

**Yılmaz Güney's *Arkadaş* and *Yol*: The Changing Approach of the
Renowned Socialist Filmmaker to Gender Equality**

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Arkadaş [Friend] (Turkey) 1974. In Turkish. Director: Yılmaz Güney. Writer: Yılmaz Güney. 105 minutes.

Yol [The Road] (France) 1982. In Turkish. Director: Şerif Gören, Yılmaz Güney. Writer: Yılmaz Güney. 114 minutes.

Arkadaş (1974) tells the story of two college buddies who reunite in their forties, and realize that they no longer have much in common. Cemil (Kerim Afşar) is now a successful businessman, and has adopted a somewhat hedonistic lifestyle. In contrast, Âzem (Yılmaz Güney) works at the Highway Commission for a modest wage, and has strong socialist views.

The plot revolves around Âzem's disapproval of Cemil's lifestyle, and around his efforts to change his morals back to how they used to be. This is obviously a bit weird, since Cemil is an adult, and is entitled to his own life choices. But, that does not seem to matter to Âzem. He simply arrives one day at the city Cemil lives in, starts staying at his house, and soon afterwards, appoints himself to an ideological mission to save him from his "degenerate" lifestyle.

What leads one friend to assume the authority to instruct morals to the other in a somewhat intrusive manner? The film suggests that it is political ideology. In fact, on a more abstract level, the entire storyline rests on the assumption that the bourgeois lifestyle is categorically degenerate. Cemil and his entourage exemplify this degeneration: They are out of touch with the realities of the working class, if not the whole country. They are intellectually shallow enough to laugh at any pointless joke. They have loose morals, and continuously engage in extramarital affairs, sometimes with each other's spouses. In all, they live meaningless lives, and especially the women in their circles usually pass their days without doing any actual work.

In contrast, the hardworking village people labor in dire conditions, yet still have very little to survive. *Arkadaş* underlines this disparity with an overt tone of didacticism that finds expression primarily in Âzem's attitudes, if not his whole persona. In addition, a series of snippet scenes demonstrate the sharp contrast between the two worlds. The scenes from the bourgeois circles involve, for example, rich women in bikinis mistreating their housemaids, while those from the countryside display gracious people who industriously work the fields or milk the animals.

In the context of class membership, Cemil represents an interesting case. Because, he is originally a village boy, but has moved up the social ladder to join the bourgeoisie. However, the change in his class membership has led to his transformation into a degenerate person. Therefore, Âzem takes him back to his village to remind him of his roots, which are supposedly pure and free from degeneration. The experience somehow turns out to be mind-blowing for Cemil. He confesses to Âzem that his life is worthless, and void of meaning. He even makes vows of change, and says that he will leave his wife, and move back to the village. Once he arrives back in his house, however, he cannot find the courage to keep any of his vows. Âzem thus leaves in disappointment.

This is the end of the story. But, *Arkadaş* saves the climax for the very last moment. Soon after Âzem is out the door, a gunshot echoes in the neighborhood. Âzem understands that, unable to withstand his inner conflicts, Cemil has committed suicide. Yet, he does not seem to mind that at all. He just keeps walking. In fact, he is happy! Because, right at that moment, he encounters a working-class youth who, with his influence, has now cut his long hair short – an indication that he no longer wants to imitate the bourgeois! Hence the big smile on Âzem's face, and a happy ending...

Such a story leaves the viewers with many questions. The majority of these questions stem from *Arkadaş*'s unusual outlook on life, reflecting a hardline socialism on the one hand, and a rather patriarchal approach to women and gender relations on the other.

The hardline socialist perspective assumes class identities to be quite rigid and monolithic. In *Arkadaş*, dichotomous traits such as hardworking-lazy, pure-degenerate, or moral-immoral appear almost squarely along class lines. There are very few exceptions. These traits also imply that interclass relations are mainly characterized by exploitation and cruelty. For example, when Âzem and Cemil are in the countryside, they encounter a few city women taking photos. Cemil cannot understand why they are even there, and what exactly they are photographing, since there is not much in their village that is worth the effort. Âzem, however, knows the answer. "They are photographing our poverty," he says with a tone of hidden anger. He almost means that the city women sadistically enjoy the sights of poverty in rural areas, and that they capture them for future entertainment. He adds, "But, one day will come, and they will not be able to do so." But, it is not clear what exactly he means with that. How will that be possible? What will that "one day" involve? Will the hard work of the villagers result in economic development, leaving no poverty to photograph? Or, will a socialist revolution change the tide? Âzem does not say.

Another such interclass encounter occurs between Âzem and Cemil's wife, after the former discovers and exposes the latter's extramarital affairs. When Âzem is finally leaving their house, she slaps him in the face to express her anger at him. But, according to the movie, her slap is somehow not due to the distress that Âzem has brought to her life and marriage, but a function of her class membership. He therefore responds, "One day *we* will definitely bring *you* to account for that slap. Definitely... Definitely one day..." (emphases mine)

How does this famous quote relate to reality? Is human behavior really a function of class membership even in utterly personal contexts? Probably not.

There are many other similar discrepancies in *Arkadaş*. Are cities really vacation spots where the bourgeoisie live in comfort without having to work? Are activities such as walking by the beach, playing ball, laughing, or having an ice-cream – which dominate the opening scenes of *Arkadaş* – really peculiar to the bourgeoisie? Do the proletariat in the cities or elsewhere not engage in any of these activities? Are class boundaries really that rigid? If so, how has a determined village youth like Cemil been able to accomplish his goal of becoming rich?

