

## 69th Berlin International Film Festival—Part 9

**Three Turkish films (*A Tale of Three Sisters*, *Daughters of Two Worlds*, *Oray*)—Hoping for a better life**

**Bernd Reinhardt**  
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*This is the ninth and final part in a series of articles on the recent Berlin International Film Festival, the Berlinale, held from February 7 to 17, 2019. The first part was posted on February 15, the second on February 22, the third on February 28, the fourth on March 5, the fifth on March 11, the sixth on March 13, the seventh on March 16 and the eighth on March 21.*

When living and social conditions—and often locale—change, people confront the need to alter their relationship to outdated traditions. When examined closely, the supposedly “unbridgeable” cultural differences invoked by racists, but also by pseudo-left advocates of identity politics, prove to be rent by social contradictions.

At a time when racism and xenophobia in various forms increasingly determine official policies towards the poorest migrants and refugees, the three films below exude a humanistic spirit of enlightenment and dialogue: everyone, regardless of their ethnic, religious or cultural background, has the right to a better life.

***A Tale of Three Sisters***

The Turkish film *A Tale of Three Sisters* by Emin Alper (*Beyond the Hill*, *Frenzy*) takes place in a remote Anatolian mountain village.

In wintertime, the narrow road to the city is impassable. In the past, employment at the local coal mine fed inhabitants, but the village is now desolate because the mine has closed. Just a few old people clamber through the mine’s tunnels, risking their lives to gather and sell chunks of coal. Most of the inhabitants have moved away.

The widower ?evket (Müfit Kayacan) lives with his three

daughters and the husband of his eldest daughter, Reyhan (Cemre Ebüzziya), in a tiny house without electricity.

As is often the case in poor rural families, the father sent Reyhan to work as a maid for a better-off family in the city. However, she returns pregnant. The second-eldest, Nurhan (Ece Yüksel), was dismissed by the same doctor’s family after she fell ill. ?evket then appeals to the doctor to engage his youngest daughter, Havva (Helin Kandemir), although one assumes the doctor is the father of Reyhan’s illegitimate child.

Reyhan’s husband, who earns little as a shepherd, desperately begs the doctor to help him find work in a gas station. For his part, the doctor enthuses about the positive effects of the picturesque mountain idyll, which its inhabitants look upon as hell.

The old stone houses seem timeless. But something is shifting. Most of the inhabitants have moved away and the traditional respect for the elderly is evaporating. What is a village head without a village community or a head of a family who cannot feed the family?

The sisters are reluctant to submit to the father. They are desperate to leave poverty behind them. Turkish women in the village today are more self-confident than they were in the 1970s, according to Alper (born 1974). His aim is to show that the desire to improve the conditions of life is universal: “Many people around the world are hoping for a better life.” Most of the immigrants who have done everything to get into the European Union (EU) come from the lowest layers of the working class, second-class citizens at best.

The extent to which overwhelming social conditions can render people helpless is impressively embodied in the figure of the father. In a hopeless situation, he wants the best for his daughters, albeit in traditional fashion. The film’s oft-magical atmosphere gives the impression that the characters

live alongside ghosts. Reyhan's husband sees dangers everywhere and fears a punitive God, as was the case in the old days. Others who have come to know urban life ridicule his naïveté.

Another "culture"?—Not really, it's just poverty.

### *Daughters of Two Worlds*

A consideration of the same theme can be found in the remarkable documentary, *Daughters of Two Worlds* (1991), by the German-Turkish filmmaker Serap Berrakkarasu (screened in Berlin as part of a retrospective).

Twenty-four-year-old Meral was born in a Turkish village, but grew up in Germany. Her mother, Seriban, is strongly influenced by her native village's traditions in line with her own generation. Meral brought "disgrace" on the family when she fled the village and the husband who had been chosen for her by her parents, according to village custom. She now lives happily, unmarried, with a German man.

Meral is very open in front of the camera. She explains she cannot now imagine living like women of her same age from the village, women who have known no other culture. She knows the village now only from her holidays. The cultural differences are illustrated in the film by various images of a traditional rural wedding. We witness a young bride who appears to be very unhappy on the "most wonderful day of her life." Presumably, she will submit to her fate—that is part of the tradition and embedded in the rural-conservative environment—and accustom herself to a man she does not love.

Originally, the director only intended to feature Meral on screen. To her surprise, Seriban said she also wanted to put forward her point of view. The dialogue between the generations (which never actually took place in person) was so important for the mother and daughter they were prepared to enact it before the camera and for an audience beyond the immediate German-Turkish community.

The fact that *Daughters of Two Worlds*, made almost 30 years ago, has not been available on DVD until now reflects the social climate, which has been marked by malicious government and media attacks on "the unwillingness of migrants to integrate" rather than dialogue. For its part, the film advocates mutual respect, trust and patience to successfully tackle such a problem as forced marriage.

*Oray*

What is the relationship of Turkish-German Muslims to their religion? The thoughtful feature film *Oray* was awarded a prize for best first film at the festival. Its director, Mehmet Akif Büyükcatalay, grew up in Germany.

Oray (Zejhun Demiro) is a young man who, in a fit of anger, curses his wife Burcu (Deniz Orta). This entails, according to Islamic law, a three-month period of separation. The former petty criminal converted to Islam when he was in prison. Since then he has been trying to persuade others to live an honest life. After the separation, he returns to his family in Cologne, finds work and a place to live.

But Oray gets into trouble. He owes rent and has financial obligations to Burcu. He still loves her. In the meantime, however, he has painstakingly gained a foothold in Cologne. His wife works in Hagen, where she has completed her training and has the prospect of a secure job.

Oray increasingly asks himself (it haunts him in his sleep): did he utter the curse against Burcu three times in a row, which means divorce forever? Under the pretext of uncovering "God's will" with a pure heart, he has used his faith to betray someone he loves. In the community, there are those who suspect something is wrong with Oray. After all, it is not God's will to separate people who love one other.

Against the background of today's political propaganda against "Islamism," the film stresses the ordinariness of Islam. It is no more about strange and rigid rituals than any other religion.

Inadvertently perhaps, the director points to a social and political reality. Oray yearns for true brotherhood, stable social relationships and a powerful ideology that binds people together. Clearly, none of the official political or social movements, including the "left" ones, in Germany (or Turkey) provide anything like that. Oray pursues his religious faith in part because it is "radical": heaven or hell. He despises the government's lukewarm "integration" program, where young people only learn hip-hop.

*Oray* intimates that state efforts to criminalise Islamic communities strengthen the type of fundamentalist conservatism that perceives and paints the hypocritical, hard-hearted world of wealth as a purely "German" or "Christian" phenomenon. In the film, the religious diatribe against "infidels" is primarily directed against those in the Turkish community who worship money.

*Concluded*



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