Kurdish Cinema: In Search of Cultural Identity

By Dr Muhammad Kamal. Senior Lecturer, Asia Institute, University of Melbourne

The Kurds make the largest ethnic community in the Middle East without a state of their own. Their history is a chain of unsuccessful uprisings for independence. It tells about genocide, forcible assimilation, deportation and life in exile.

After the defeat of the Ottomans in 1918, the British forces occupied almost all of present day Middle East. Woodrow Wilson in his Fourteen Point Program for World Peace (point 12) stated that non-Turkish minorities of the Ottoman Empire should be 'assured of an absolute unmolested opportunity of autonomous development.'

The Treaty of Sevres signed in August 1920 gave a great hope to the Kurds and brought them closer to statehood. But the peace conference at Lausanne in November 1922, which was finalized in treaty in July 1923 disappointed the Kurdish delegation.

The defeated Turkey secured a position to impose demands on the conference and categorically rejected the recognition of the national rights of the Kurds.

The Allies satisfied with their own gains were happy to please Turkey for two reasons; first, Mustafa Kamal who emerged as a leader advocated the idea of westernizing Turkey and second the Allies wanted from Turkey to block the influence of Soviet Marxism in the region.

In March 1924 with the establishment of modern and secular state of Turkey by Mustafa Kamal, Kurdish language, associations and publications were officially banned. Over one million Kurds were forcibly displaced. Since then the Kurdish issue has been officially neglected and Turkish government adopted the policy of assimilation and demographic changes in Kurdistan.

What shall we expect from a nation, which is deprived of basic rights even right to speak its own language? How could Kurdish cinema under these repressive circumstances be born? Is there Kurdish cinema?

The first time a film was shown in Sulaimani a Kurdish city in the Iraqi part of Kurdistan was in July 1925. (Zhiyanew 1, No. 31, July 16, 1926, pp. 2-3). After that a number of films, including a few imported Persian-language ones, were shown with Kurdish subtitles in the 1970s. In Iraq the number of

foreign films distributed annually during that time was estimated at four hundred, of which 120 of them were filmed in Egypt and were in Arabic; almost all non-Arabic films were subtitled in Arabic but non of them in Kurdish (UNESCO 1950 1950:358).

When we talk about Kurdish cinema we need to begin from 1980 for two reasons; first it was during that time the technological changes in audiovisual media in Kurdistan took place. The introduction of video, and satellite TV broadcasting made it difficult for any despotic regime to control over the flow of films and television programming. Second, the Kurds in exile began to study art and media. Some of the Kurds studied cinema.

In 1989, preparations were made in Iraqi Kurdistan for the production of the first Kurdish motion picture, ' $Mem~\hat{u}~Zin$ '. Due to Gulf war, this production was not completed. In 1990, a project for making another Kurdish film ' $N\hat{e}rgiz~B\hat{u}k\hat{\imath}~Kurdistan$ ' (Nergiz, Bride of Kurdistan), began by Mekki Abdullah and was completed after one year. Mehdi Umed who studied cinema in the former Soviet Union directed ' $Gel\hat{e}~Gurg$ ' (Flock of Wolves); a feature film based on a novel by an Iraqi Kurdish writer Hossein Arif, and Tunnel, which was shown in Götenberg Film Festival in 1993.

In Iran, the first experiment with Kurdish film was made by Timur Patai and then Bahman Ggobadi's 'A Time for Drunken Horses', which got an international award marks a bright beginning.

The name of Yilmaz Güney, actor, director, writer and political activist dominates Kurdish cinema in Turkey. Although Güney's films were not in Kurdish yet they had a great deal with Kurdish life and cultural identity in Turkey. As we know art is not only the reflection of reality. It is a creative process in which the truth of being is revealed. In light of this understanding of the meaning of art Yilmaz Güney's cinema brings with itself a revelation about the truth of being a Kurd in the state of alienation under occupation. His film 'Yol' (The Path), which won an award at Cannes festival in 1982, is one of the productions dealing with a number of issues on the Kurdish question artistically. The image of the Kurds and Kurdish cultural identity in this film is not a political propaganda but a revelation of a hidden truth about the conditions surrounding Kurdish people and the adventure in which they live simply because they are different from the Turks. [KKK] Güney exhibits Kurdish suffering without transgressing into the abyss of political slogans and oversimplifying his artistic expressions.

