



## Article

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### Silent Representation of Kurdish Identity in Cinema Through "Sarmaşık (Ivy)"

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#### Abstract

All this – all the meanness and agony without end  
I sitting look out upon  
See, hear and am silent.  
Walt Whitman, 'I Sit and Look'(Genius, 2018).

Kurdish people constitute a significant part of the Turkish society for ages with some cultural and linguistic differences. This article focuses on the symbolic representation of Kurds in Turkish cinema through a close reading of the movie *Sarmaşık* in order to reveal how and at what limits the movie touches upon different forms of verbal and sound control imposed over them. This study analyzes how the Kurdish identity is constructed in the film with content analysis. By embodying the silence of Kurds, the film *Sarmaşık* bring forward the Kurds positions already in Turkey. On the other hand, this film emphasizes minority identities through the silence theme.

**Keywords:** Kurdish identity, Kurdish silence, Turkish cinema, Kurdish cinema

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## **“Sarmaşık (Ivy)” Filmi Üzerinden Kürt Kimliğinin Sinemada Sessiz Temsili**

### **Öz**

Tüm bu- Anlamsızlık ve sonsuz ıstıraba

Oturmuş bakıyorum

Görüyor ve duyuyorum ama sessizim.

Walt Whitman, ‘Oturmuş Bakıyorum’ (Genius, 2018).

Kürt halkı çağlar boyu bazı kültürel ve dil farklılıkları ile Türkiye toplumunun önemli bir parçasını oluşturmuştur. Bu makale, Kürtler üzerindeki sözel ve sesli kontrolün nasıl ve ne oranda işlendiğini ortaya koymak amacıyla *Sarmaşık* filmine yakın bir okuma yaparak, Kürtlerin Türk sinemasındaki simgesel temsiline odaklanmaktadır. Bu çalışmada içerik analiziyle filmde Kürt kimliğinin nasıl inşa edildiği çözümlenmektedir. *Sarmaşık* filmi Kürtlerin sessizliğini somutlaştırarak Türkiye’deki hali hazırdaki konumlarını tartışmaya açmaktadır. Öte yandan bu film sessizlik teması üzerinden azınlık kimliklerine vurgu yapmaktadır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Kürt kimliği, Kürt sessizliği, Türk sineması, Kürt sineması

### **Introduction**

Rigid hierarchies reign on ships during long voyages and everyone acts according to these hierarchies. The person leading this hierarchy does not interact with those at the bottom and often does not even see their faces. There is a clear stratification between the rulers and the ruled. Everybody knows that “we are all on the same ship; don’t fight if we sink, we all sink.” Being on the same ship is a fairly accurate expression of capital and labor in various ways. This wholeness aboard ships is achieved through an agreement, just like in the capitalist society; it is how ships move and lives can go forward. When the ship stops, however, everything begins to change. The ship begins to turn into a prison. Those with authority have difficulty retaining their legitimacy under these circumstances.

The director of the film *Sarmaşık*, Tolga Karaçelik, strikingly demonstrates how power dynamics can change individuals and lead to questions regarding the legitimacy of authority, hierarchy, and the status quo. In the film, he tells the stories of six men aboard a ship together for two months; the crew on this ship eventually endures crises and chaos and becomes

classless and unprivileged. The film begins, though, by showing these six men as they were prior to their journey. As they board the ship, the film delves deeper into the personalities of and relationships between the individual characters. These relationships begin to turn to tension and conflict in the second part of the film. In the third and final part of the film, surreal metaphors are employed and the film ends amid the struggle between all of the characters the conflict's resolution is left to the audience. The six-person crew is originally restricted limited by the ship's hierarchy; as time goes on, however, hierarchical boundaries dissolve as uncertainty increases, supplies dwindle, and hopelessness sets in. As conditions worsen and crew members get sick, the hierarchy completely breaks down a power struggle ensues among the crew and they do not hesitate to use force. Even the captain, who silently just observed and did not react this chaos, does not intervene after a while. The very concepts of authority and sustainability are being questioned.

This study mainly focuses on Kurdish character and evaluates the implications of the film for Kurdish society with a descriptive approach and qualitative method. The film serves as a summary of Turkey's situation In the last decade. Thus, this study looks at the social situation of Kurds as a minority through the lens of a film in which Tolga Karaçelik was able to incorporate symbols in a way that effectively constructs an element of tension. In short, it aims to express the sincere scream of the film's silent character.

### **A Movie with a Silent Kurdish Character**

This article focuses on the representation of "Kürt," the Kurdish character in *Sarmaşık* who is somehow "silent" or "silenced" (Karaçelik, 2015). This article examines the reasons why Kürt, as a minority character, can or cannot express his ideas. The Kurdish character does not truly have a name; when asked his name, he simply responds with "Kurt." The unnamed Kurdish character remains silent throughout the film, aside from the early scene in which he salutes and introduces himself after boarding the ship. This silent Kurdish character, however, conveys physical power he poses a threat to whoever opposes him. Of course, the Kurdish character is not a leading character in the film. In fact, it is the unclear point in the movie. The audience does not sure if he is dead or alive even if he turns into a ghost in the later scenes of the film or it is unclear whether he is still alive.

