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Popular Turkish Cinema and Remakes

In its heyday in the 1960s and early 1970s the Turkish film industry was producing over 200 films a year, and cinema was the most popular form of entertainment. According to the Turkish Statistical Institute, in 1970 there were around 2,500 film theatres around the country and 250 million tickets were sold.[1]

During that period, the most popular genre in Turkey was melodrama, followed by comedy. But what were the sources of these popular stories? Many Turkish productions were based on international films that had screened in Turkey almost a decade earlier, as well as some international novels and plays. According to some estimates,[2] almost 90 percent of the films shot in 1960s Turkey were remakes, adaptations or rip-offs, though their source materials were never credited in order to avoid any legal sanctions. The perception of plagiarism was not the same as that which existed in Europe and the US. The long list of Turkish remakes includes three different versions of 'Some Like It Hot' (Billy Wilder, 1959), an Islamicised 'The Exorcist' (William Friedkin, 1973) and even comic-strip hero Lucky Luke's screen adaptations.

Surely there were some economic objectives underlying this strategy. Producer Nusret İkbal suggests that the film industry was not able to support such a huge number of productions.[3] The limited budgets for production and the lack of creative writers might have been the reasons behind this phenomenon

1 Ahmet Gürata, 'Translating Modernity: Remakes in Turkish Cinema' in Dimitris Eleftheriotis and Gary Needham (ed.) 'Asian Cinemas: A Reader and Guide'. Published in 2006

2 Giovanni Scognamillo, 'Türk Sinemasında Yabancı Uyarlamalar-1' in Yedinci Sanat 9, Vol. 68. Published in 1973

3 Cited by Agah Özgüç in 'Türk Sinemasında Kleptomani Devam Ediyor'. Ses 21, 13. Published in 1965

of adaptations. But more importantly, it was the earlier success of a particular film that encouraged filmmakers to create remakes. They intuitively thought that the audience would continue to buy into a particular story in its new incarnation because the underlying fable was still compelling.

Turkish scriptwriters also worked very hard to transpose the stories into Turkey while trying to make sure the worldview and the sensations would translate into a local context. There are a number of issues that informed script adaptations, such as moral codes and cultural values.[4] For example, the shoot of an adaptation of Tay Garnett's 1946 film 'The Postman Always Rings Twice' had to be abandoned as the film involved an extra-marital relationship. Although running successfully in cinemas in Turkey, an adaptation of Billy Wilder's 1963 film 'Irma La Douce' was considered impossible for moral reasons.[5] While guaranteeing cultural suitability, filmmakers also aimed at introducing modern concepts, paradigms and forms through these adaptations.

4 Gürata, 'Translating modernity: Remakes in Turkish Cinema'

5 Scognamillo, 1973

A STORY TOLD MANY TIMES

One phenomenal example is the 1951 Indian film 'Awaara' ('The Vagabond'), directed by Raj Kapoor, which was remade several times in Turkey. Upon its Turkish release in February 1955, the film became an instant hit and was seen by several generations of Turkish filmgoers. Since there are no statistics available from the 1950s for annual admissions, it is difficult to estimate the number of viewers. However, newspaper advertisements reported that in the first week of its run some 100,000 watched the film. 'Awaara' was named 'best film of the year' in the popular daily newspaper Milliyet, following a vote among its readers. William Wyler's 'Roman Holiday' and Chaplin's 'Limelight' came only second and third that year. The film focuses on the poor Raju and his childhood sweetheart, the wealthy Rita. Jagga is convicted of a crime by Judge Raghunath, despite a lack of evidence. In revenge, Jagga kidnaps the judge's wife. Upon discovering she's pregnant he decides to smear her name, spreading a rumour of her infidelity. The judge, not believing the baby is his, throws her onto the street, forcing Raju and his mother to live in poverty. Growing up, Raju finds a surrogate father in Jagga, who he eventually kills. Defended in court by Rita, now a lawyer, Raju is redeemed by Judge Raghunath, who is finally convinced that Raju is his son.[6]

6 Ashish Rajadhyaksha, Paul Willemen (ed.) 'Encyclopedia of Indian Cinema'. Published in 1999

7 Ahmet Gürata, '"The Road to Vagrancy": Translation and Reception of Indian Cinema in Turkey,' in Bioscope: South Asian Screen Studies, 1:1. Published in 2010

Thanks to the film's unprecedented success, many other titles from India were imported within the following years. Between 1952 and 1962, over 100 Indian films were dubbed into Turkish and screened in the country,[7] and their popularity continued until the mid-1970s. Among the films shown during the period were many classics of Indian cinema such as 'Barsaat' (Raj Kapoor, 1949), 'Shree 420' (Raj Kapoor, 1955), 'Mother India' (Mehboob Khan, 1957), 'Sangam' (Raj Kapoor, 1964) and 'Mera Naam Joker' (Raj Kapoor, 1970). These films circulated widely throughout Turkey for many years. They were first screened in big cities and then rerun in small towns. Many were also adapted or remade as Turkish films, initially becoming a part of Turkish cinema.

