

THE HARMONY OF TRADITIONAL AND MODERN TURKISH DRAMA IN BILGESU ERENUS' PLAY MISAFIR

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All literary and art forms are the reflection of societies' values, desires, anxieties etc. Drama is one of the instrument of art that gives clue about individual's conflicts within himself, within society, within the authority more powerful because of its visuality. Turkish drama is also a mirror to understand and follow the change in Turkish society. It is the fact that the Turkish drama consists of three main traditions of theatre: folk theatre tradition, popular theatre tradition- shadow play, storyteller and western theatre tradition. It is known that after 1839 westernization is seen in every aspect of life; social, economical etc. Like the other literary types Turkish drama follows the style of its western examples. After oral-tradition of Turkish theatre, playwrights began to write their play by paying attention to western dramatic elements; character, setting, conflict, climax, tension and rhythm. During this period some playwrights preferred to create their play with a western understanding of drama and ignored the existance of traditional Turkish drama. And the others tried to combine the traditional elements of Turkish drama and understanding of western drama in their plays. Bilgesu Erenus is just one of them who aims to deal with universal themes through traditional features of Turkish drama. *Misafir (Guest)* written in 1984, is one of her play that she focuses on the universal concept 'being the other' through traditional Turkish drama's instruments.

In the play *Misafir*, the major character Musa Tezer has to leave his country in order to earn money in Germany. From his story it is understood that it is not so easy to create a new life in a foreign country. In the play it is underlined that he is also 'the other' in his homeland. Because for a long time he was outside and now becomes a foreigner to his friend even to his son.

In the center of the play the playwright consciously uses a ritual which is regarded traditional for the modern world; 'Yaren meeting,' that is a friends meeting which is common in center Anatolia; it is a community that it has some rules to enter that community such as giving importance to friendship, integrity, hospitality, honesty, loyalty etc. The philosophy of this group is meaningless for the modern world. The playwright consciously uses this tradition to question universal concepts. It is seen that the ritual itself is also lost its value and meaning that only eight members attend the meeting in the play. The rest of the group goes to Germany to earn money like Musa Tezer or doesn't give any importance to the meeting anymore. This group is the serious and respected group although it contains humour that they play games together or play an instrument and sing a song. Only men can be the member of the group and have to obey the rules of this special group. If one of the member of the group has a guilt a punishment is given by the rest of the members. And the smart punishment is to be driven away from the group.

In the play Musa Tezer is driven away from the group. Because he was in Germany for a long time and after his return he doesn't obey the rules of that group. It is ironic that his own son underlines this fact visually by putting a candle inside his shoes which means that he is driven away from the meeting according to the tradition of the group. In the beginning of the play his son and other members act out the life of Musa Tezer after his return to homeland with his lack of manners. They laugh to his rudeness. Because Musa cannot adapt himself neither to the culture of his homeland nor of Germany. He stands just in between. Suddenly Musa Tezer comes to this meeting, in fact they don't want to accept him but the leader of the group allows him to enter and listens to his story from himself. In the play the life of Musa in Germany and in his homeland are given sometimes through telling sometimes through acting out by the members of the group and himself.

Musa has to go to Germany in order to earn money to have a good life. But it doesn't worth it. First of all he has to leave his big son in his homeland. Then he comes across lots of difficulties in Germany such as learning a foreign language in a short time, understanding the life style and culture of the foreign country. He is a hard working man but it is not enough for the future of his family.

He lost one of his finger while working in a factory and lost his second son in Germany in a fight. He buys a field and a house in his homeland from the members of that group. But it is ironic that the members are not honest that they sell their belongings very expensive. Because for them Musa is just a foreigner and they have a right to get lots of money from him when they have a chance.

It is understood even his close friends are far away from understanding him. At the end of the play all the members accept their mistakes and understand that they don't have any right to judge Musa.

In this study *Misafir* is analysed in the aspect of possibility of telling the plot of the play through traditional Turkish drama's instruments and create a modern play. Within the framework of these aspects it is intended to examine and discuss the success of using traditional features of Turkish drama such as using alienation elements, speaking slang language, using play within a play technique etc. to tell a universal theme. In other words the play is studied in the aspect of the usage of instruments of drama, that traditional ones are chosen in this play, to reach 21. century's audience. In this sense there is a chance to question the director's success that the play is performed in State Theatre of Turkey this year. In order to foreground the success or intention of the director semiotic usage on the stage is discussed in this study.

