

## The Inescapable Route to Realisation

With Turkey increasingly growing secular and at the same time reviving its glorious past, creative activity received a rare impetus in the land. A healthy dose of western influence imbued Turkey with an impasto of variegated elements, offering new faces to the outside world. In the literary field Orhan Pamuk represents such modern trend while in film-making Zeki Demirkubuz, Reha Erdem and Nuri Bilge Ceylan emerge as pioneers. Interestingly, both Pamuk and Ceylan view life as enmeshed with a douce dolefulness. In fact, melancholy is regarded as the nonpareil note nurtured by all the arts in Turkey. Against such complex background of typical combinations we have to evaluate Ceylan's impression on celluloid, "...everyone is in the better contact with the world, and being local is more difficult," he observes.

Discovering Nuri Bilge Ceylan in the context of the Turkish cinema is all the more surprising as he loves to tell yet does not believe in words, he shows refreshingly natural surrounding yet in real life is not that connected to nature, and he intends to make something completely different in each film yet again the new creation quite closely gets related to the previous one. This silence, this subterranean flow of sadness and a strange, sublime continuity mark Ceylan's speciality. This palmy pursuit is threaded with beads like poplar trees, stoic streets, animals, for example, a tortoise, a donkey, a cat, birds; cornfields, a grave-site and so on. And in most cases the characters seem to start afresh from where they stopped in the earlier film. Yet with every new piece of visual poesy he not only re-asserts his worth, but also grows more mature by portraying his theme from a different angle of view.



Torn between love and disillusionment, village and city life, and also between dreams and mournful moments of misery, his characters struggle for respite along with the maker himself: 'with cinema I was able to create a kind of peace in my soul. It was like therapy; you put all the dark, bad sides of yourself into the films, and so you get rid of them - or at least control them in a better way', says Ceylan. Born in Istanbul in 1959, Ceylan moved at the age of two to the western province of Canakkale, the inspiration for the first three films. Returning to Istanbul at 10, he studied electrical engineering there, did photography, travelled to London, worked as a waiter there, reading books and watching cinema everyday. He then went to Nepal to see the Himalayas and later joined military service, until Roman Planski's autobiography pushed him to film school, London, and then to save expenses, to continue the study in Turkey. A decade later he got the real chance to make his first film.

Geoff Andrew analyses '...but as with Kiarostami's beguiling blends of "reality" and "fiction", Ceylan's methods are essentially poetic. Both his narrative and his visual style might be termed "impressionistic", he favours ellipsis, discreet metaphor, repetition, rhyme and rhythmic flexibility. Andrew also compares Ceylan with Edward Yang regarding 'the experience of individuals ... affected by changes in the world', and then speaks of Keaton in relation to Ceylan's 'humour ... darkly abound, may be even tragic.' Ceylan himself feels indebted to Chekhov for using humour in order to make tragedy more convincing. He is also thankful to Dostoevsky, Tarkovsky and Ozu. Along with Kiarostami we also find Alireza Raieesian to resemble Ceylan as 'Iran and Turkey are quite similar in appearance', all of them have compassion for their characters who are simple, ordinary people and they treat nature with great importance. Ceylan thinks that 'The truth lies in what's hidden, in what's not told. Reality lies in the unspoken part of our lives ... So without words is better, and it allows the spectator to be more active.' And this reminds us of Jeon Soo-il from S. Korea whose silence on celluloid also serves similar purpose.

In his very first film *Koza* (Cocoon, 1995), a black and white short movie 20 minutes long, Ceylan appears to have laid bare all his traits and hinted at trends to be unfolded in his later productions. A single sentence from Ceylan holds its subject: '... a man and a woman who were living separately and were trying to live together again, but couldn't.' We also now and then see a boy with a sling - shot running through wood, climbing a tree or kicking a bee-box placed by the man. With a scanty dialogue, unconventional narrative and little characterisation we try to figure out the boy. "My intention was to show the differences between childhood and being old", explains Ceylan.





