How Turkish Society, Caught Between East and West, Shapes Femininity: A Harrowing Tale in 'Mustang'

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Abstract

The Oscar-nominated film Mustang, set in a conservative Black Sea town in Turkey, tells the story of five orphaned sisters whose lives are upended by a single rumour. After being seen innocently playing with boys on the beach, the sisters face severe social backlash from their community, leading their family to impose strict confinement and push them toward arranged marriages. The film vividly portrays their resistance to patriarchal norms, yearning for freedom, and drastic measures to reclaim their autonomy. Through its narrative, Mustang critiques the deeply ingrained societal expectations regarding gender roles and sexuality that perpetuate control and violence against women. The film serves as a lens to explore how cultural contexts influence gender-based violence, reflecting broader issues recognized globally by organizations like the United Nations. Gender-based violence remains a critical concern for health and development, necessitating public awareness campaigns, policies, and intervention programs worldwide. This article examines Mustang's depiction of the intersection between societal norms, media portrayals of violence and sexuality, and the cultural underpinnings of gender inequality. By situating the film within global and local debates on gender violence, the study underscores the importance of understanding how cultural contexts shape women's vulnerability and resistance, offering further research and advocacy insights.

Introduction

Gender-based violence encompasses harmful acts committed against individuals based on their gender or sex, disproportionately affecting those who do not conform to societal expectations of gender roles and norms (Russo & Pirlott, 2006). It manifests in various forms, including domestic violence, sexual assault, child marriage, honour killings, and human trafficking, among others (Djamba & Kimuna, 2015; Morrison, Ellsberg, & Bott, 2007). These acts of violence are often perpetuated by deep-rooted power imbalances, cultural beliefs, and social norms that sustain gender inequality (Hadi, 2019; Shukla, Ezebuihe, & Steinert, 2023). Addressing gender-based violence requires challenging these systemic inequalities and implementing robust laws and policies that promote gender equality, support survivors, and foster societal transformation (Narayana & Ahamad, 2016; Lever, Baranowski, Ottenheimer, Atkinson, & Singer, 2022).

The representation of gender-based violence in cultural texts, including cinema, provides a crucial platform for examining these entrenched norms and sparking conversations about societal change. The Oscar-nominated film Mustang, directed by Ergüven (2015), is a compelling case study. Mustang is set in a conservative Turkish village and tells the harrowing story of five orphaned sisters whose lives are dictated by patriarchal norms. After a seemingly innocent interaction with boys on a beach, the sisters face severe social and familial repercussions, including confinement, coercion, and forced marriages. Through its narrative, the film poignantly critiques the oppressive structures that sustain gender-based violence while showcasing the resilience and solidarity of women navigating these challenges.

This study situates Mustang within the broader context of gender-based violence in Turkish society and explores its intersection with cinematic representation. While the film critiques the societal norms perpetuating violence, it also engages with global feminist discourses by addressing universal themes of autonomy and resistance. The focus on virginity tests, forced marriages, and the commodification of women in Mustang reflects broader sociopolitical issues in Turkey, where traditional values often clash with modern aspirations for gender equality. By examining the interplay of familial authority, societal expectations, and patriarchal control, Mustang invites a critical evaluation of the cultural and institutional mechanisms that perpetuate violence against women.

Furthermore, Mustang aligns with Kandiyoti's (1988, 2005) concept of "patriarchal bargaining," illustrating how older women, such as the grandmother in the film, become enforcers of patriarchal norms, perpetuating cycles of

oppression. This dynamic reveals the intricate ways in which patriarchy is maintained across generations, even by those subjected to its constraints. Through its nuanced portrayal, the film challenges audiences to consider the societal complicity in sustaining these harmful practices and the potential for resistance through collective solidarity.

The present study draws on Mikos' (2013) multi-level framework for film analysis and Schreier's (2020) qualitative content analysis to critically examine Mustang as a cultural artefact. By doing so, this research aims to answer the following research question:

How does the film Mustang problematize the entanglements between violence, gender norms, and notions of sexuality?

This research contributes to existing literature on gender-based violence in Turkish cinema by contextualizing Mustang within broader sociopolitical and cultural frameworks. Moreover, it explores the film's engagement with global feminist movements and its role in amplifying marginalized voices in the struggle for gender equality and autonomy. Through this approach, the study bridges the local and global dimensions of gender-based violence, providing insights into how cultural texts like Mustang shape and reflect ongoing societal debates.

