

## **Social Construction of Southeastern Turkey through the Bliss**

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### **Abstract**

This article examines how sociological imagination of the individuals living in southeastern Turkey is constructed through Movie, The Bliss. Traditional and modern forms of life are symbolically constructed in this movie. The framework of "honor killing," "masculinity in southeastern Turkey," "cultural deficiency," and "othering" will be analyzed to explicate how stereotypical southeastern characters are reproduced. Content analysis technique is applied to interpret apparent and latent contents, contexts, aspects and so forth. Developed categories are revisited through Ibn Khaldun's Typology, cultural deficiency theory, Tonnies' theory, Durkheim's view on society, and Goffman's framing process.

*Keywords:* honor killings, southeastern Turkey, content analysis, Kurdish structure,

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Anatolia has preserved many civilizations, different ethnic groups, and distinctive characteristics. As of today, southeastern Turkey is usually displayed as contrasting the modern part of Turkey. Likewise, this place was demonstrated as uncivilized territory. An individual who are living in southeastern of Turkey said that "Constantly southeastern of Turkey is victimized in episodes, we are dishonored through custom (*töre*) crimes." The portrayal of eastern and southern individuals in Turkey is problematic. They are exposed in the movies as uneducated, uncultivated, bad-mannered, violent, and primitive. Especially, the individuals who do not have firsthand experience with eastern people (mostly Kurds and Arabs) learn the characteristics of their life through media such as movies ( Komecoglu, 2011).

### **Background of the Bliss**

Bliss starts with an opening scene unfolding a shameful story about a young woman. Meryem, starred by Özgü Namal, is a 17-year-old girl, whose mother died when she was little and she was raised by her stepmother. Even though her father, Tahsin, treated her like royalty, she was constantly abused, tortured, insulted, and humiliated by the stepmother, Döne. The first representation of Meryem is by the side of a lake; raped and unconsciously lying on the ground. A shepherd finds out what happened and carries her back to her house among the surprised, confused and curious eyes of villagers. She is locked into a barn, and Döne tries to convince her to talk about who caused this abominable sin; however, Meryem helplessly refused to talk about what happened. Therefore, the tribal leader in the village, Ali Rıza Agha – who is also Meryem's uncle and Tahsin's elder brother, holds her responsible for the sin, and sentences her to death. The death of Meryem will clean up the mess, and uphold the family honor.

The honor killing, a primitive practice, requires a single male who is related to family through blood. In the meantime, Cemal is introduced, Ali Rıza Agha's younger son, who is almost about to complete mandatory Turkish military service, which he serves as a commando. Cemal, starred by Murat Han, has to carry out what the ancient principles, *töre*, and the leader decides, killing his cousin to clean her sin. As the gendarmes are out trying to figure out what happened and the neighbors start to gossip around the village, Ali Rıza Agha decides to send them to Istanbul to complete the order. The reason the two will leave the village is told to the villagers as Meryem's getting married with a guy who is a friend of Yakub, who is Cemal's brother living in Istanbul with his family. The story of Cemal and Meryem starts at this point, when they leave the village.

After arriving in Istanbul and talking with his brother Yakub, Cemal wants to end this shameful situation as soon as possible. However, he gives up killing Meryem at the last moment. They are both on the run. The village leader expects 'good news' from his son regarding the job being accomplished. Cemal finds his close friend from military, Selo, and tells him that they need a place to stay for a while. Luckily, even though Selo doesn't understand the situation, he sends them to the city called Marmaris, in which they own a fish farm. Agha finds out that the task is not carried out by Cemal, he comes to Istanbul with a couple of his obedient servants; ordering that they need to find and kill the girl and bring Cemal back home. Selo causes Agha to realize that he was helping them to hide in Marmaris. At the same time, Cemal and Meryem accept the job offer of a skipper, İrfan, as being his crew on his yacht. İrfan is a professor who gave up his boring academic position and the glamorous life of his wife, Aysel, and decides to get on his yacht; live without knowing what tomorrow will bring on. Actually, another reason for this get-away is to live a life his beloved friend Hidayet wanted to do.