Koza presents a set of old still photographs at the outset portraying the couple in course of their marital life and settles on their ripe old age, parted and parched. Now a serene visual texture is woven bordering the '...themes of death, loss, wasted time and heartache', reveals Doborah Young, adding, '...a dead cat and a dead bird... grave hidden deep within the forest that provides the film's setting. But the death on display is not only literal, but also a kind of "living death". For example, not one word is spoken in the film - nor even between the couple... theirs being a relationship that is decomposing before our eyes. In the film's most striking and poignant scene, the old woman lies in bed silently crying whilst her husband stands across the room, gazing mindlessly out of the window - the couple are in one sense together but they also could not be further apart' ... 'the "cocoon" of the title becomes apparent - the old couple have retreated into their own shells - much like the tortoise.'

The prolonged remembrance of the couple, interspersed with wind, rain, fire and darkness as recorded with effective music in continuous frames of painting as it were, moving with a rare reticence. The leaves of poplar, a piece of cloth hanging on a pole, the old man's hair - all flutter in the air showing the fleeting moments, and a single feather flies off the body of the dead cat ! While old age broods beyond the windowpane dotted with raindrops, the boy seems to have learned to enjoy nature towards the end of the movie. The broken wooden door of the grave - site becomes a symbol revealing so many things. This short film abounds in such images extending the space and time of the theme drawn marvellously in a deceptively short duration.

The Small Town (Kasaba, 1997), also in black and white, contrives a tale spanning three generations as revealed through the experience of two inquisitive children who learn the seasons in a sylvan surrounding to reach the intricate world of the elders. The viewpoint of Asiye, the 11 year-old girl, offers a refreshing narrative in a primary school where Kamal Ataturk is paid homage amidst snowfall and in the classroom a young teacher finds interest only in staring outside the window while the students find scope to play with a flying feather in between studying social rules. Ceylan here secretly exposes his own attitude to conventional methods of education and shows that the points of learning actually lie in observing attractive visuals strewn all over - the whimsical flight of the feather, the man descending from a hill, the cat seeking entry into the class or the nonchalant dog roaming around the snow-clad valley. This is also his style of progression within which furtive irony is controlled deftly. Suddenly the teacher's sense of smell increases taking him to the extent of criticising Asiye's mother, but he neither warns the boy coming late, nor notices the placing of the wet gloves that makes a disturbing sound by letting drops of water falling on the heater.

Spring comes with the spirit of merry-go-round reaching mellow blue sky strewn with pieces of white clouds. The passing cars mar the placidity of the place. Asiye, while passing through the cornfields with her brother Ali, sees a stork atop a pole and warns him not to step over the grave. There Ali flutters his eyes mocking a mule, throws a berry to the mule, steps on a turtle to check its strength and overturns it. They see apprehensive cows in the field, trees getting dark, a stream flowing calmly, the rifle of a hunter and while handling her hair-band, she suddenly discovers smoke driven by a strong wind. They run through waving grass, cross the queer wooden gate to reach the family.



In the third part the entire family assembles in a summer night chatting and eating roast corn. 'Here the adult world takes over in a lengthy conversation that touches on war, death, hunger, starvation, work and reputation. Dialogue and camerawork stay about the family', observes Deborah Young. The elders complain about rising costs of altering a trouser, the barber's fee, excessive use of pesticide, while the tortoise still tries to get straight. Gradually a family feud develops on the theme of sacrifice for the family. While admitting the dead son's fault silently the Grandpa admonishes the living one, 'Do you think you are perfect'? And his philosophy comes clear, 'It is sufficient to know just what we need'.

In the last part at home the girl and the boy try to reconcile the diverse things they learn. In the symbolic darkness of night the conscious mingles with the sub-conscious effectively revealing their desire and fear. At dawn the cousin leaves the village saying he never wanted to stay there, thus contradicting his own view about his father.





Clouds of May (Mayis Sikintisi, 1999), set in the same town, traces the activity of a filmmaker (Muzaffer) who comes from Istanbul to make a film on his native place casting his own parents (in real life also it is so!). His father is obsessed with his orchard hemmed with a forest of poplars which the officials want to cut down for the purpose of increasing land for cultivation. Father's running across the town and asking everybody about the forest officials, emerges as an irony in the end when he discovers that his trees are marked for cutting while he was busy in acting in his son's film! Clouds of May is his worry as survey people come in this month. Similarly, Uncle Pire is ready to act in film, but gets obsessed with his dead wife.