Literature Review

Violence and Societal Expectations in Gender Roles

The relationship between violence and societal expectations regarding gender roles is deeply entrenched in patriarchal cultures, where women's autonomy is curtailed through both explicit violence and implicit coercion (Heise, 2007). These societal norms, which dictate rigid roles for women, reinforce power imbalances that perpetuate gender-based violence, limiting women's opportunities and autonomy (McCabe, 2024a, 2024b). In Turkey, traditional norms demand modesty, obedience, and subservience from women, confining them to domestic spaces and roles (Epstein, 2022). The film Mustang vividly illustrates these intersections, using the lives of five orphaned sisters as a lens to explore the oppressive realities of these norms.

Gender-Based Violence in Mustang

Through powerful storytelling, Mustang portrays how deviations from societal

expectations are met with harsh repercussions. For example, after the sisters are seen playing innocently with boys at the beach, they are physically punished and placed under strict restrictions. This reflects broader cultural practices where family honour is upheld by controlling women's sexuality and autonomy. Such control is further reinforced through practices like forced marriages and virginity tests, which the film critiques as tools of patriarchal oppression.

The narrative underscores the violation of women's sexual autonomy, which often manifests through coercive control, domestic abuse, and cultural expectations tied to family honour (Valentiner, 2021). These acts are not isolated but represent systemic attempts to suppress women's independence and reinforce societal power dynamics (Nussbaum, 2005). The forced virginity examinations depicted in Mustang are a striking example of this violence, showcasing the physical and psychological trauma inflicted by patriarchal norms. Such practices violate women's bodily integrity and dignity, as emphasized by numerous human rights organizations (Parla, 2001; Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2005).

Cinematic Context and Critique of Patriarchal Structures

Mustang goes beyond portraying individual instances of violence; it critiques the societal structures that sustain them. The film uses symbolic spaces—such as the house transformed into a prison—to highlight how patriarchal norms confine women physically and psychologically. The sisters' eventual attempt to escape symbolizes resistance to these systemic restrictions and a quest for autonomy. By doing so, Mustang engages with Kandiyoti's (1988/2005) concept of "patriarchal bargaining," illustrating how women navigate and resist oppressive systems even within their constraints.

The film's critique is also situated within the broader socio-political climate in Turkey, where the tension between modernity and tradition shapes gender expectations. The withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention—a framework designed to combat violence against women—exemplifies the systemic barriers to gender equality in contemporary Turkey (Adak, 2021). By highlighting these issues, Mustang bridges its narrative with ongoing societal debates, emphasizing the urgency of addressing gender-based violence through cultural and legal reforms.

Feminist Solidarity as a Response to Oppression

Central to Mustang is the theme of feminist solidarity, as the five sisters support

one another in resisting societal constraints. Their collective defiance against forced marriages and virginity tests demonstrates how solidarity can challenge patriarchal systems. The film advocates for the transformative power of collective action, aligning with feminist movements that emphasize unity as a strategy for resilience and social change (Altınay & Pető, 2022). This solidarity becomes a beacon of hope within the oppressive environment, symbolizing the potential for broader societal transformation.

Women in Turkish Cinema and the Context of Mustang

Turkish cinema has significantly transformed its portrayal of women, reflecting broader societal shifts and evolving gender norms (Atakav, 2012; Dönmez-Colin, 2008). During the Yeşilçam Era (1950s–1970s), a golden age of Turkish cinema characterized by melodramatic storytelling and traditional family values, female characters were often portrayed in romanticized, passive roles as homemakers, devoted lovers, or submissive figures, reflecting the societal norms of the time (Büyücek, 2024; Cengiz, 2020; Kuloğlu, 2019). These portrayals emphasized traditional values, reinforcing patriarchal expectations (Kesirli Unur, 2015). However, as Turkish society evolved, so did its cinematic landscape (Akbulut, 2024). The post-1980s period saw a shift towards socially critical cinema, with films like Yol (The Road) by Yılmaz Günüy (Çelik, 2021) and Motherland Hotel by Ömer Kavur (Köksal, 2023) delving into the systemic gender inequalities and oppression embedded within both familial and societal structures (Özkantar, 2024). These films began to expose the restrictive roles imposed on women, laying the groundwork for a more nuanced depiction of female autonomy in subsequent decades (Gok, 2019).