In the story, Cemal and Meryem are representing the primitive, traditional, and uncivilized society of Eastern Turkey, and İrfan represents the modern, civilized, and developed side of Western Turkey. They form an interesting trio and start their journey, which unearths the hidden sides of each character. However, the journey will mostly change Meryem's life; she will discover that she loves Cemal deep inside even though she calls him Cemal Abi, Cemal Brother, all the time. To Cemal, Meryem is still a pure young girl who needs protection and guidance. Although the customs say that she needs to be killed, there is a reason why Cemal couldn't accomplish the task – he is in love with Meryem. As they don't know what to do with each other, Cemal's behaviors to Meryem are cautious, causing Meryem to remember she is sinned. On the other side, İrfan realizes how uneducated Meryem is and tries to enhance her knowledge about

the world. He is like a lighthouse with flashing beams in the middle of the night. He teaches Meryem how to determine the course of the cruise, talks about his friend's dream and asks her questions to get to know her. As İrfan doesn't really know what happened to Cemal and Meryem, he doesn't probe them that much as he trusts these innocent and harmless people. The close relationship between İrfan and Meryem disturbs Cemal so much that with the later help of İrfan, he realizes that he loves Meryem deep inside his heart. Therefore, İrfan becomes her mentor – Cemal and Meryem are greatly in need of enlightenment.

The story ends when Agha's servants find the yacht and kidnap Meryem to fulfill the order. She accomplishes to escape from them on the coast but one of them runs after and catches her – just like her uncle Ali Rıza Agha did that day. The mystery behind the event is resolved when Cemal catches the man chasing Meryem, and finds her begging 'Please don't Ali Rıza uncle, mercy me, don't do it Ali Rıza uncle, please mercy me, please!' Those words reveal who raped Meryem brutally and left by the side of the lake. Ashamed of his father, Cemal goes back to the village and confronts his father, while Meryem's father Tahsin is standing right next to Cemal wishing not to hear bad news. However, when Cemal calls his father a rapist, holding the gun to his face, Tahsin takes the gun and fires it – the rapist uncle gets killed. The movie ends with Meryem's letter to İrfan, telling him that he showed them the way it was supposed to be, and she is grateful to him. Now Meryem knows nothing about what is going to happen next, but sure about something; she has Cemal right beside her, the man she has always loved.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Traditional and modern lifestyle can be seen in this movie. Moreover, the characteristics of two different forms of life are framed. To illustrate, the specific clothing of traditional lifestyle and modern clothing are differentiated. Ibn Khaldun examined the characteristic of rural and urban societies. Baali (1988) showed the summarized table that illustrates the characteristic of Khaldunian Typology which is rural and urban society (see Table 1).

Table 1

*The Characteristics of Rural and Urban Societies*

<b>Ibn Khaldun's Typology</b>	
<b><u>Rural Society</u></b>	<b><u>Urban Society</u></b>
Preceded Urban society; it is the origin of civilization	Indebted to rural society for its origin (population).
Small population with low density	Large population with high density
Occupations are limited mainly to agriculture and animal husbandry	Occupations are varied but "secondary and subsequent" to rural people's crafts
Division of labor and specialization are simple	Complex division of labor necessitates specialization.
Bare necessities of living; less comfortable living	Abundant and comfortable life.
More brave	Less brave
Strong sense of social solidarity	Weak solidarity. Social solidarity may vanish
Purity of lineage	Lineages are "mixed up."
Closer to being good "more remote from the evil habits."	More deviance and "blameworthy qualities."
Little or no change in customs and habits.	Change is inevitable and expected.
Emphasis is on informal social control	Use of "restraining laws" by "authorities and the government."
Prevalence of illiteracy or minimal education	Learning is stressed; arts and sciences are cultivated.
Generally, less clever	More clever as a result of scientific and related activities

Note: Modified from “*Society, State, and Urbanism: Ibn Khaldun’s Sociological Thought*,” by F. Baali (1988), p. 100.

Tonnies examined traditional (*gemeinschaft*) and modern industrial life (*gesellschaft*). Tonnies emphasized that “most people yearn for the order and meaning provided by folk communities. They often find life in modern societies troublesome and meaningless” (Baran & Davis, 2012). Durkheim’s notion of “mechanical” and “organic solidarity” suggests that “folk cultures bound by consensus and traditional social roles”, whereas, “modern social orders bound by culturally negotiated social ties” (Baran & Davis, 2012).

