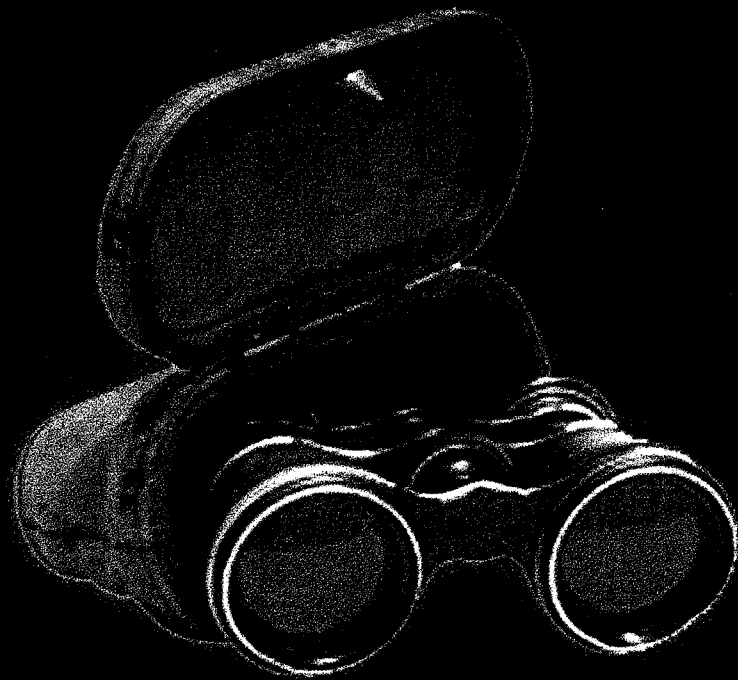


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Scientific Committee:
Assoc. Prof. Aydin Ersöz
Assoc. Prof. Asu Aksoy
Asst. Prof. Burcu Yasemin Şeyben
Aylin Kalem
Beliz Demircioğlu Cihandide
Rasim Erdem Avşar

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HOME AS A PUBLIC/PRIVATE SPACE: HEADSCARVED FEMALE CHARACTERS IN *GOOD THINGS ARE ON OUR SIDE* AND *CLOUDS MAY WANDER*

BURCU YASEMİN ŞEYBEN, RASİM ERDEM AVŞAR

Introduction

The practices concerning the participation of headscarved women in public space in Turkey, have been the subject of a great debate for years especially since the early 80's. As Nilüfer Göle, who has written extensively on the headscarf affair and its reception in the Turkish society, points out:

"[...] The battle in the public sphere continues among groups with different interpretations of secularism, but also among women themselves. As the most visible symbol of Islamization for the last three decades, the headscarf has been considered a threat to secularism and gender equality, two values that are cherished by those who are devoted to the heritage of Atatürk's republican modernity" (2008) despite the removal of headscarf ban in the public space in October, 2013.

The subject law was claimed to provide headscarved Muslim women not only with equal working rights in public institutions but also an access to all aspects of daily life. However major the step that has been taken, it does not necessarily stand for an absolute liberty. There still remains the political debates and public opposition around the issue of the 'headscarf'. And the secular opposition rising against the ban is caused by several fears.

If we look closely at the fears of the seculars as stated by Göle, we see that those fears stem mostly out of the concern about the sharing of the public space. The strong opposition against the participation of headscarved Muslim women in the public schools, universities and the Parliament implies almost a possible threat to the existence of secular women in such spaces as if they cannot coexist or one's existence will pave the way for the other's forced departure.

Although very few examples are encountered, headscarved women have not absolutely been ignored, having appeared in the dramatic texts and productions of contemporary Turkish playwrights. Whether it is in the *realpolitik* or the arts in general; we argue that the representation of headscarved women and the ways that are implied for their participation in the public domain do not vary greatly: The secular, male gaze over the Muslim females.

In this paper, we discuss the representation of headscarved women as dramatic characters in Berkun Oya's *Good Things Are on Our Side* (2013) and Özen Yula's *Clouds May Wander* (2014), both written and directed by themselves, as well as the idea of "home" as a public/private space and how these characters are manifested in these domains.