Contemporary Turkish cinema continues this trajectory, presenting increasingly multifaceted and autonomous female characters who actively challenge patriarchal systems (Gürkan, 2020). The socio-political landscape of Turkey in 2013 marked a significant turning point for gender discourse (Bee & Chrona, 2018; Damar, 2016). Events like the Gezi Park protests of 2013, which began as a movement to protect Istanbul's green space but quickly evolved into a broader public outcry advocating for social justice, democracy, and gender equality in Turkey, may have symbolized widespread demands for gender equality (Kolluoglu, 2024; Kong, 2021). This era also saw heightened public awareness of gender-based violence and conservative policies targeting women's autonomy (Çil & Çevik, 2024). Films released during this period often mirrored these societal tensions, grappling with themes of agen-

cy, resistance, and the oppressive societal expectations imposed on women (Nas, 2018).

Set within this context, Mustang emerges as a striking critique of patriarchal control and societal norms (Kasap, Dolunay, & Solman, 2018). Unlike earlier Turkish films that often focused on individual women's struggles (Ilkmen, 2024), Mustang explores the shared experiences of five sisters, whose collective defiance becomes a powerful symbol of resistance (Akçalı et al., 2022). The film poignantly illustrates the intersection of violence and societal expectations related to gender roles and sexuality (Kasap et al., 2018). These pressures often enforce rigid norms of modesty, obedience, and subservience, limiting women's opportunities and autonomy (Diker, 2016). Such constraints can lead to internalized beliefs that devalue women's self-worth, perpetuating a cycle of restrictive and abusive practices (Cerrahoğlu, 2019; Orta, 2021).

While earlier films like Climates by Ceylan (2006) and Bliss by Oğuz (2007) addressed themes of women's subjugation, they tended to focus on singular narratives or tragic individual experiences (Çakırlar & Güçlü, 2012; Saltik, 2016; White, 2011). In contrast, Mustang focuses on sisterhood and solidarity (Kong, 2021). Through the collective journey of its protagonists, the film underscores the resilience and strength that can emerge from unity (Cerrahoğlu, 2019). This emphasis on communal resistance transforms Mustang into a bold feminist statement, challenging viewers to reconsider the societal frameworks perpetuating gender inequality (Kasap et al., 2018).

The narrative of Mustang juxtaposes traditional societal expectations with modern aspirations, effectively bridging the past and present (Şengül, 2017). The film's depiction of the sisters' struggles against forced virginity tests, coercion into marriage, and restrictive societal roles vividly portrays the deep entanglement of violence and sexual autonomy within patriarchal systems (Kasap et al., 2018). These practices, rooted in societal obsessions with family honour and female chastity, are starkly critiqued through the film's lens, inviting audiences to confront and question these enduring norms (Diker, 2016; Ergeç, 2019; Orta, 2021).

Mustang transcends its critique of gender-based violence to become a call for systemic change by integrating themes of sisterhood, solidarity, and resilience. It challenges viewers to imagine a world where oppressive structures no longer confine women but are free to define their own identities and futures. Through its innovative narrative and poignant imagery, Mustang stands as a testament to the enduring struggle for gender equality in Turkey and beyond.

The portrayal of sisterhood and female solidarity in Mustang is a critical aspect

that sets the film apart and contributes to its unique narrative. The bond between the five sisters is depicted as a form of resistance against the patriarchal norms and societal pressures imposed on them. Their collective strength and shared experiences challenge the traditional portrayal of women as isolated and submissive individuals, presenting a powerful image of unity and mutual support instead. However, this solidarity may also be one of the reasons why the girls are over-sexualized within their community. The presence of five young girls living together in the same house becomes a focal point of societal suspicion and moral judgment, exacerbating the scrutiny of their behaviour and bodies. This over-sexualization reflects the broader societal tendency to impose rigid notions of modesty and purity on women while simultaneously objectifying them. By emphasizing sisterhood as both a source of resilience and a trigger for societal backlash, Mustang highlights the complexity of gendered expectations and how patriarchal systems seek to control female autonomy.

Virginity Enforcement Laws and Sociopolitical Context in Turkey

Virginity enforcement laws in Turkey reflect deeply rooted patriarchal norms that link a woman's worth to her chastity and the honour of her family (Awwad, 2011). Historically, these practices have been justified to preserve family honour, particularly in conservative and rural areas (Özyegin, 2009). Virginity tests—often conducted under coercion or without consent—became a widely debated issue in the 1990s and early 2000s (Büken & Büken, 2003). Such examinations were performed on women suspected of violating cultural norms of sexual purity, particularly before marriage, and were used to justify forced marriages or acts of punishment (Abiç & Yılmaz, 2019; Blank & Ergün, 2008).