Goffman defines framing as the “principles of organization which govern events-at least social ones-and our subjective involvement in them” (1974, p. 10). The framing in the movie presents two forms of life style to interpret the meaningful context. Baran and Davis (2012) developed Goffman’s theory of framing (see Figure 1).

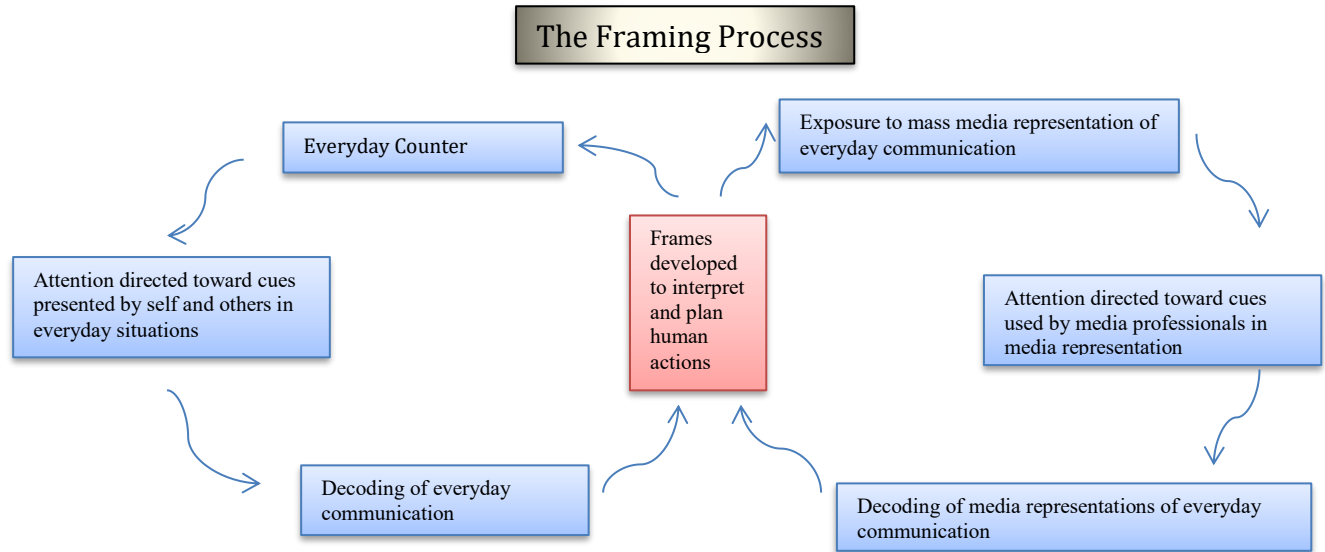


Figure 1. Goffman's theory of framing. Adapted from Baran & Davis, 2012.

In this study, agenda setting theory and framing theory will be integrated. In this movie, the director sets an agenda to show westernized individuals and “Eastern” villagers. We will benefit from agenda setting theory. While setting agenda, there are frames which help agenda setting. Baran and Davis mentioned that:

McCombs argues that agenda-setting operates at two levels, or orders: the object level and the attribute level. Conventional agenda-setting research has focused at the object level and has assessed how media coverage could influence the priority assigned to objects (e.g., issues, candidates, events, and problems). In doing this, media told us “what to think about.” But media can also tell us “how to think about” some objects. Media do this by influencing second order “attribute agendas.” They tell us which object attributes are important and which ones are not. (2012, p. 297)

McCombs also suggested that the integration of agenda-setting theory with framing theory helps us to understand “second-order agenda-setting and framing share common concerns for attribute agendas (**frames**), the dynamics of the agenda-setting process (framing process), and agenda-setting influence (framing effects)” (Baran & Davis, 2012, p. 297).

## Data and Method

*Bliss*, originally *Mutluluk*, is a Turkish drama movie directed and produced by Abdullah Oğuz in 2007. The plot is based on the famous novel by Zülfü Livaneli, who is also a popular Turkish folk musician. The soundtrack of the popular movie is an art of Zülfü Livaneli, the cinematography is done by Mirsad Herović, and the movie is distributed by Kenda Film. The length of the movie is 105 minutes. To evaluate of the *Bliss*, the qualitative content analysis technique is applied. Content analysis method enables us to interpret the structure of Kurdish

populace in southeastern Turkey, Kurdish custom (tore), eliminated power of religion against to long-lived custom, segregation, and gender inequality (Ziyanak & Soyer, 2014).