*Sarmaşık* heavily incorporates ideas of power relations. In the story, a Turkish ship was anchored off the coast of Egypt because the shipowner had gone bankrupt. Bankers seized the ship in order to sell it; the ship's employees would collect their accumulated money from the new shipowner. Only six people (of which two were managers) were needed for the temporary crew, as they simply needed to wait a few months on the anchored ship. The idea of guaranteed earnings was attractive, so the crew agreed to sign on. As time went on, as has already been discussed, tensions began to rise. The captain, Beybaba (not truly a name, just an epithet that refers to hierarchy and patriarchy "bey" means master and "baba" means father), and his deputy İsmail were no longer able to exert authority over the others and the ship as a whole grew inactive. Beybaba's governing tactics failed, leading him to fall to Cenk's rebellion. After a prolonged struggle, the film concludes with an unknown shift in power relations.

This study examines how Kurdishness, through Kurt either by exaggerating, lessening, or eliminating became a way of self-expression. In all cases, Kurt is a character for whom acts of silence serve as a form of power. His silence fosters a psychological uneasiness among the crew, as they perceive it as an unknown threat. "On a thematic level, silent characters are often associated with sexuality, (self-) destruction, dissimilarity, violence and/or a traumatic past (Güçlü, 2010)."

*Sarmaşık*, at its core, tells the story of a ship that cannot move because the captain cannot maintain the hierarchy among a crew stuck in a cargo ship for 100 days. The crew is made up of six very different characters: Captain Beybaba acts as a father/mister figure; Cenk is a drug addict and a troublemaker; Alper is a passive-aggressive follower of Cenk; Chef Nadir is the captain's favorite helper due to his calm nature; İsmail is pious, tense, and a right-hand man to the captain; finally, Kürt is simply a mute Kurd. Kürt is a silent character that, in lieu of any information on his personality, is extraordinary in terms of his physical characteristics. He is very tall and has a giant face, like that of an ogre, that is always host to a deadpan expression. This monstrous, robotic man understands what people tell him and consistently does his job without any comments or objections. His silence functions as a sign that reaches across Peirce's semiotic trichotomy of Icon, Index, and Symbol (Peirce, Bucher, & Spotswood, 1955; The University of Chicago, 2018). The massive physique of the mute Kürt is iconic, as it refers to the fear that exists in society due to the lack of knowledge on the Kurdish people Kürt's presence on the ship fosters anxiety among the crew. As an indicator, his silence serves

as a looming presence and refers to the physicality of absence, exemplified in the function of ellipses (The University of Chicago, 2008). The boldness of his silence becomes an obtrusive reality, one that is at once something intriguing, something to hold in derision, and something to be apprehensive of. His deliberate silence prompts a discourse among the rest of the crew until he disappears the silence is an active experience for the crew simply because, despite being able to speak, he chooses not to.

After Kürt disappears, his absence results in anxiety and fear. According to Chion, “the mute character, a character without a sound, serves the narrative and plays a subservient role. They are an instrument “to disturb, catalyze, or reveal.” He claims that the mute character has a very close relationship with knowledge and power as “we rarely know for sure whether they cannot speak or will not speak.” Moreover, they are not only “unknowable,” but we do not know how much they know “we might think of them as the place where the story’s crucial knowledge is lodged and which can never be wholly transmitted” (Chion, 1947/1999). After Kürt vanishes, Nadir searched for him everywhere but cannot find any clues on his whereabouts. There was no way to know if he died, got injured, committed suicide, or just hid. Soon after, Kürt began to appear as a ghost in the crew members’ minds. In some scenes, they would see creeping shadows in their thoughts or perhaps Kürt was simply appearing at unexpected times and places throughout the ship. The crew began to wait for Kürt, like in “Waiting for Godot” by Samuel Beckett (Who is Godot, 2010), with great anxiety.

### **The Silence of Kürt Representing Minorities**

Kürt’s silence is known to be deliberate; everyone aboard the ship knows that he has the ability to speak. He does not exhibit kindness or rudeness and his body language reveals no feelings or thoughts. His giant body simply exists in silence. His traits create ambiguity, darkness, curiosity, and obscurity. The silence of minorities is a prominent topic in cinema, but Kürt’s silence is unique. For example, his silence is very different from that of Chief Bromden from *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* (Forman, 1975). Bromden is also a minority in his society; he is a stupendous individual who pretends to be deaf and mute. People around him think he cannot hear and talk, giving him a sort of upper hand. Doctors openly talk about treatments or reveal secret plans around him. Silence serves as a tactic to obtain information without being seen as a threat. It is impossible, however, to be certain that he is eager to hear, participate, or bear witness to anything (Forman, 1975). Kürt’s silence results in suspicion and

discomfort in those around him because he reveals that he can speak but chooses not to; Bromden pretends to be deaf and mute, resulting in a feeling of safety for those around him. Clearly, one's "silence" as an action can have various effects on other people.