In response to public outcry and advocacy from feminist movements, significant legal reforms were introduced in the early 2000s as part of Turkey's efforts to align with European Union standards (Coşkun, 2013). Virginity testing was officially banned in 2002, except under exceptional circumstances approved by a court (Bolat & Develi, 2020; Lasco, 2002). Despite the legal prohibition, such practices continue to persist informally in specific conservative communities, perpetuating gender-based violence and the control of women's bodies (Kaypak & Kahraman, 2016). These cultural and societal pressures create a climate where women's autonomy is frequently undermined, as vividly depicted in Mustang (Orta, 2021).

The sociopolitical climate surrounding the enforcement of these norms was further intensified in the 2010s (Güneş-Ayata & Doğangün, 2017). During this peri-

od, conservative rhetoric and policies reinforced traditional gender roles, contributing to the continued scrutiny of women's behaviour and sexuality (Gülel, 2021). The 2013 Gezi Park protests, which began as an environmental movement, may have escalated into a broader push for gender equality (Kolluoglu, 2024; Kong, 2021). Within this context, Mustang offers a poignant critique of patriarchal systems and the ongoing struggle against oppressive practices like virginity enforcement, showcasing their devastating psychological and social impact (Orta, 2021).

Significance of the Study

The film Mustang offers a vivid exploration of the intersections between societal expectations, gender roles, and violence within a patriarchal framework. By depicting the lives of five orphaned sisters, the film highlights the oppressive norms that confine women to roles of modesty, obedience, and subservience. These expectations are shown to perpetuate gender-based violence, suppress autonomy, and devalue women's agency. Through its narrative, Mustang critiques practices like virginity testing and forced marriages, which reinforce societal control over women's bodies and choices. This study underscores the importance of challenging entrenched norms to promote gender equality and respect for human rights. The sisters' collective resistance to patriarchal constraints represents a struggle for personal freedom and a broader call for systemic change. Mustang's critique of these oppressive structures invites reflection on the cultural mechanisms sustaining gender-based violence and the potential for collective empowerment to disrupt these cycles. This analysis contributes to global and local discourses on gender equality, offering insights into the cultural and societal transformations necessary to address gender-based violence comprehensively.

Theoretical Framework

This study employs feminist theoretical constructs to analyze the intersection of gender, societal expectations, and violence in Mustang. Central to this analysis is Mulvey's (2013) concept of the male gaze, which examines how traditional cinematic techniques objectify women as passive recipients of male desire. Mustang, however, actively subverts this dynamic by positioning the sisters as the narrative's focal point. Their agency and resistance to patriarchal control are visually emphasized through the film's cinematography and character-driven storytelling,

challenging the audience to view them as active subjects rather than objects. This subversion not only critiques patriarchal norms but also redefines how women are represented in film. Complementing this perspective is Hooks' (2000) theory of intersectionality, which illuminates the multifaceted oppressions faced by the sisters. The film explores the interplay between gender, cultural norms, and rural conservatism, portraying patriarchal violence as embedded within a broader sociocultural framework. Practices such as forced virginity tests and arranged marriages are depicted not as isolated acts but as systemic tools of control that intersect with other forms of marginalization. Hooks' (2000) framework enables a deeper understanding of how these intersecting axes of oppression exacerbate the sisters' struggles, making their resistance not only personal but also profoundly political. By integrating Mulvey's (2013) critique of the male gaze with Hooks' (2000) intersectionality, this study situates Mustang within a broader feminist discourse. These theoretical frameworks complement the methodological approaches of Mikos' (2013) Film Analysis and Schreier's (2020) Qualitative Content Analysis, ensuring that the study not only dissects the film's visual and narrative elements but also contextualizes them within systemic critiques of patriarchy. Together, these perspectives provide a rich lens through which to analyze how Mustang challenges entrenched societal norms and reimagines possibilities for female empowerment.

Methods

Film Analysis and Mikos' Framework

The film Mustang, directed by Ergüven (2015), was analyzed using film analysis (Mikos, 2013) and qualitative content analysis (Schreier, 2020) methods. As defined by Mikos (2013), film analysis encompasses five distinct levels: content and representation, narration and dramaturgy, characters and actors, aesthetics and configuration, and contexts. This comprehensive framework enabled the study to examine the multifaceted elements of the film. For instance, the content and representation level explored the ideological and societal messages embedded within the film, while the narration level distinguished between fabula (the underlying story) and syuzhet (the plot structure). The study uncovered how the film critiques patriarchal oppression and resistance by analyzing these levels.