On the other side, Goffman's (1974) framing is engaged to conceptualize the central outlines in the interpretations. As mentioned above, frames in this study are construed individually. Afterwards, each interpretation for the themes is coded through patterns. Findings and codes are kept in an excel file. Findings of the study are simply used in quote and elucidated in the text.

## Data Analysis

### Honor Killing

Pre-marital sex is strongly condemned in this cultural structure. Virginity is a symbol of virtue and chastity. Eastern women's virginity is correlated with Eastern masculinity in two ways. First, it is not tolerable to marry with woman who experiences premarital sex with another man since it is significant to be the first man who has the first affair with the bride. Moreover, it is a custom that the groom must show a tissue with vaginal blood on it upon the first consummation to his mother. The groom sends the bride away to her family to make a decision for her if the bride is determined not virgin. Father, head of the family, is responsible for his daughter to maintain pre-marriage virginity, which is the masculine identity of male family members. Woman's virginity is significant for the family as well as the tribe. If women experience pre-marital sex (even if she is forced to have sex), the honor of the family and the tribe become polluted. Therefore, honor killing has taken place so far and has always been committed by men (Kordvani, 2002). That is,

It is a 'masculine homicide' and has its sources in the willingness of male members of the family to lay down challenges to their masculine position both within the family and the society. Honor killing may be committed collectively or individually. Usually, a kind of family council or informal gathering of senior men decides on the punishment and determines who must perform it. (Kordvani, 2002, p.8)

It has always been like whenever you hear some news or watch movies released about southeastern Turkey, honor killing is generally the main topic. Generally the majority of Turkish society gets to know Southeastern Anatolian via these news and movies, and therefore these people are known as the highly performers of honor killing. Media representation of southeastern people causes a stereotypical character; barbaric, rude, uncivilized and uneducated. Bliss is just a recent example covering the issue of honor killing in southeastern Turkey. The reification of honor killing code is covered by this movie as well; further, an illustration of southeastern people having incest relationships within their society is covered. The situation results in racist ideologies among Turks and Kurds, as well. The scripts from Bliss demonstrate a basic look at the decision made for the raped young girl, Meryem. The conversation is held between Meryem's father, Tahsin, and her uncle, Ali Riza Agha, who later found to be the rapist.

Ali Riza (Agha): May the Almighty put no one through a test of their honors.

Meryem is like a daughter to me too.

Tahsin: Abi, won't you let me have a word?

Ali Riza: What are you going to talk about? Then you'll start feeling sorry for her. What was she doing all the way out there? Seeing she was being a whore. She could at least have died.

Tahsin: They must have left her there thinking she was dead.

Ali Riza: Tahsin... We need to clear up this business. The villagers have started whispering. The villagers keep jabbering about when this business will end.

## The Order

This old order has been there over thousands of years and it is not vanishing. It has been considered as a prevailing informal law. Southeastern part of Turkey is very conservative and religious principles are dynamic in the territory (Ziyanak, 2015). On the other hand, the most striking point is that religion of Islam is against to this category of crimes or killing an innocent human being unjustly (honor killings). Killing in the name of honor dilemma is neither legitimate nor Islamic, but it still unyielding.

## Eastern Turkey Masculinity

Eastern Turkey masculinity as a marginalized masculinity is regarded as violent, despotic, and murderous, whereas hegemonic masculinity is seen as protective, caring and compassionate. Moreover, essentialist notions of Eastern Turkey masculinity are reinforced by hegemonic masculinity (Westernized man). Eastern women and men are objectified due to the discourse of “honor killing,” even if they do not support this cultural practice. Eastern men are regarded as “oppressors of women” due to the patriarchal family system present in Eastern culture (Eliassi, 2010).

Irfan and Meryem take a boat to do sightseeing around early morning without Cemal's knowledge. Cemal thinks that Irfan would like to take advantage of her.

Irfan: Hello, Cemal.

