between good and evil. As previously stated, the Vizier, a figure embodying unjustified evil, is a common trope in melodramatic narratives. In this regard, he exemplifies the adaptation of such melodramatic elements to the conventions of Yeşilçam storytelling. In contrast to characters, types are defined by a singular personality trait, exert influence over the dramatic action, and reflect the characteristics of the society in which they are situated. Another defining feature of types is their unchanging nature, which lends them a sense of consistency (Aktaş, 2006). It is evident that the archetypal cruel Vizier is a recurring figure in both historical Eastern narratives and melodramatic fiction. The Vizier's fate serves to illustrate the retribution meted out to those who engage in malevolent actions, thereby reinforcing the notion of the dichotomy between good and evil in the context of an idealised human paradigm (Öztürk, 2013: 91).

Another recurring motif in the film is that of the dervish. This cherubic old man, who resolves the narrative's complexities, unravels the events and reveals the truth, can be seen as an embodiment of the miracle element that is frequently encountered in Eastern texts. The film's portrayal of miracles and coincidences through a religious lens, a common trope in melodramas, serves to reinforce its conservative stance (Balaban, 2020: 5). In this regard, the film's portrayal of masculinity and denigration of femininity represents a significant socio-cultural code (Arslan, 2022: 400). In the film, the male child is celebrated and regarded as the perpetuator of the lineage. The female child is regarded as unfavourable and is rejected. Actions such as shooting an arrow and riding a horse, which are presented as acts of great virtue, are masculinized, while women are confined to actions that require less physical exertion, such as *tapestry and embroidery*. Indeed, Dervish, who is presented as a religious motif, defines women shooting arrows and holding swords as defying the Creator of heaven and earth.

Another noteworthy motif in the film is the theme of falling in love with a person whom the protagonist has only seen in a dream. This episode is notable for its melodramatic quality. The character Kerem sees Aslı in his dream, falls in love with her, and discloses this information to Aslan Bey, unaware that Aslı is in fact Aslan Bey. In the context of Sufism, there are three

types of dreams, which can be defined as a vision or perception experienced during sleep. The term *dream* is derived from the Arabic word *ra'a*, which means *to see*. These are classified as divine, angelic, and satanic dreams. In the scene under discussion, Kerem experiences a rare phenomenon, namely a *divine dream*. In consequence of his infatuation with the dream he has seen, Kerem appears to become involved in an *abstract love* relationship. In the film, the concept of *abstract love* is not explicitly delineated; rather, it is merely alluded to in a cursory manner. This phenomenon can be attributed to the reductionist nature of melodrama, which has the capacity *to absorb* a multitude of elements. The fact that Kerem has this dream, which is unique to righteous people, informs the audience that he is *good* in the good-evil opposition. At the same time, this motif seems to be compatible with “the motifs of the love goblet and the dream” mentioned in Şükrü Elçin’s study (2010: 35-36).

In *Kerem and Aslı*, which demonstrates the presence of intertextuality from the initial credits, the first visible intertextual transition occurs when Hakan imprisons his daughter in the *Maiden’s Tower*. This dramatic element, which was incorporated from the legend of the Maiden’s Tower during the scripting process, serves to reinforce the melodramatic structure and intensify the conflict. Kerem, on the other hand, is blindfolded. This episode, derived from the *Koroğlu Epic*, was also incorporated into the script of the narrative. In the story, there is no analogous dramatic element, such as Kerem’s being blindfolded.

The character of Kerem, who has been blindfolded, has become a *rind*<sup>2</sup>, that is, an individual who is indifferent to the world and intoxicated with a love for God. In this state, he searches for his beloved Aslı by singing folk songs with his saz. This sequence exemplifies the intimate connection between melodrama and music. Yeşilçam is a cinema that has historically been closely intertwined with music (Dönmez & İmik, 2022). This phenomenon reached its zenith during the melodramas of the 1960s-1970s. In the film, the emotions of the characters are conveyed through an extended use of folk songs, evoking a sense of anguish in the audience. It is evident that music serves a narrative function in this context. Furthermore, the film exhibits similarities to the genre of films featuring songs or folksongs, which were prevalent in the 1970s. It could be argued that this film represents a fusion of melodrama and films with songs or folksongs.