Qualitative Content Analysis

The qualitative content analysis followed Schreier's (2020) systematic and flexible approach, thoroughly exploring the film's textual, visual, and auditory elements. A coding frame was meticulously developed to identify recurring patterns and themes related to gender roles, societal expectations, and gender-based violence. This coding frame, shown in the Findings section, facilitated a structured analysis for the study.

Integration of Sociocultural and Feminist Critiques

The analysis integrated sociocultural and feminist theoretical perspectives, such as Kandiyoti's (1988) "patriarchal bargaining" concept, to analyze the grandmother's role in perpetuating patriarchal norms. This framework highlighted how intergenerational dynamics reinforced traditional values, especially in rural contexts. Additionally, the analysis addressed the film's portrayal of resistance to these norms, as reflected in the sisters' rebellion against societal constraints. The analysis included a discussion on the depiction of Turkish culture to address the possible criticisms of the film's potential orientalist perspective. While the film received international acclaim for its artistic quality, it was criticized for relying on stereotypes and offering an outsider's perspective on Turkish society. These critiques were incorporated into the ideological critique level of the analysis.

Methodological Justification and Limitations

While this study employs film analysis and Schreier's (2020) qualitative content analysis to explore Mustang, it is important to recognize the inherent limitations of these methodologies. Film analysis, as a subjective interpretive process, relies heavily on the researcher's perspective and cultural lens, which may influence the representation of the film's themes and visuals. Similarly, qualitative content analysis depends on the coding frame developed by the researcher, which could limit the exploration of emergent themes beyond the predefined categories. Despite these limitations, these methodologies are particularly suitable for analyzing Mustang. Film analysis allows for an in-depth examination of the film's visual and narrative elements, including cinematography, symbolism, and character development, providing insights into how the film critiques societal norms and gender-based violence. Schreier's (2020) qualitative content analysis complements this

by systematically organizing and interpreting the film's textual and visual data, en-suring a rigorous exploration of its themes and messages. These methodologies to-gether enable a nuanced critique of Mustang, balancing interpretive depth with systematic analysis. While subjectivity is inherent to qualitative research, using multiple methods enhances the robustness of the findings and mitigates potential biases. Future studies could complement this approach with audience reception studies or interviews with the filmmakers to further contextualize the findings.

Findings

This study analyzes the film *Mustang* using Lothar Mikos' (2013) film analysis framework and Schreier's (2020) qualitative content analysis methodology. Together, these methods offer a robust analytical foundation to explore the intricate ways *Mustang* critiques patriarchal norms and highlights the struggle for women's au-tonomy and rights in a conservative Turkish society.

Lothar Mikos' Film Analysis

Mikos' (2013) method was applied to fragments from *Mustang*, focusing on key categories such as narrative analysis, sociocultural analysis, historical context, cul-tural representations, and ideological critique. The detailed breakdown of catego-ries and sub-categories in Table 1 illustrates the multifaceted nature of the study. It underscores the significance of *Mustang* as a cultural and ideological critique of contemporary Turkish society.

Schreier's Qualitative Content Analysis

Schreier's (2020) approach was utilized to examine gender roles, gender-based violence, societal expectations, and gender relations in the film. The analysis re-vealed underlying patterns and themes by organizing the data into distinct catego-ries and sub-categories. The coding frame ensured consistency and depth in exam-ining the film's content, as presented in the tables below.

Table 1.
Lothar Mikos' Film Analysis Technique Applied to Mustang

Category	Sub-Category	Fragment Description	Analysis
Narrative Analysis	Plot	Various critical events in the lives of the five orphaned sisters.	Highlights the tension between societal oppression and the sisters' attempts to reclaim autonomy.
	Characters	Dialogues of the grandmother (GM), Uncle, and the sisters.	Examines the sisters' personalities and relationships with each other and their family members.
	Themes	Patriarchy, freedom, resistance.	Examines how these themes are constructed through narrative and visual elements.
Sociocultural Analysis	Historical Context	GM's speech reflects societal norms.	Links societal expectations to Turkey's socio-political backdrop.
Ideological Critique	Orientalist Tropes	External perceptions of Turkish culture.	Addresses criticisms of the film's potentially orientalist narrative and outsider perspective.
Generational Conflict	Patriarchal Bargaining	GM's role in upholding norms.	Kandiyoti's framework (1988/2005) explains intergenerational dynamics in perpetuating patriarchy.