Muzaffer's cousin (Saffet) is fed up with his life in a factory and he is exploited by Muzaffer in the making of the film, with the assurance to take him to Istanbul for 'any job'. With 'the same people we saw playing the grand-parents in The Small Town... and that we now see a recreation of the shooting of the night-picnic scene from that movie', everything becomes more interesting. Muzaffer's nephew, nine-year old Ali, has to carry an egg in his pocket for 40 days to make his aunt persuade his father to buy a musical watch. They play with a tortoise (again here!) Ali breaks the egg while carrying a bucket of tomatoes and steals another egg - a child is made to take an unfair way! The episode of Ali's waiting for his aunt, swinging his legs, much to the dislike of the uncle, and mistakenly returning with a photograph (he places it in the letter-box!), is at once serious and hilarious. Ali gets a musical lighter and yet contrives to get his much wanted watch. Saffet is pensive in the end losing hope of Istanbul. 'The boundary between 'clouds of May' and Muzaffer's film, the title and subject of which never disclosed, blurs without quite vanishing altogether', says A. D. Scott.

Distant (Uzak, 2002), appears to have something of a change in location, being shot in wintry Istanbul, explores the growing distance in the relationship between a disillusioned city photographer (Mahmut) and the country cousin (Yusuf) who stays with him in the hope of getting any naval job. Meeting with ex-wife makes Mahmut's life more insipid. He invents excuses to belittle Yusuf and is totally indifferent about Yusuf's problem back home. 'Save, then that the city sophisticate is now a commercial photographer rather than a filmmaker, the film might be seen as to some extent a sequel to Clouds in May - and, indeed, given that the restless cousin is in all instances played by Toprak, to have originated in The Small Town, too,' notices Geoff Andrew. Ceylan uses irony in this rather grim movie when, for example, Mahmut stops watching Tarkovsky's "The Stalker" and starts watching pornography, only to return quickly to Tarkovsky as Yusuf returns to tell something. Yusuf also amuses us with his following women wherever he finds them in the city. The use of different unusual colours for frames makes the movie a distinctive one.

The snow-clad roadside, disturbing sound of trains, the vacant lifeless park, the fish still struggling in water among dead ones - all set the mood of the film. The pleasant view of animals present in the earlier films is replaced by a filthy mouse which is smashed against the wall by Mahmut before dumping it in the garbage-bin. Against all these, Mahmut's effort to talk privately to his ex-wife, her lamenting for the parting and his standing in the airport unseen, evoke a healthy response. When Yusuf finally leaves, Mahmut gets out to sit on a bench overlooking rough waves under the overcast sky and smokes the cigarette that he refused earlier when offered by Yusuf. "His smoking again can mean may be again he is ready to change and perhaps has the potential to do so. Perhaps this is a sign of hope', comments Ceylan himself.



*Climates* (İklimler, 2006), 'is arguably Ceylan's most introspective film yet, with a chamber-drama intensity to match Ingmar Bergman', says J. Romney and adds, 'Not only does its High-Definition digital photography seem to expose its characters' emotions with forensic transparency..., but also it offers an extremely striking essay on landscapes and weather...notably, a shot of Isa standing on a bridge under looming clouds'. Here the director (Isa), together with his wife, (Bahar) acted as an unmarried couple who separate after a series of emotional complications on a holiday. Ceylan explains, '...I have painful memories from many relationships - they left a mark on me, and those marks made me make this movie'. Both the characters offer indicative complex reactions and leave us guessing continuously with some disorienting sound design. When Isa sits on the beach rehearsing his break-up points, Bahar is abruptly revealed to be sitting beside him, though she was in the ocean a split-second earlier. Bahar's nightmare about being buried alive, staged as though it's really happening, makes us view with suspicion her subsequent attempt to make Isa crash his moped while she is riding pillion. 'Climates is a quiet work on the surface, but the psychological turmoil is so acutely rendered that we may crave respite without realising it', says Ryan Gilbey. Considering all his films Ceylan touches a chord of universality in a quiet, understated way. He asks 'what are we doing with our lives and why, how does the past influence the present and the Small Town future, how may we reconcile our needs and ideals with the disappointments of reality, how can our relationships with family and friends survive when the world is changing so quickly', opines Geoff Andrew.

The girl and the boy remind us of Durga and Apu who also learn through nature and ordinary people around them. With Wordsworthian serenity all around, they grow sensitive to all the minor elements present in the surrounding, only to face the dismal aspects of adult life.

**Amit Mukhopadhyay**