The body sizes of Kürt and Bromden draw attention to the perception of minorities in both societies. Their stature reveals how minorities are silenced, how massive this silence becomes, and what effect it has on the majority. On the other hand, their silence represents the acquiescence of minority voices and fear of the majority. Both men are isolated, but there are no clear indications that minorities are being undervalued or mistreated by society. Their isolation is directly related to silence, as they actively choose to not communicate. The impossibility of communication shows itself in both narratives.

Another significant difference is that, while Chief Bromden does not directly provide any information on his ethnicity (Forman, 1975), Kürt declares his Kurdishness immediately upon arrival. Announcing one's own ethnicity typically implies positive feelings and pride, but Kürt does not mean to convey these feelings about his Kurdishness. It was quite strange to be given this information on his ethnicity and nothing more, but having this information makes things more interesting. Generally, "Kurdishness was implicitly evoked (in film) by the use of Kurdish names, an Eastern accent, and the mention of Eastern cities as characters' hometowns, thus associating its characters' identities with a geographical space: East. The conflict, then, was not ethnic since Kurdish characters were constructed as Turks who live in the East and speak Turkish" (Koçer & Göztepe, 2017). Ece Deliormanlı's thesis summarizes the history of Kurds in cinema and signifies that the "liberalization process of Turkey had begun with (the) election in 1981; when Kurds (were) represented, the mainstream cinema avoided calling them Kurds" (Deliormanlı, 2014). In *Sarmaşık*, instead of revealing Kürt's identity with his accent, clothes, and manners, Kürt openly announces it. Foucault claims that "the silent treatment can be a technique of torture, producing a certain degree of pain, forming part of a ritual, creating a spectacle [link], seen by all almost as its triumph." (Foucault, 1995). As Foucault mentions, Kürt's announcement of his name as Kürt and his subsequent silence throughout the rest of the movie becomes torturous for the crew it could be seen as a triumph over them. Max Picard, in *World of Silence*, posits silence as a pre-historical state of plenitude when he says that "silence contains everything in itself. It is not waiting for anything, it is always wholly present in itself and it completely fills out the space in which it appears" (Picard, 1988). Once Kürt's silence became part of the ship, his unknown absence became

wholly present in the minds of the crew in the form of a ghost, a shadow, or just a menacing idea. His deliberate silence becomes an argument that creates heaviness, weightlessness, plenitude, and emptiness, depending on the crew member. Uncertainty surrounding the situation enhances the perception of Kürt as a giant, unknown source of trouble.

### **The Value of Minorities When They are Lost**

Toward the end of the movie, Kürt disappears without a trace. It is unclear if his sporadic appearances thereafter are real or simply hallucinations. Here, the invisible feelings of society reveal themselves as polarization. Kürt's silence refers to the exclusion of minority groups from society while the anxiety and fear among the crew represent society's fear of minorities. It is important to note that the crew was not worried about Kürt's life their worries directly stemmed from their fears, and his disappearance only enhanced those fears. They did not weep for his disappearance or death they only feared what it meant for them.

Finally, everyone except Kürt speaks aboard the ship. Kürt's story of silence represents the suppression, assimilation, and exclusion of the Kurdish people in Turkey. His unspeakable language and ethnic suppression are likely full of trauma, as is the case with many minorities. From the perspective of the majority perspective, these minorities are simply unknown troubles that are only worth considering insofar as their interests are at risk.

### **Conclusion**

The Kurdish people in Turkey have experienced a turbulent past involving assimilation, discrimination, and cultural struggles over identity, mostly due to state policies (Yavuz, 2001). Although they have not endured severe social discrimination by the Turkish people, they have not been able to freely reveal their Kurdish identity without fear of discrimination or prejudice against them. They have always been represented in Turkish media as ignorant with a heavy, funny accent (Bulut, 1992; Evrensel, 2008). *Sarmaşık* by Tolga Karaçelik is one of the best displays of the status of Kurds and their feelings toward Turkish society as well as Turkish perceptions of Kurds. (Karaçelik, 2015; Tanrıvermiş, 2016). The silence of "Kürt" excellently represents the status of the Kurdish minority in Turkey from the perspective of both sides. While silence is utilized internationally as an artistic tool (Güçlü, 2010; Picard,

1988; The University of Chicago, 2008), Kürt's silence differs from most in that it is deliberate, but not in protest; he is silent as well as helpful and compliant. The final message of the movie is also unique: minorities are essential parts of societies despite appearances; ignoring them or getting rid of them will not make you more comfortable it will cost you more. The modern era needs more films depicting the idea that, in civilized societies, people should feel less like members of a minority or majority and more like members of a just and kind society.

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