The question of Kurdish cultural identity is central to his films. Yol, in particular is an example of this. This film is unique in the sense that it employs various types of socio-political issues. It successfully narrates the problem of Kurdish identity in Turkey. Although this film is not in Kurdish language but the theme is so forcefully projected it is almost difficult to

ignore the Kurdish sentiment through the narrative features of the roles played and the events around each character.

This film is targeting three objectives:

First, by focusing on Kurdish issue and in making Kurdish cultural identity explicit, Kurdish question has become a dominant feature. Through the life of five prisoners the film tells us the suffering of Kurdish people.

Second, through revealing the Kurdish issue different types of corruption of the occupying political system, such as political oppression, denial of Kurdish cultural identity, military invasion, the treatment of women, or sex industry in urbanised social life, bureaucratic corruption, economic problems and migration from rural areas to the cities are shown.

Third, the film is not only targeting the evil forces of occupation, it also looks at some aspects of Kurdish culture critically.

Yol is about five Kurdish prisoners who get leave from prison to visit their families for one week. These prisoners are not criminals but simply members of Kurdish community. Their journey towards home is beset with a number of problems. They need to reach home as soon as possible to utilise the given time with their families. But we realise that time and spacedictate their journey and become annoying factors because they have to travel a long distance with obstacles on the way.

Throughout the journey, from prison to home, one can see the symptoms of political oppression. Soldiers are everywhere; people have to go through the checking posts in order to travel from one place to another, which is the reminiscent of the Nazi occupation of Germany. The Kurdish village on the border of Syria is under constant firing at night. The villagers are afraid even to identify the dead bodies of their beloved ones who were killed by Turkish soldiers. All these events are telling the spectators that although the Kurdish problem is officially denied by Turkish government but at the same time it is a living problem in the daily life of every Turkish citizen. The Kurds who are the second large ethnic community in Turkey are certainly different from Turks. The political regime tries to deny this difference by not recognising the existence of the Kurds in Turkey. Meanwhile Turkish policy towards the Kurds is self-contradictory. The denial of Kurdish problem is at the same time the recognition of Kurds as a different ethnic group having its own cultural identity.

Two prisoners (Mehmmet and Saidali) find themselves in the middle of problems and family dispute when they reach home. Here, Yilmaz Güney

turns his camera critically towards Kurdish culture. Realising the role of art and cinema in life he has shown us the dark side of Kurdish patriarchal and tribal values, particularly honour killing and revenge. Saidali is expected to kill his wife at arrival because she was not loyal to him when he was in prison and she brought shame to the family. It is worth mentioning that honour killing or this type of crime is not peculiar to Kurdish society. Other ethnic groups in the Middle East also practice it. [Saddam's change of the family law, 2001, 200 sex workers were beheaded in Baghdad]. Mehmmet and his wife are punished for trying to have sex in the train while the government licensed brothel houses in the cities. Later their own family members as revenge killed both of them.

In the end I like to say that Güney has presented Kurdish cultural identity and problem in Turkey in an artistic and professional way without prejudice. He is critical of the occupation as well as tribalism and patriarchy in Kurdish culture. This film is not a fiction telling us about five Kurdish prisoners but the reality of Kurdish people in Turkey. The Kurds are in prison in their won land and are deprived of their basic rights; meanwhile their own culture is also a source of suffering to a great extent. If this is a beginning of the beginning of Kurdish cinema lets congratulate Yilmaz Güney and other Kurdish artist for this promising effort to become the pioneer of Kurdish cinema.

Muhammad Kamal