Good Things Are on Our Side (2013) and *Clouds May Wander* (2014)

Berkun Oya's *Good Things Are on Our Side* (2013), starts in a posh modern flat in an urban area. What starts as a dispute over a missing Pentax camera between the

couple inhabiting the flat (Woman and Man, Orhan), quickly turns into something deeper, when the woman discovers another couple hiding in a backroom. Orhan, blaming this seemingly poor couple, coming from a rural area, for stealing the camera, discovers that his girlfriend had it in the first place. The suspected couple leave the flat, followed by Orhan and woman's break-up. Not long after, though, Ayşe, the girl who wears a headscarf, and the female counterpart of the rural couple, turns back to Orhan's flat when her lover is killed in an honour killing by their relatives, following them up all the way to Istanbul to avenge their unwanted affair.

The rest of the play revolves around the confrontation between Ayşe and Orhan. Once absolute strangers, they do discover a lot of about each other, their beliefs, lifestyles, memories and love affairs.

In Özen Yula's play *Clouds May Wander* (2014), the protagonist of the play is Betül, a headscarved female around her late 20's. Her only connection to the outer world is through telemarketing TV channels and shopping after her husband's death. Her solitary daily routine gets interrupted when Kaya from her late husband's past makes it into her flat. Though unwilling to accept him to her flat in the first place, Betül soon agrees to let him in to discover more about her husband's suspicious and unexpected suicide. What is revealed during Kaya's visit is not only the reasons behind his suicide but something else that strikes her even more: Kaya's actual relationship to her husband and that they were gay lovers.

Defining the Public and Private Domains through Dramatic Characters

Both plays represent a headscarved female character as either protagonists or one of the main characters, whose lover died and display their struggle against their losses in the absence of male figures in their lives and physical spaces. In both plays, the idea of space, whether it belongs to somebody else or the characters themselves, serves as a dramatic tool to espouse the characterization of these headscarved women. However, the line between the public and private space becomes continuously blurred throughout both plays.

In *Clouds May Wander*, what starts as Betül's private space –her home- turns into a public space with a male intervention, in *Good Things Are on Our Side*, Ayşe, ends up in another male's private space, thus a public space for a Muslim woman, in the end, converts into a private space for her.

In Good Things Are on Our Side

In *Good Things Are on Our Side*, the movement of one of the main characters, Ayşe, from private to public space or vice versa throughout the story, helps one follow the dramatic arc of the story and her characterization. Ayşe comes from a rather conservative rural place where she either lived in her private home with her family, or enters into the public space where she secretly meets and makes love with her lover, Ali. Her only presence in the public space is through a man, Ali, but even with or just because of this man they have to meet in hidden corners of the village – thus in a sense they become private spaces that they create within the public spaces. In short, in her village, Ayşe lives in between her family house – a private-allowed space – to a semi-private-sinful and forbidden space that she accesses through her lover.

When the play starts, Ayşe and Ali have already arrived to Istanbul where they have to “hide” in public spaces until they arrange their running away from the country. Although they cannot move freely in their desperate run from Ayşe’s family who plans to kill both, they have some “freedom” of being able to appear as a couple in public spaces – to see an open air movie, and/or walk by the seashore. Ayşe’s relative freedom to use the public space is hindered both by her fear of her family’s plans and her love for Ali drives her to always be with a man. Later on, in the play, the confessions which she makes to Orhan about her decision for coming to Istanbul blurs the portrayal of Ayşe’s character even more. It is really hard to grasp from these confessions whether she runs from the village to experience her love “freely” in public or to do what’s necessary in order not to confront her family alone.

“GIRL: I was always afraid, brother, of my father, of the Hoca, of Ali, I was afraid that Ali would leave me if we did not run away together, we came here, then I was afraid that something would happen to Ali and I would be alone, what happened? Whatever I was afraid of happened to me one by one” (Oya, 2013).

Here we understand that even if Istanbul offers a public space where Ayşe experiences some sort of a freedom with her lover, Ayşe seems to experience it with a man out of fear for being lonesome. Therefore, she seems not to desire or does not even think of a real freedom as a woman alone in a public space. However, just a few lines after this she talks again to Orhan as if she has come to Istanbul willingly without taking into account any opinion of the male figures in her life.

“GIRL: I ran away and came here; I listened to neither my father, nor the Hoca, not Ali, brother [...]” (Oya, 2013).