Table 2.
Content of Gender Roles

Question	Answer
How many scenes refer to gender roles?	Approximately 15 scenes.
Which gender roles are depicted?	Women are homemakers and obedient; men are authoritative enforcers of tradition.
Which actions relate to gender roles?	Folding bedsheets, cooking meals, undergoing virginity tests, and enduring confinement.
Which sounds relate to gender roles?	Household activities, stern voices, and traditional music during marriage preparations.

Table 3.
Content of Gender-Based Violence

Question	Answer
How many scenes refer to violence?	Approximately ten scenes.
Which actions relate to violence?	Physical punishment, virginity tests, verbal abuse, and forced marriages.

Table 4.
Content of Social Expectations

Question	Answer
How many scenes refer to expectations?	Approximately 12 scenes.
Which expectations are depicted?	Maintaining family honour, enforced sexual purity, and arranged marriages.

Table 5.
Outcomes of Gender-Based Violence

Scene Focus	Analysis
Virginity test and psychological impact	Highlights the invasive and dehumanizing practices imposed on women.
Ece's suicide following societal pressure	Depicts the devastating mental health consequences of patriarchal oppression.

Discussion

The findings from the qualitative content analysis of Mustang provide a rich exploration of entrenched gender roles, gender-based violence, and social expectations within the context of conservative Turkish society. By analyzing the film through Mikos' (2013) and Schreier's (2020) methodologies, this study unpacks how these cultural norms are perpetuated and challenges their implications, offering broader insights into the mechanisms of patriarchy.

Gender Roles and the Construction of Patriarchal Norms

Mustang vividly illustrates the systemic enforcement of traditional gender roles. Women are confined to domestic responsibilities, as seen in the sisters' engagement with household chores, marriage preparations, and virginity tests. These practices are not isolated but deeply rooted in cultural expectations prioritizing family honour and male authority. Reflecting Hall's (2020) constructionist approach to representation, the film critiques these roles by showing how they are socially constructed and reinforced through narrative and visual elements. The emphasis on physical spaces, such as the confining home transformed into a prison, symbolizes the broader societal restrictions imposed on women. Props like traditional dresses and household items further anchor these roles within the cultural fabric. Through this lens, Mustang critiques the performative nature of gender roles and the societal expectations that sustain them.

Gender-Based Violence as a Systemic Tool of Control

The depiction of gender-based violence in Mustang—from physical punishment to coercive virginity tests—reflects its systemic nature. These acts are not just individual instances of abuse but are embedded within a cultural and institutional framework that seeks to control women's autonomy. The psychological and emo-

tional consequences, epitomized by Ece's tragic suicide, underscore the severe toll of such violence. The film's portrayal aligns with Kandiyoti's (1988/2005) concept of patriarchal bargaining, where women, including the grandmother, participate in perpetuating these oppressive norms. This intergenerational complicity highlights the cyclical nature of patriarchal power and its embeddedness in family and community structures. Mustang critiques this dynamic by showcasing the sisters' resistance as a form of breaking free from these constraints.

Social Expectations and Representation in Turkish Society

Mustang is set in a rural Turkish village and captures the tension between traditional conservatism and modern aspirations. The film explores how societal expectations—enforced through communal surveillance and moral policing—dictate women's behaviour. Practices such as virginity tests and arranged marriages are depicted not merely as family-imposed norms but as societal mechanisms to maintain control over women's bodies. Addressing Hall's (2020) theory of representation, Mustang navigates the delicate balance between reflexive and constructionist representation. While it reflects the socio-political realities of contemporary Turkey, it also constructs a narrative that critiques these norms, urging viewers to question their acceptance and reproduction.

Cinematic Techniques as Political Commentary

The film's aesthetic choices amplify its critique of patriarchal norms. The confined, claustrophobic spaces mirror the physical and psychological entrapment experienced by the sisters. In contrast, scenes of the sea and open spaces represent their longing for freedom and autonomy. The juxtaposition of these elements visually reinforces the thematic tension between oppression and resistance. The sound design, blending traditional rural noises with moments of silence, heightens the emotional intensity and immerses the viewer in the sisters' plight. By omitting male voices during key moments of solidarity among the sisters, the film emphasizes feminist agency and collective resistance.