Another common element in melodramas is the portrayal of the extraordinary and the miraculous. Melodramas are works that resort to the cheapest means in order to impress the audience in the easiest way; they organise extraordinary situations, extraordinary coincidences, complex events; they use people like puppets by attempting to draw a structure with simple, rough lines (Özön, 1981: 198). The film also features instances of phenomena and miracles. For instance, Kerem’s eyesight is restored as a result of a miracle when he is reunited with Aslı, yet he is unable to see her due to his blindness. The film incorporates several motifs of miracles and the extraordinary, including the three appearances of derviş, which reiterates the relationship between melodrama and the concepts of the extraordinary and the miraculous.

As the film draws to a close, the conflict between good and evil reaches its climax, with the Vizier poisoning the Sultan, who is already in a state of ill health, to death. These actions align with the aforementioned portrayal of the Vizier as malevolent and remorseless. The

Vizier orders the death of Kerem's father with the intention of apprehending Aslı and Kerem, who are currently evading capture. Should Kerem and Aslı remain silent, Kerem's father will perish. In a highly melodramatic scene, Kerem manages to catch up with his father, who is on the verge of being killed. However, the Vizier reneges on his promise and kills Kerem's father. In this scene, the sacrifice of Kerem's father for his son represents not only an exemplary sacrifice worthy of melodrama, but is also aligned with the dominant male perspective of the film, particularly the 'good father' identity as presented by society.

At the conclusion of the film, as lovers are on the verge of death, they approach each other by crawling on the ground and meet in death. In this scene, the film offers its viewers a positive belief in the afterlife. The film *Kerem and Aslı*, which clearly reveals its relationship with the ethereal, completes its conservative structure by portraying it in the last scene.

### Conclusion

The folk story *Kerem and Aslı* is a semi-poetic and fantastic narrative that conveys a love story through an oral, open-form, and superficial structure. It is characterized by contrasts and weak cause-and-effect relationships, which aligns it with the genre of melodrama, particularly as it is represented in Turkish cinema. Similar to the melodrama films of Turkish cinema, and particularly the film of the same name by Orhan Elmas, which serves as a case study here, the narrative of *Kerem and Aslı* conveys affirmative messages about conservative and patriarchal morality. It employs a narrative style that is replete with stereotypes and clichés, and it celebrates the intensity of emotions by appealing to emotions rather than reason. It also produces contrasts and does not establish a rational cause-and-effect relationship. Moreover, it includes numerous coincidences and surprises in its content. It is evident that the narrative of *Kerem and Aslı*, exemplifying a Turkish melodrama film, exhibits formal and contextual similarities. In this sense, *Kerem and Aslı* can be defined as a *melodramatic story*. The mentality of the Eastern cultural circle that constructs the Eastern narrative tradition, of which the story of *Kerem and Aslı* is a part, is derived from the same source or exhibits similarities with the traditional mentality that constructs the melodrama genre.

It can be proposed that this commonality and similarity should be leveraged as a catalyst for creativity and cultural diversity. The story of *Kerem and Aslı*, which carries the aura of the melodramas characteristic of Turkish cinema, features a plot, characters, and traditional motifs reminiscent of this genre. The film of the same name, which serves as a representative sample, is adapted with fidelity to the source material in many respects. However, this story is only one aspect of the rich folk culture of the Turkish people, who continue to embrace melodrama even after years and perpetuate it through television series. There are thousands of stories that could be evaluated in this way within folk culture. It would be highly beneficial for creators, particularly those in the cinema and television industry, to utilise such commonalities and similarities as a source of inspiration and excitement, and to ensure the continued vitality of folk culture and educate society through art.

## Endnotes

- 1 The version of the story considered the primary source for this study is that presented by Elçin (2010) in his book under the title *The Plot of the Story According to the Printed Manuscript* and subsequently defined by Öztürk (2012) as the *Anatolian Version* in his work *Kerem ile Aslı*.
- 2 The individual in question is one who is receptive to the vicissitudes of the world, exhibits a lack of concern for matters of little consequence, and displays a high degree of tolerance and emotional openness. (Püsküllüoğlu, 1994: 881).

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