Marvin Carlson has written about the importance of the audience for semiotic theory of the theatre. The complexity and openness of signification on the stage create in the audience a 'psychic polyphony' which allows individual audience members to focus their attention in any number of ways, allowing the audience 'an unique and individual synchronic reading as the play moves forward diachronically'. (Carlson 1990; 99). This is to say that each audience takes in particular facets of the performance moment by moment and also has a particular sense of how the performance unfolds in time. Theatre is always a self-destructive act and is always written on the wind. (Brook, 1968; 15). The endlessly moving, endlessly changing nature of theatre forces audience to understand the text. The play is primarily concerned with conveying meaning and understanding rather than capturing a detailed illusion of reality. (Fortier, 2008;29)

Reader-response and reception theory underlines the fact the relation between the audience and the performance and is concerned with how people other than the playwright or creator contribute to the meaning and import of a work of art. (Fortier, 2008;133) The audience is engaged in a project of creative collaboration, with the actors, in the interest of a more complete realisation of the performance. Quite clearly, although play offers a system of signs which have been artificially placed and purposively thought out to create meaning, levels of interpretation must vary between individuals. Not only do spatial codes set out to define, shape and construct the meaning of the spectating and playing spaces, they also govern relations between performers on the stage, and performer-audience interactions.

The Canadian scholar Susan Bennett concludes that the audience in traditional theatre enters into a social contract in which audience agrees to be passive in their behaviour but open, eager and active in his/her acceptance and decoding of the signs presented to him/her. (Bennett, 1990;125) But the anti-illusionistic aesthetic of distancing of this play, *Misafir*, can be read as a return to the convention-based modes of presentation. Performance is now foregrounded as performance, and the audience is again in an active role in the process of meaning-production.

Plays such as *Misafir*, which deviate from the traditional shaping of dramatic plot serve to highlight the rules and conventions governing theatrical construction. Where the formal conventions of the dramatic plot are in some sense 'violated' the devices which govern the shaping of drama are foregrounded and laid bare. Such plays like *Misafir* disrupt textual expectations and discomfort or unsettle the audience. A play which requires the audience to re-examine the rules of drama demands her/his collaboration and active participation in the production of meaning as it is seen in the performance of the play, *Misafir*. (Aston& Savona, 2007; 33) Such a re-examination challenges the audience's relation to both the dramatic world and the actual world. It is a process of engagement whereby what is known becomes unknown, and which, in consequence, invites a rethinking of the world as it exists.

The director nowadays has control over the theatrical shape and is faced with the task of organising the signifying systems of theatre at her/his disposal- lighting, scenery, props and so on- into a codified process appropriate to the production of a text. If the director fails in this task, then the performance will not make sense to the audience. In theatre everything is put before audience and he/she has a panoramic view as opposed to a partial and pre-selected view of the stage. Signs operating within the theatrical frame need to be hierarchised in such a way as to help fix meaning. Like language, theatre can foreground or make strange specific elements of staging as a means to create difference or significance. In this sense the director of this play, that it is performed in Konya State Theater, Ömer Naci Topçu is successful.

Because he consciously pays attention to give the core of the play with the style of performance, with the usage of traditional and modern techniques that serve to give universal concepts that it is the aim of the playwright, also.

The playwright says about the play that "it is not so easy to have the feelings such as; being powerful, belonging with strong connections to somewhere, living in safety nowadays. Alienation is seen all over the world and in these circumstances it is difficult to say 'here, I am, I want to strike roots here which makes me happy'" (Tekerek, 2008; 220) In order to deal with this subject she uses 'play within a play technique' in her play, *Misafir*.

In the center of the play the tragedy of Musa is given but outside of this circle she uses the tradition of yaren meeting as a big/outside circle which is one of the instrument of traditional Turkish drama. (Pekman, 2002;94)

The director, Ömer Naci also uses the play within play technique on the stage to follow and protect the nature of the play. Hasan Erkek especially underlines the advantage of using play within a play technique that it helps to tell the life of Musa only in one scene. Because it is difficult to give every detail of his life with its environment on the stage. The difficulties of living in a foreign country, alienation, divided family, being the other are told by the techniques of drama instead of telling in a monotonous way. (Erkek, 1999; 33) Nurhan Karadağ also underlines the fact that by the help of play within a play technique the time problem is solved that today, past and future are given at once on the stage. (Tekerek, 1990; 234)