In order to understand the appeal of 'Awaara' among diverse audiences, its historical relevance should be taken into consideration. There were other popular Indian films and successful Hollywood melodramas that were much loved by Turkish audiences. They too had melodramatic plots, star attraction and spectacular scenes. However, the story of Raj Kapoor's 'little man' and his struggles against authority resonated immensely among spectators. After all, this was a film about the opposition between the traditional sources of authority (the family) against a secular one (the state). It seems like the combination of this angry revolt, and optimism about life, fascinated Turkish audiences, as well as the adapters of the story. Obviously, the film's meaning is far from being static or fixed. It depends on particular contexts of translation and reception.

The phenomenal success of 'Awaara' was also related to the popularity of its title song 'Awaara Hoon'. The song was a top-selling record, and was performed by a number of Turkish singers who circulated it as a local piece in the music market. The song literally became part of Turkish folk culture when folklorist İlhan Başgöz recorded a folk version that was performed in 1957 in the north eastern city of Kars. To his surprise, he found this indigenised version being played with the traditional Turkish instruments davul and zurna.[8]

The first imitations and spin-offs of 'Awaara' appeared a few years after. In 1957, a film directed by Osman Seden called 'Berduş', another Turkish word for vagabond, featured the famed singer and actor Zeki Müren. Seden's vagabond, played by Müren, was a shoeshine boy who later found a job as a gardener. He was misunderstood and wrongly accused of theft. Another famous vagabond film character was played by singer Erol Büyükburç. Interestingly, the film in which he starred, directed by Hulki Saner

8 İlhan Başgöz, 'Karac'oğlan' in I. Istanbul: Cumhuriyet Dünya Klasikleri. Published in 1999

and released in 1969, was also called 'Berduş'. Both films featured highly popular title songs with lyrics and melodies that are close to 'Awaara Hoon'.

Meanwhile, one of the first remakes of 'Awaara', directed by Semih Evin, appeared in 1964 with the same title 'Avare'. The film featured well-known actor Sadri Alışık who later created the screen persona 'Turist Ömer,' yet another version of the little tramp. What is significant about this remake is that it replaces the original ending with a much happier one. In this Turkish adaptation of 'Awaara', the judge character was eventually forgiven by everyone and remarries his wife. And in the last scene the protagonist and his lover are seen with their little son.

The 1968 remake 'Ağla Gözlerim' ('Cry My Eyes Out') interestingly features a female Awaara – Turkish cinema's most iconic star Türkan Şoray. Directed by Mehmet Dinler, the film also had some significant plot changes. Once again, Awaara is acquitted of all charges and marries her handsome lawyer.

Over the next decade, the story of Awaara was almost forgotten. However, it was revived with three new remakes in the late 1970s. Çetin Inanç's 1976 film 'Kader Bu' ('This is Fate') is a faithful adaptation. But it is shorter in length, with only one musical number. In Temel Gürsu's 1977 film 'Benim Gibi Sevenler', featuring singer Ferdi Tayfur, the Awaara character is quite decent and doesn't steal. Nevertheless, he is wrongly accused. The last remake of 'Awaara' is with another famous singer – Adnan Şenses. This time Remzi Jöntürk's 1978 'Avare' includes some agitating dialogue in line with the populist left-wing discourse of the period.

As Canadian academic and literary critic Linda Hutcheon states in her 2006 book 'A Theory of Adaptation': 'travelling stories adapt to local cultures, just as populations of organisms adapt to local environments.'[1] This is a process of cultural selection: some stories adapt and survive, and some are forgotten. 'Awaara' is one such adaptive organism – retold for several decades. In each case, it mutated according to the context of reception. Depending on the time and place, different aspects of that story are foregrounded. And more than 60 years later, the transcultural fascination with the film still continues. Indian star Aamir Khan's long awaited visit to Turkey in October 2017 to promote 'Secret Superstar' has created another big sensation that might be compared with that of 'Awaara'.

[1] Linda Hutcheon, 'A Theory of Adaptation'. Published in 2006

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