Ayşe states that when coming to Istanbul she listened to what her grandmother told her in a dream where the grandmother told Ayşe to hear what her heart says.

From one moment to another in the play there is a serious leap in the thoughts of Ayşe. Firstly, this sudden leap appears as a response to Orhan whose prejudices against and fierce judgments about the headscarved Muslim women in special and Muslim people in general, force Ayşe to show that it is not the case for her. Secondly, after Ayşe and Orhan’s accusations against each other about their real feelings and actions towards their ex-lovers, Ayşe first hesitates and then feels comfortable about taking her headscarf in Orhan’s house. This house has been a public space for her since the beginning.

Ayşe’s removal of her headscarf at the end of the play is shown as a sign of reconciliation between two clashing sides of the society – the secularists and Islamists. When Ayşe takes her headscarf off, she shows that she accepts this space as her “new” private space. Either “out of circumstances” or “out of her own will” she returns in a way to where she began – into the sphere of what she considers home or her private space. In addition, Orhan appears to show a white flag by letting her stay in his house. But the readers or the audience know that although Orhan is on the “secular” side of the coin, he is as unbending and prejudicial in his attitude and opinion of Ayşe as her parents. Ayşe’s return again to Orhan’s private space to find shelter after having lost a battle out in the open exhausts all possibilities of her access to a public space which is actually defined in the play as her ability to do or act by herself.

This, we argue, is a weakness in the characterization of Ayşe because we expect to see characters that act rather than are acted upon in dramatic works. If we look at the overall story arc, we always see Ayşe being acted upon, and her space being defined, created and confined by men in her life.

In Clouds May Wander

In *Clouds May Wander*, our headscarved protagonist, Betül, is an Istanbulite, unlike Ayşe from *Good Things Are on Our Side*. The play starts with Betül, all alone at her own place. The whole play takes place in the living room of Betül's house. Yula describes the setting as "[...] not –in any way- either an intellectual space or a designer house..." in the first stage direction of the first scene. He also adds, Betül, a housewife to a late carpet trader, has filled in the house with *kitsch* yet expensive luxury items. And on TV is a telemarketing programme, barely audible. And on top of everything, a huge photo of her late husband is hung on the wall, reminding the infamous Big Brother, constantly watching Betül and the audience.

The opening scene is when we see Betül, wearing a headscarf even at her own private space for a couple of minutes until the doorbell rings which makes her tighten it a bit in case it is a stranger at the door. Despite the stage directions included in the script, stating that Betül has just finished with her prayer, in the full-production of the play, we, as the audience do not see either a prayer rug in the living room or Betül performing her prayer. As Muslim women wearing headscarves are allowed to remove it unless they are accompanied by men unknown to them such as random strangers or distant male relatives, it strikes the audience as a surprise how Betül decides to keep her headscarf on even when she is all alone. What would be a peaceful private space for Betül, starts off as acting like a public space and the exact line between the idea of private and the public space gets blurred right from the beginning.

Apart from converting her private space into a public one, when it comes to Betül's access to the outer world and the public space as we know it, we learn how she used to wander around Cevahir, one of the biggest shopping malls in İstanbul, when her husband was alive. When Kaya –a stranger in the first place- retells what her husband told him about Betül, he cannot help but scold Betül for having been constantly shopping.

"KAYA: Orhan would tell me you even shopped more than other women.

KAYA: [I gave him a loan] Because you needed money to do your shopping! He told me you would even go and do more shopping even if he was in a dire situation!" (Yula, 2014).

Besides Kaya's constant remarks on Betül's being a shopaholic, Betül, when she is confronted by Kaya, she says:

BETÜL: I... Yes. I like doing shopping. Maybe a bit too much at times. I mean... I watch those TV channels and order things from there... [My husband] didn't get an ISP service installed. He didn't want it. And what's the pleasure in shopping on your iPhone? [...] I used to go out and do it" (Yula, 2014).

Our protagonist, therefore, seems to be clearly marked by a rupture between the public and private space and their implications on her daily life. When she had "somebody to take care of her", her only access was to the shopping malls through the money given by a male figure. When her husband dies, she finds herself in a

solitary confinement, locked in a seemingly private space, with her TV on. Only after Kaya arrives, she discovers further about her husband's death and gets other news from the public domain –through another male figure.