It is the fact that opening a play is a highly structured process, notwithstanding that the audience is positioned to receive it as a natural beginning. Traditionally, a first scene needs to supply us with story-line information: setting the scene, introducing characters and establishing the beginnings of an action. The same understanding is seen in the performance of *Misafir* that especially in the first act the director prefers to introduce the ritual of Anatolia, yaren meeting, with its rule, music, and style. The features of this group are shown on the stage through the story of Musa. Thus, in the first act the audience forces himself/herself to understand what is going on on the stage. Because the example on the stage is real, but not common for most of the audience in their daily life. The existence of only actors on the stage is one of the alienation element of the play that this picture does not suit to outside life. So the audience questions the reason of lack of the women role or actresses on the stage.

In the performance of Konya State Theatre the actors, in other words the members of yaren meeting welcome every audience which is another alienation element. By this way the actors underline the fact that you are not only audience of this play, you are also the guest of yaren meeting. In this sense the question of the play 'who is guest in this universe' is also asked. And also through this opening the director underlines the fact that the audience is responsible what experiences Musa Tezer as an individual, as a guest, as a foreigner or as the other. It is seen that in the play the director makes recurrent use of direct address to the audience, breaking down the conventional barriers, between actor and audience.

The other feature of this play is that audience only sees men on the stage because it is a yaren meeting and as a result the role of women are also played by actors which creates comedy on the stage. It is important that the actors put on skirt or scarf before the audience which is another alienation element in the play. Because audience knows that he/she has to regard that actor as a woman in that scene although the change is given before him which breaks down the illusion. Also the costumes of the actors are original costumes of yaren group. By this way the director catches the reality or creates verisimilitude on the stage. (Kocabay, 2008; 60)



It is the fact that generally objects placed on stage acquire greater significance than in the everyday world, that 'on the stage things that play the part of theatrical signs can in the course of the play acquire special features, qualities, and attributes that they do not have in real life.

(Bogatyrev, 1976; 35) For instance in this play the candle and shoes are used consciously together from the beginning till the end of the play to foreground the tradition of yaren meeting. In fact in daily life there is no connection between these two objects but in the play or in the tradition of yaren meeting they have a powerful meaning.



But generally it can be said that in this play there is no decoration/props on the stage that means the actors are going to be these ornaments in the play. It is seen that they become a car, a train, an animal or a machine in the factory. For instance they use a pillow that symbolizes the newborn baby.



The choice of using a black veil belongs to the director to give different scenes on the stage in an aesthetic way. For instance with the light of the back side of the veil the director gives the relation of boss and employer effectively. At the same time in the other part of the veil the audience sees the machine of factory and his hopeless situation against this technology. The usage of veil solves the time problem on the stage that past and present can be given at the same time.



The music or playing a game are other alienation elements of the play. Because these features break down the storyline and get attention to themselves. Also the function of music or games is to give the situation or psychology of



Musa thus they create atmosphere of the play at the same time.

The director especially in the second act of the play prefers to give the tragedy of Musa, such as death of his son, lost of his finger, his loneliness, etc. As an audience the identification with the actor can be seen but just because of the story of Musa, the major character. Because the director still insists on using alienation elements in the second act which does not allow a complete identification.

The playwright of *Misafir* thinks that cultural richness exists in Anatolia. Thus as a playwright she feels herself lucky in making connection between cultural richness/rituals and modern world's understanding in the plays. The director of this play which is performed in Konya State Theatre, Ömer Naci is also successful to give the intention of the playwright by using right form on the stage; such as using alienation elements like music, veil, lack of object on the stage. Although these features belong to Turkey or Anatolia the subject of the play is universal. Because in his story Musa is not alone. Like him, all over the world most of the people leave their family, their culture, their country in order to have a good life. But it is tragic that this choice is not the solution to their problems. On the contrary they have to fight against life just to survive as a guest or the other. It can be said that humanbeing is mortal and as a result everyone is guest in this universe. But again it is ironic that humanbeing prefers to live by ignoring this fact. On the other hand 'being the other' or 'the guest' is a psychological trauma and the problem of society in daily life. On the stage the director just shows the reality and forces the audience to understand and evaluate the problem. Thus this play does not require identification from the audience. Instead it asks a lot of questions such as the role of modernization in our life, degeneration or changed values effect on the relation of people etc.

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