Meryem: I'm going to the kitchen. Whore!

Irfan: Cemal, what are you doing? What were you doing more like?

Cemal: Shut up!

Irfan: Fine but get a grip on yourself, Cemal.

Cemal: Take an ignorant peasant like me for an idiot, a pimp! Rapist! You've been planning this for days, right? You're finished! I'll kill you!

Eastern masculinity is stigmatized as ‘*maganda*,’ ‘*hanzo*,’ ‘*kiro*’<sup>1</sup> at the end of 1980s by hegemonic masculinity (Mutluer, 2009). *Maganda* is the figure of marginalized masculinity “who is totally oblivious to his own uncouth and offensive masculinity thus ‘interfering’ with the moral discourses of the decade, to destabilize and debunk the authoritative codes of ‘civility’ ” (Oncu, 2002, p. 174). Westernized Turk hegemonic masculinity is considered as civilized, whereas Eastern masculinity is regarded as uncivilized and barbaric since Eastern people is always portrayed in the media as the object of honor killing and crime (Mutluer, 2009).

<sup>1</sup> Three Turkish terms are similar meaning of “yokel,” “yahoo,” “lout” or “hick” in English.

Irfan: Here. This is for you.

Meryem: What's this, Irfan Abi?

Irfan: A present. I hope you like it.

Meryem: No, no. I can't take it.

Irfan: What do you mean, you can't take it? That's so rude! You can't turn down a present. Here. Open it and see what's inside.

....

Cemal: What's that thing round your neck?

Meryem: A present...

Meryem: Don't be angry, Cemal Abi. He said it was a present and it was rude to refuse it.

Irfan: How could you let a stranger touch you?

Meryem: I couldn't do it up. He helped. I was all confused too.

Irfan: Confused, huh? Confused!

Meryem: OK, Cemal Abi. Don't be angry.

Cemal: Shut up! you're still banging on. You'll lose your head soon. It's my stupid fault. For not punishing you. Whore! You're not ashamed of yourself but at least be ashamed in front of me!

While Cemal and the other southeastern people are represented as primitive, rude, sexually promiscuous, Irfan is represented as the leader, teacher, merciful, generous, gentleman, and see woman not as an object but a respected individual. This focused view on the southeastern people is evident all the way through the movie.

Irfan: Cemal, you know what? Meryem's very resourceful.

Cemal: Abi, she's uneducated. Don't mind if she does anything wrong.

Irfan: No, no. She's a very clever girl.

Irfan: Here, take this. Off you go and lay the table, Cemal. Go on!

Cemal: But it's a woman's job. It's not right.

Irfan: What do you mean "a woman's job"?

Irfan: Now listen. Who's the skipper here?

Cemal: You, Irfan Abi.

Irfan: The skipper of a boat is also like a CO. The CO's word is final. There are no women's jobs, no men's jobs on my boat. Now, take it. No, Meryem, not you. Take it.

### **Cultural Deficiency**

Meryem and Cemal, the main characters in the movie, are Kurds and illustrated as low class, uneducated, and ignorant peasants. When the decision was made for Meryem, they travel to Istanbul together and Cemal needs to close the deal in the modern westernized city. The scenes in Istanbul demonstrate them otherworldly, especially Meryem. The conversation between Meryem and some westernized woman points out how they differ when it comes to intellectuality.

Meryem: Istanbul's beautiful, isn't it, Cemal Abi?

Teyze: So you like it then.



Meryem: Yes, I do, Teyze.

Teyze: Good. Welcome then.

Meryem: There's supposed to be a bridge. Where's that?

Teyze: There are lots of bridges. Which one do you mean?

Meryem: I don't know.

In addition to lacking cultural knowledge, Meryem is demonstrated as she never ate fish before, and therefore she doesn't know how to eat it. Even though the village which Meryem and Cemal from has a lake, Meryem has never consumed fish; also a sign of impoverished representation of village community.

Cemal: Have you never had fish before?

Meryem: It's nice. A bit like chicken. (Coughing because a bone)

Cemal: Have some bread. You got a bone there.

Also, the scene that Irfan offers wine to Cemal shows us the lower and upper class representations of different liquor preferences. Instead of Wine, Cemal drinks beer.

Irfan: Have some wine, Cemal.