Such rigid dichotomies imply that the movie perceives the world through its hardline socialist lenses. Interestingly, however, it also postulates a rather patriarchal understanding of gender relations – despite the obvious incongruence of the traditional gender roles with socialism. Moreover, these two almost antithetical perspectives do not merely coexist in *Arkadaş*. The movie presents them as if they complement each other. This is due to a major flaw of reasoning that the movie suffers from: *the fallacy of the inverse*. That is, if the bourgeois lifestyle involves degenerate and loose morals, then, the working class is pure. Or, if the bourgeois men do not mind other males making sexual advances to their wives, then the working class men feel highly jealous under similar circumstances. For example, in *Arkadaş*, Âzem criticizes Cemil for allowing his friends to have somewhat close encounters with his wife, and reminds him of how jealous he used to feel in his non-bourgeois past when a man stared at his partner even from 500 meters away. Âzem seems to consider this a praiseworthy attitude.

A more shocking manifestation of the movie's male-dominant perspective is the way Âzem responds to Cemil's wife after she eventually hits on him too: He literally hits her in the face in a quite aggressive manner – in front of her husband, for that matter. He probably thinks that her indecency gives him the right to do so.

In some scenes, the male-dominated and class-based perspectives intertwine in more absurd fashions. For example, when Cemil takes him to a brothel, Âzem merely chats with the prostitute in her room, and does not have sex with her. Yet, in another scene, he has a one-night stand with a bourgeois

woman. It is not clear why he does not seem to have any reservations in the latter case. If promiscuousness is a characteristic of the degenerate bourgeois morals, then, why is it okay for a working-class man with a noble cause to have a one-night stand with a bourgeois woman? Would it be equally okay if a bourgeois man had a one-night stand with a village girl? If not, what does that imply about the movie's approach to gender equality, and more importantly, about the way it construes sexual intercourse?

Overall, *Arkadaş* has a quite conservative outlook on gender relations – that is, to an extent which is unexpected from a socialist movie. Yet, Turkish socialism also has a nationalist aspect, which tends to consider the international influences on the country's culture and morals to be degenerative. It is therefore not a coincidence that the movie immediately switches to Western music on the background whenever it starts to depict the bourgeois.

Given the above qualities of *Arkadaş*, it is not too difficult to be critical of Yılmaz Güney's understanding of gender roles and relations, if not his politics. However, Güney's later work, *Yol* (1982), should give us a major pause before making any firm statements about him in that regard.

Considered by many Güney's magnum opus, *Yol* tells the stories of four prisoners who embark on a cross-country journey on a one-week furlough to visit their hometowns in eastern Turkey, which is predominantly Kurdish, and has some cultural peculiarities. The prisoners go their separate ways as they approach their destinations, and their stories develop independently as they do so. Nevertheless, they are all surrounded by the same two contextual factors that add to their troubles. One contextual factor is the military rule that the country has come under a short while ago; and the other is the patriarchal tradition. The movie juxtaposes the influence of these two contexts with that of the prison, and by so doing, demonstrates how individuals can be captives even when they are not behind bars.

Each of the four prisoners in *Yol* deals with a different aspect of that patriarchal tradition. The first prisoner Seyit Ali (Tarık Akan) has to decide whether to submit to family pressure, and murder his wife to "cleanse the family honor," since she left home to work as a prostitute after his imprisonment. The second prisoner Mehmet Salih (Halil Ergün) is ostracized by his in-laws, who also force him to break up his marriage, on the grounds that his selfishness and cowardice led to the death of his brother-in-law in a heist they committed together. The third prisoner Mevlat (Hikmet Çelik) can meet her fiancé only when accompanied by chaperons, and cannot even write to her from prison without making his future father-in-law angry. The fourth prisoner Ömer (Necmettin Çobanoğlu) cannot marry the girl he loves after his brother dies while fighting against the Turkish army as a member of the Kurdish guerilla. That is because the tradition (*töre*) dictates him to marry his brother's wife, and take care of his children.

When telling these stories, *Yol* also demonstrates the extents to which tradition can impose and sustain gender inequality, render sex a taboo, and lead individuals to be hypocritical about it. Examples are plentiful. Only female infidelity deserves punishment, and these extralegal punishments can be extremely cruel. When a reunited married couple uses the train's restroom out of impatience, other passengers can spontaneously form a lynch mob. A man can impose strict limitations on his fiancé's social life. Yet, soon after he does that, he can visit a brothel, which operates legally, and seems to be in high demand.

Altogether, it would not be an exaggeration to characterize *Yol* as a feminist movie. But, how can we explain this major shift in Güney's approach to gender relations? In other words, what has made a movie like *Yol* possible, eight years after *Arkadaş*, which perpetuates traditional gender roles in many respects? One explanation is that Güney adopted more progressive views some time between 1974 and 1982. However, the scripts he wrote in that era – such as *Sürü* (1978) or *Düşman* (1979) – do not offer any reasons to believe that there really was a transition in place. The former raises strong criticisms against the Kurdish tribal traditions, and the latter makes some remarks on the hypocrisy of people on sexual matters. But, these are recurring themes in Güney's scriptwriting before and after *Arkadaş*, and hardly correspond to a transition.

Perhaps, a more sensible explanation is that *Arkadaş* has trouble differentiating gender equality from Westernization, or what it seems to perceive as capitalist degeneration. Also important in the Turkish context is that, after the cultural revolution of the 1920s and 30s, Turkey has become, in Samuel Huntington's words, a "torn country" that is neither Islamic nor Western. One major consequence of that development is the widespread confusion over issues such as gender relations.

In all, such inconsistencies and confusions make it more difficult to make sense of the rationale that *Arkadaş* employs. Regardless, it perhaps goes without saying that we would remember Güney differently had he not written and remotely directed *Yol*.