The play and the whole timescale it covers, are marked by a definitive sense of immobility of the protagonist. While we never see Betül going out, the only male character of the play, besides the replica of *Big Brothresque* late husband, Kaya has access to the outer world. He comes from a public space –outside- and is defined by it almost as a harbinger of news, representing the exterior rather. While Kaya, living as a closeted Muslim gay man in Istanbul and working as a grain trader, has direct and unrestrained access to the outer world, Betül seems to be stuck at her non-private yet not fully public place with no sign of a plausible transformation in sight.

We, the audience and/or readers are positive that Kaya could leave the place at any moment he wanted to, like he came in in the first place. Betül, on the other hand, would stay at her place, wearing her headscarf in her own house, not going out and doing shopping from home as long as she could afford. She is, once again, deprived of a full and real connection to what is happening outside.

The reason why, Betül is likely to spend her life in that flat while Kaya could leave any time, is not a post-death trauma but rather the secular take on Betül which entraps her in a realm of TV commercials, *kitsch* vases, denied credit cards, a withering silk tree and her husband's gaze. Betül is on stage yet invisible as a woman who can wear a headscarf but still cannot hit the road. And it seems very unlikely for her to be an "intellectual", "go out" and claim her own space like she could do for a shopping mall, but never for her own house with or without intruders.

Conclusive Analysis

We believe both plays, contribute to the general visibility of such characters on stage by referring to the contemporary issues around the headscarf affair. Although we do see Muslim characters in dramatic texts and productions, having headscarved women as protagonists is still rare. Since the very affair of wearing a headscarf cannot be considered without a debate on public and private domains, we also see in both plays that these playwrights and directors, either directly or indirectly, included the idea of space in their plays.

However, the first common point between Ayşe and Betül is the way the audience perceives them on stage: They are never out in the public space by themselves. Even in a seemingly private place, they always have male companions with them. Although we do see Betül alone at her place in the beginning, the Big Brother portrait of her late husband makes it almost implausible to believe she is by herself.

The second significant issue to pinpoint is the dramatic decisions they make. Betül chooses to be confined in her house after her husband dies and seems very reluctant to leave the flat to –at least-, go to the only public space she once loved to visit: a shopping mall. The virtual realm of TV channels and telemarketing becomes 'the space' for her, almost providing an illusory public space.

Ayşe, on the other hand, chooses to stick to Orhan, once a total stranger to her. Despite it is obvious that a huge metropolitan like Istanbul could be frightening for a runaway young woman, Ayşe has never really been depicted as a fragile little girl throughout the play. This is especially true when what was at stake and how she

risked her life considered when she decided to escape from her village and make it to the big city. A dramatic justification is not explicitly referred for her reasons to come back to and stay with Orhan rather than stay out.

Since the transition between the public and private domains bring along the idea of mobility, a bigger common point between the two protagonists seems to be their inability to move anymore. They are both immobilized by already deceased husband and/or lovers. However much we agree to the common knowledge and a set of beliefs that would define the idea of public space, we rather discuss how the access of these characters to such a space is always dominated and enabled by male figures.

The male domination over a public space is still valid both for Turkey –and even for many other countries all around the world- for women in general whether with a headscarf or not. The current participation in the public domain of Muslim women; however, has been improved, enabling us see more headscarved Muslim women establishing independent working careers and lifestyles. Therefore, we argue that the both playwrights' decisions to form a parallel equivalence between the headscarf and male dependency which deprives them of access to and participation in the public space is relatively obsolete. Even when Ayşe removes her headscarf, which refers to her acceptance of Orhan's flat as a private space, her conditions do not seem to change. The true liberating transformation of a dramatic character should not be the removal of a headscarf or seeing no harm in making them shop at their heart's will and do nothing else. What we call a dramatic journey is the transformation of a character, either for better or worse, but never immobile characters stuck in spaces they cannot and do not leave, which seems to be the case in both plays. Therefore, what Nilüfer Göle says, as we have quoted above, about the male gaze over the headscarved women, turns out to be not a mere political statement since the case with the contemporary drama seems to be same, as well.

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Burcu Yasemin Şeyben
 PhD, Asst. Prof., *İstanbul Bilgi University,*
Management of Performing Arts

Rasim Erdem Avcı
 Research Assistant, *İstanbul Bilgi University,*
Management of Performing Arts