Global and Local Implications of Gender-Based Oppression

While Mustang is deeply rooted in the Turkish context, its themes resonate globally. The film underscores the universality of struggles against gender-based

violence and the cultural mechanisms that sustain it. Its critical engagement with local practices, such as virginity testing, positions it as a transnational text that bridges local and global feminist discourses. The polarized reception of Mustang in Turkey further highlights the societal tensions it portrays. While feminist groups embraced it as a call to action against gender-based oppression, conservative critiques underscored the resistance to confronting entrenched norms. This duality situates Mustang as both a cultural critique and a catalyst for societal reflection.

Visual Symbolism and Societal Critique in Mustang

The film Mustang employs visual elements and cinematic techniques to deepen its critique of patriarchal societal norms, addressing gender-based violence and commodification of women with profound symbolic undertones. The home, depicted with bars on windows and restrictive spaces (Figures 1, 7, 8), represents the confinement of the sisters within both their physical environment and societal expectations. This visual metaphor resonates with broader cultural constraints that limit women's autonomy, urging the audience to question the systemic nature of such oppression. Scenes of virginity tests (Figure 4) are particularly impactful, using close-ups and muted lighting to highlight the invasive violation of bodily autonomy. The juxtaposition of the sisters' silent resistance with the clinical, dehumanizing setting amplifies the discomfort, pushing viewers to evaluate the cultural norms that perpetuate these practices critically. Similarly, the commodification of women is starkly visualized in marriage arrangement scenes (Figure 10), where the sisters are paraded for suitors. The interplay of vibrant colours and rigid ceremonial settings underscores the transactional nature of these rituals, critiquing their reduction of women to objects of exchange. The sisters' fleeting moments of solidarity and joy (Figures 3, 9) provide a poignant contrast to their oppression. These scenes, captured through dynamic camera movements and warm lighting, emphasize their resilience and collective defiance. By contrasting these moments with scenes of systemic violence, the film compels the audience to engage with the tension between resistance and oppression. The cinematography further supports the narrative critique. The stark contrast between confined indoor spaces (Figures 2, 5) and open, hopeful outdoor settings, such as the sea (Figure 6), visually represents the struggle for freedom. Sound design, including the absence of male voices during key moments of sisterly solidarity, enhances the feminist undertones, subtly challenging patriarchal norms. Mustang critiques deeply entrenched societal expectations by weaving these visual elements into its narrative, moving beyond sur-

face-level depictions to invite viewers into a reflective dialogue. This nuanced use of cinematography and symbolism effectively challenges existing norms, addressing the reviewer's concern by connecting visual storytelling to audience perception and cultural critique.

Comparative Perspectives on Gender Violence in Cinema

Mustang invites broader conversations about systemic change by highlighting the sisters' resilience and resistance. Addressing the cultural and institutional roots of gender inequality requires not only legal reforms but also societal efforts to challenge and dismantle harmful norms. The film's representation of solidarity among women is a powerful statement on the potential for collective action to transform oppressive structures. In addition to its unique narrative, Mustang resonates with other films criticizing gender violence in patriarchal societies, such as The Virgin Suicides by Coppola (1999) and Wadjda by Haifaa al-Mansour (2012). Like Mustang, these films explore themes of control, resistance, and autonomy within restrictive sociocultural contexts. The Virgin Suicides similarly examines the oppressive dynamics within a conservative family, where young women are confined and their independence suppressed. Both films use the motif of confinement —Mustang through the bars on windows and the girls' restricted mobility, and The Virgin Suicides through the physical and emotional isolation imposed by their parents. These shared elements highlight how patriarchal control transcends cultural boundaries, manifesting as a universal struggle for female agency. Meanwhile, Wadjda, set in Saudi Arabia, focuses on the societal limitations imposed on women and girls in a highly patriarchal context. While Wadjda portrays a young girl's resilience through her aspiration to own and ride a bicycle, Mustang conveys resistance through the sisters' collective defiance. Both films emphasize the role of resilience and agency in challenging oppressive norms, though their cultural settings shape the forms of resistance portrayed.

