

# Visible and Invisible Borders around Women: Feminist Meaning of War and Migration in Cinema

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## ABSTRACT

Although women and children are the most affected by the wars and migrations that cause great destruction and suffering, the difficulties they face in this process and how they perceive what is happening is still not well understood. Turkey is one of the countries in which the consequences of the Syrian civil war and migration are the most visible. However, media and art works on the impacts of the Syrian civil war on Turkey and how Turkey perceive the civil war and migration are very limited. This study examines how war and migration, which make the borders between nation-states permeable, change the boundaries of women's lives, social roles and bodies as well as patriarchal social perspectives against women through the film "Misafir" (Guest - 2017).

**Keywords:** civil war, migration, borders, gender, feminist theory

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# Kadınları Saran Görünür ve Görünmeyen Sınırlar: Sinemada Savaş ve Göçün Feminist Anlamı

## Öz

Kadınlar ve çocuklar büyük yıkım ve ıstıraplara neden olan savaş ve göçlerden en çok etkilenenler olsa da, bu süreçte karşılaştıkları zorlukların neler olduğu ve unları nasıl algıladıkları hala tam olarak anlaşılamamıştır. Türkiye, Suriye iç savaşının ve göçünün sonuçlarının en görünür olduğu ülkelerden biridir. Ancak medya ve sanat alanında, Suriye iç savaşının Türkiye'ye etkileri ve Türkiye'nin iç savaş ve göçü nasıl algıladığı üzerine yapılan çalışmaların yetersiz kaldığı görülmektedir. Bu çalışma, ulus-devletler arasındaki sınırları geçiren savaş ve göçün kadınların hayatlarını, toplumsal rollerini ve bedenlerini çevreleyen sınırlarını ve kadınlara yönelik ataeril sosyal bakış açılarını nasıl değiştirdiğini ele almaktadır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** iç savaş, göç, sınırlar, toplumsal cinsiyet, feminist teori

## INTRODUCTION

Although women and children are the most affected by the wars and migrations that cause great destruction and suffering, the difficulties they face in this process and how they perceive these difficulties are still not well understood. In this sense, there is a great responsibility for the media studies that can reveal the stories of women in the war and migration processes from different perspectives. Cinema plays a very important role both in explaining the difficult areas of observation such as battlefields, borders, deaths and human dramas to people and in making qualitative research on these issues. In this sense, the Syrian crisis and the wave of immigration have become a subject frequently discussed by the cinema. So, cinema films are considered as an important source in which the concept of migration and borders can be handled with a feminist perspective.

The popular uprisings that began in Dara, Syria in March 2011 turned into a civil war in a short time, causing one of the most important waves of migration in recent years. More than thirteen million Syrians have been forced to leave their homes, while almost half of them took refuge in neighbouring countries. Some of them migrate from these countries either legally or illegally to European countries and to the USA. Turkey has attracted worldwide attention as the country hosting more than half of the total Syrian refugees. Therefore, Turkey is the country in which migration issues are the most visible. However, media and art works on the impacts of the Syrian civil war on Turkey and how Turkey perceive the civil war and migration are very limited.

In this study, it will be examined how war and migration, which make the borders between nation-states permeable, change the boundaries of women's lives, social roles and bodies as well as patriarchal social perspectives against women through the film "Misafir" (Guest - 2017) directed by a Turkish female director Andaç Veznedaroğlu and addressing the problems of female asylum seekers Syrian living in Turkey.

## **Gender Boundaries That Continue To Exist As Nation-State Boundaries Become Uncertain**

The Syrian Civil War, which constitutes the biggest wave of migration in the 21st century, and the developments caused by it, are quickly responded to in cinema, and since 2011, many fiction films and documentaries have been shot. Although it is home to a large number of asylum seekers, it is difficult to say that Turkish cinema is interested in the issue of Syrian refugees. The limited number of films that are shot do not attract much attention. Among these films, the "Guest" (*Misafir*) is a unique example in terms of the representation of Syrian refugee women in the Turkish cinema since it is directed by a woman director and focuses directly on problems of women and children refugees.

The Guest is about the events experienced by a seven-year-old Syrian girl and her sister who had to leave their country with their neighbour *Meryem* to seek refuge in Turkey after the bombing of their house. The film starting with a scene in which a group of children holding a globe in their hands talk about where they can go if they emigrate because of the events in Syria. This scene continues with the bombing of Syrian aircraft. *Lina*, who lost her family during the bombing, joins a group of immigrants with her sister and their female neighbour *Meryem*. They managed to reach Turkey after a tough journey. *Meryem* and *Lina* decide to go to Istanbul together and they settle down with their fellow countrymen who have already migrated from Syria and started living in a basement in Istanbul. With no hope of returning to Syria, *Lina* decides to go to her uncle who works as a doctor in Germany. She boards a boat from Bodrum and goes to Greece illegally and then to her uncle to Germany.