Cemal: No thanks, Abi. I don't drink wine.

When Irfan realizes Cemal and Meryem are in need of help, the westernized professor offers his helping hand to them, being generous and fatherly. Even though Cemal hesitates to accept the job offer, Irfan encourage him that the work in the boat is not something complicated. This scene also shows how the Kurd character is portrayed as unskilled.

Irfan: Cemal, listen. As you can see, the boat's huge. And I'm on my own. I was going to look for staff when I got to the harbor. Why not work with me?

Cemal: But how would that work?

Irfan: Easily enough. Meryem can look after the kitchen. And you can help me.

Irfan is not only a savior, but he is also as a characteristic of the modern world. Irfan buys some new clothes as gifts to change their outlook. The new clothes will fit them better into the picture of modern world. Especially Meryem's dresses is southeastern traditional clothes.

Irfan: Cemal, here. These are for you.

Cemal: Abi, you shouldn't have bothered.

Irfan: Come on...We're talking the tiniest present for the helmsman and deckhand. Here, Meryem. These are for you. I hope you like the stuff. Off you go and get changed now. Go on!

### **“Othering”**

In the movie, the word Kurd is never mentioned, but Cemal and Meryem's being 'other' is emphasized, not knowing where they are from. Selo and Irfan demonstrate the same kind of approach when Cemal and Meryem's customs and situation is being held. Selo points out the

customs and Irfan handle them as workers.

Selo: Look, Cemal. I can't get my head round the customs where you come from. You know that. I mean, running off with a girl is a thing of the past these days.

Cemal: No, Selo. It's not that kind of thing.

Irfan: You're not from around here, are you, Cemal?

Cemal: No, Abi.

Irfan: Did you come here as workers? There are a lot of people like that here. Especially cotton pickers in Adana.

Cemal doesn't trust the westernized Turk as Meryem does, and thinks deep inside that Irfan might try to benefit from her, too.

Meryem: What a nice man, isn't he, Cemal Abi?

Cemal: Don't be so wide-eyed, Meryem. You can't tell what he's like right off. What do we care anyway? Don't trust everyone just like that.

Irfan doesn't ask many questions to Cemal and Meryem, thinking that they also escape something that chase them. When he realizes something different goes on between the two, he accuses them not being loyal and straight with him.

Irfan: What did you say, Meryem? Did you say "Cemal Abi"? I heard right, didn't I? ...You misled me...you lied to me. Why don't you get it? We're living here together. You weren't working here. Was it so hard to be honest with me? Huh? Why did I leave Istanbul to come here? Why did I set out on this trip? Because I'd had it with lies and deceit. But you lied to me.

However, with another Turk, Cemal's friend Selo from military, holds the relationship between him and Cemal as brotherhood, not judging and trustworthy at all times.

Cemal: I didn't know where to go. Where else would you go?

Selo: Of course you'd come here! Hey, we're brothers, aren't we? Look, I understand. You need somewhere to stay for a while. Sure. Come and stay with me.

### **Conclusion**

Southeastern citizens in Turkey are continuously portrayed in the movies as uneducated, violent, and in need of civilization. In this movie, the different characteristics of westernized life and rural life are shown. Especially, the individuals who do not have firsthand experience with Eastern people (Turks, Kurds, Arabs, etc.) learn the characteristics of their life through media such as movies. It can be said that popular movies offer people "narratives for experiences they may not have in real life. In fact, in the absence of lived experience, films are often understood as "authentic" reflections of "real life" (Hughey, 2009). Bliss is just a recent example covering the issue of honor killing in southeastern Turkey.

The reification of honor killing code is covered by this movie as well; further, an

illustration of eastern people having incest relationships within their society is covered. The situation may result in increasing the current discriminatory ideologies among Easterner and the rest of the societies in Turkey and beyond.

In this parallel, in some way an invisible hand is helping to intensify this prejudice against to Kurdish people and their culture by exposing their ill-mannered image on media. As happening now, there is more interest in social and political segregation between “ethnic Kurdish populace, and Turkish people, who have lived peacefully in the same region for thousands of years” (Ziyanak, 2014, p.45) than in addressing poverty, ignorance, education, illiteracy, and the other ongoing social / civil turmoil.

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