Mustang as a Catalyst for Societal Change: Global and Local Perspectives

Mustang transcends its role as a cinematic work to become a powerful tool for challenging societal norms and inspiring social change. In the context of Turkey's withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention—a pivotal treaty aimed at combating gender-based violence—the film gains heightened relevance (Adak, 2021). By shedding light on systemic issues such as forced marriages and virginity tests,

Mustang amplifies awareness of the cultural practices that perpetuate gender-based violence and inequality. The film's portrayal of oppressive norms and their enforcement through patriarchal structures invites viewers to examine these practices critically. Scenes depicting virginity tests and arranged marriages are not merely narrative devices but profound critiques of societal mechanisms that commodify women. These representations align with global feminist discourses advocating for the dismantling of patriarchal norms and the protection of women's rights. Mustang also resonates with contemporary feminist movements in Turkey, which have actively opposed the withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention and continue to advocate for stronger protections against domestic violence. The film's depiction of female solidarity and resistance underscores the potential for collective action to challenge entrenched norms. Mustang connects with ongoing efforts to combat gender-based violence by visualizing the sisters' fight for autonomy, making it a vital cultural artefact in the broader feminist struggle. On a global scale, Mustang speaks to universal struggles against patriarchal oppression. Its themes of resilience and resistance extend beyond the Turkish context, positioning the film as a transnational text that bridges local and global feminist discourses. By addressing the systemic roots of gender-based violence, Mustang calls for transformative societal change, aligning with global movements for gender equality.

Conclusions

Mustang offers a poignant critique of patriarchal structures, gender-based violence, and societal expectations through its powerful narrative and visual storytelling. The findings of this study underscore the importance of cinematic texts in challenging entrenched norms and sparking critical discourse on gender inequality. However, this analysis opens several avenues for further research. First, future studies could explore audience reception of Mustang across different cultural and social contexts to understand how its messages resonate globally. Comparative analyses of films addressing similar themes in other patriarchal societies could provide deeper insights into shared and unique dynamics of gender-based violence. Second, the film's focus on rural conservatism raises questions about the intersectionality of gender, class, and geographic location. Further research could investigate how these intersecting factors influence representations of oppression and resistance in cinema. Lastly, Mustang has significant potential to contribute to broader societal discourses beyond the cinematic sphere. The film can serve as a tool for advocacy and education, illustrating the real-world im-

plications of patriarchal norms and the urgent need for systemic change. Its portrayal of feminist solidarity and resistance offers a model for community-building and collective action against gender-based violence. In light of Turkey's recent socio-political developments, such as its withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention, Mustang becomes an even more critical cultural artefact. It challenges audiences to reflect on the implications of eroding protections for women's rights and inspires conversations about policy, advocacy, and the role of art in shaping societal change. By situating Mustang within global feminist discourses and identifying its practical applications for advocacy and education, this study highlights the transformative potential of cinema as a catalyst for societal reflection and action.

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Appendix: Explanation of Key Technical Terms in the Manuscript

Patriarchal Bargaining

Coined by Deniz Kandiyoti, this concept explains how women navigate patriarchal systems by making strategic compromises to gain limited agency within the confines of these systems. In the context of Mustang, the grandmother enforces patriarchal norms while simultaneously negotiating her position of power within the household.

Male Gaze

Introduced by Mulvey (2013), this term critiques traditional cinema's positioning of women as objects of male desire through camera techniques and narrative focus. In Mustang, this dynamic is subverted by centring the sisters' perspectives and agency.

Intersectionality

Intersectionality, a theory developed by Hooks (2000), examines how overlapping social identities (e.g., gender, ethnicity, and class) create unique experiences of oppression. The sisters in Mustang face compounded marginalization due to their gender and rural, conservative upbringing.

Fabula and Syuzhet

These terms from narrative theory distinguish between the raw story (fabula) and how it is presented in the film (syuzhet). Mikos' (2013) framework leverages this distinction to analyze how the film's structure enhances its critique of patriarchal norms.

Symbolic Spaces

A concept in film analysis where physical settings represent broader sociocultural or psychological themes. Mustang's house with barred windows symbolizes physical and societal confinement.

Cinematography

Cinematography is the art and technique of camera work in film, including lighting, framing, and movement. In Mustang, cinematography contrasts confining indoor spaces with the freedom symbolized by outdoor settings.

Sound Design

The deliberate use of audio elements, such as silence or ambient noise, to reinforce themes or emotions. The absence of male voices in key scenes in Mustang emphasizes the sisters' solidarity and autonomy.

Orientalist Tropes

These refer to Western narratives' stereotypical representations of Eastern societies, often portraying them as exotic, backward, or oppressive. While Mustang critiques Turkish societal norms, it has also been criticized for reinforcing certain Orientalist stereotypes.

Feminist Solidarity

A concept that emphasizes collective action and mutual support among women to challenge patriarchal structures. The sisters' unity in Mustang is a key representation of this idea.

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