In general, the film reveals the normative gender structure in the geography the Middle East and Syria in a descriptive way without questioning it (Kibby and Costello, 2004). Both men and women often fulfil their gender roles without question. As the border approaches, the group, including *Meryem* and *Lina*, is attacked and only young men who are able to fight are detained by ISIS terrorists to make warriors. Syrian women living in Istanbul generally work in labour-intensive jobs that do not need special education, such as textiles, while men carry out daily work as

the head of the family. Domestic work such as cleaning, cooking, washing up and childcare is done by women. Although she is a child, *Lina's* caring for *Zehra* as a mother, feeding her, taking her diapers reveals how normative gender roles are internalized by girls.

In the film, almost all women except *Meryem* are under the pressure of men. Women are not allowed to leave the house on their own except on the way to and from work. The men of the family react greatly to *Lina* and her friend *Hacer* who work in a textile workshop because they just sit with their male friends in a cafe. In fact, shortly after this incident, *Hacer* is married to a man, whom she does not know, in exchange for the bride price regardless of her age. Bargaining to determine the amount of the bride price indicates that the woman has become a commodity traded in the market in the patriarchal order (Kaplan, 1983). *Hacer* does not object and accepts marriage very obediently as a victimized woman. In the film, not only men oppress women but also women use intense oral and physical violence against women. In this way, women's pressure on each other reproduces the contention pattern that a woman's greatest rival is another woman, which is included in many mainstream narratives (İnceoğlu, 2015: 89).

In keeping with the patriarchal perspective, women take care of their personal care and clothing, such as make-up and hair care throughout the film. The masculine point of view emerges with narratives that present the woman as an object of the male gaze as a victim or sufferer. In the films produced with this perspective, the woman is a spectacle (sexual) object or an object of desire (Kaplan, 1983). Therefore, actions such as make-up, dressing, undressing and combing the hair are actions offered to the pleasure of masculine gaze (İnceoğlu, 2015: 92).

In the film, country flags, barbed wires on the border are shown as a symbol of classical nation-state understanding. However, these seemingly rigid borders have become more flexible in the face of war and migration. Therefore, they can easily enter Turkey without the application of any of the bureaucratic procedures.

In the scenes in Istanbul, the skyscrapers that are shown higher with lower angle shots and resemble the phallus represent the power of both capitalism and

patriarchal order. In the face of these buildings, both *Lina*, her sister and the people who have to live in the parks seem rather weak. In the scenes where their lives in Istanbul are told, the skyscrapers that are shown higher with lower angle shots and resemble the phallus represent the power of both capitalism and patriarchal order. In the face of these buildings, both *Lina* and her sister and the people who have to live in the parks seem rather weak. In other words, they have no choice but to internalize order in an unjust world shaped by patriarchal values. In this regard, as most of the female immigrants, they perceive migration "as a means of resisting and escaping at least some aspects of the oppress structures" they live in (Kofman et al., 2000: 22).

## CONCLUSION

In addition to being a branch of art, cinema, which is also a media tool, has the potential to spread the debates on the problems of war, immigration and woman by using the striking language of cinema art. However, it is considered that this potential is not used sufficiently in *Guest* film. Although it is shot by a female director, the film does not have a critical point of view. Women and men are represented in accordance with normative gender identities, and gender identities other than masculinity and femininity are not included.

Throughout the film, all the characters obediently accept the roles that the patriarchal order assigns to them. This situation is consistent with the narrative of classical cinema where the woman is sacrificed. Sexuality is not addressed at all, and no other harassment is included, except for ISIS terrorists' abuse of women. Issues such as child labour, precarious and low-wage employment are not illustrated sufficiently.

At the end of the film, *Lina* and her sister reach to their uncles to serve the restoration of the patriarchal order and the comfort of the audience. The film with a narrative based on the victimization of immigrant women focuses on the visual part of the problems rather than the causes and the criticism. Despite all these criticisms, it reveals that in a world where war, internal conflict and humanitarian crises intensify, inter-state borders are no longer obstacles, but the borders of social perceptions such as women's social roles, commodification of the body and freedom still stand firmly.

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