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DECEIT, DESIRE, AND THE FILMS OF ZEKİ DEMİRKUBUZ

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This article analyses four films by Zeki Demirkubuz, *Kor* (Ember, 2016), *İtiraf* (Confession, 2001), *Masumiyet* (Innocence, 1997), and *Kader* (Destiny, 2006), which deal with the themes of unrequited love, jealousy, and betrayal. Analysis reveals the dynamics of desire in these four films. *Kor* and *İtiraf*, both of which depict the sad plight of jealous husbands who agonize over their wives' infidelity, illustrate Rene Girard's theory of triangular desire by introducing a third person in the genesis and perpetuation of the subject's desire. *Masumiyet* and *Kader*, on the other hand, are interpreted as modern takes on the theme of courtly love, in which the lover elevates the beloved to the status of sublime object. *Masumiyet* and *Kader* are analysed through the lens of Lacanian psychoanalysis, particularly in relation to Lacan's and Zizek's writings on the anamorphic gaze and masochistic contract present in courtly love. The article shows that all four films demystify the concept of romantic love, thereby demonstrating Lacan's contention that a spontaneous, unmediated and harmonious sexual relationship between a man and a woman is impossible.

Keywords: Zeki Demirkubuz, triangular desire, courtly love, anamorphosis, masochism.

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ZEKİ DEMİRKUBUZ FİLMLERİNDE ARZU VE İHANET

Abstract

Bu makale, Zeki Demirkubuz'un karşılıksız aşk, kıskançlık ve ihanet temalarını ele alan filmlerinden *Kor* (2016), *İtiraf*, (2001), *Masumiyet* (1997) ve *Kader* (2006) üzerine odaklanarak bu filmlerde işleyen arzu dinamiklerini aydınlatmayı amaçlamaktadır. Öncelikle karısının kendisini aldattığı şüphesiyle kıvranan erkeklerin dramlarını konu alan *Kor* ve *İtiraf* filmlerinin Rene Girard'ın üçgen arzu kuramına uygun düşecek şekilde, arzunun doğuşunda ve sürdürülmesinde üçüncü şahısların oynadığı aktif rolü ortaya serdiği gösterilecektir. *Masumiyet* ve *Kader*'de resmedilen ilişki, aşığın sevdiği kadını yüce bir nesne konumuna yükselttiği şövalye aşkının modern bir versiyonu olarak yorumlanacaktır. *Masumiyet* ve *Kader*, Lacancı psikanaliz ışığında, bilhassa Lacan'ın ve Zizek'in şövalye aşkında işleyen anamorfik bakış ve mazoşizm dinamiğine dair yazdıklarından yararlanmak suretiyle incelenecektir. Sonuç olarak bu makalenin amacı, yukarıda adı geçen filmlerin romantik aşk kavramının büyüsünü bozarak Lacan'ın kadınla erkek arasında kendiliğinden, dolayımsız ve dengeli bir cinsel ilişkinin mümkün olmadığına dair tezini kanıtladığını göstermektir.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Zeki Demirkubuz, üçgen arzu, şövalye aşkı, anamorfoz, mazoşizm.

Introduction

Moderation, i.e. the trait of avoiding excesses, so highly prized by ancient Greek philosophers like Aristotle and held up as the key to the good life, seems to be utterly lacking in the characters that populate Zeki Demirkubuz's cinematic universe: His characters either become the slaves of strong passions like love, jealousy, or envy, such, for instance, as Bekir in *Masumiyet* (*Innocence*, 1997) and *Kader* (*Destiny*, 2006), Harun in *İtiraf* (*Confession*, 2001), Seniha in *Kıskanmak* (*Envy*, 2009), or err in the other extreme, displaying utter indifference and apathy in the face of events that would normally be deemed as most unsettling, like Musa in *Yazgı* (*Fate*, 2001), or Ahmet in *Bulantı* (*Nausea*, 2015). In those films that deal with sexual relationships, the focus is exclusively on the (almost always male) protagonist rather than the relationship as such, which becomes a mere pretext for exploring the protagonist's inner dynamics. Indeed, from his second feature *Masumiyet* to his latest film *Kor* (*Ember*, 2016), Demirkubuz's oeuvre teems with tortured male characters who fail to extricate themselves from doomed love affairs that lead them to destruction. In film after film, Demirkubuz portrays the tragic plight of tormented lovers whose obsessive quest for love seems to promise nothing other than morbid jealousy, abject humiliation and impotent hatred. Unrequited love, deceit and betrayal are the key themes that run through Demirkubuz's films, where lovers always cheat on their partners and love is invariably tainted with doubt and jealousy. Nevertheless, as a general rule, Demirkubuz's characters prefer to wallow in the depths of jealousy and humiliation rather than give up on their love. The dark and claustrophobic mise-en-scenes that characterize Demirkubuz's distinct visual style serve to convey the mood of dejection and alienation that beset these tormented lovers.

"The psychical value of erotic needs is reduced as soon as their satisfaction becomes easy" wrote Sigmund Freud in an early essay on the causes of psychological impotence "an obstacle is required in order to heighten libido; and where natural resistances to satisfaction have not been sufficient, men have at all times erected conventional ones so as to be able to enjoy love" (2001, p. 187). Given that an object that can be easily possessed is valueless, it naturally follows that the greatest value is

ascribed to objects that remain unattainable due to some insurmountable obstacle. The greatest love stories of all time, such as "Tristan and Isolde," "Romeo and Juliet," "Leyla and Mecnun," "Kerem and Aslı," etc. would not have been great were it not for the insurmountable obstacles preventing the union of the star-crossed lovers. Demirkubuz's *Masumiyet* and *Kader*, which depict the plight of a doomed lover, Bekir, who dedicates his life to chasing after an impossible love, belong to the tradition of such great love stories, which invariably end in tragedy, thereby substantiating Jacques Lacan's famous dictum that desire can never be satisfied.[1] Yet, like the legendary lovers in great love stories, Bekir "tries paradoxically to satisfy his desire by rushing toward the obstacle, thus making his destiny one of misery and failure" (Girard, 1965, p. 179). The protagonists in *İtiraf* and *Kor*, on the other hand, are tormented husbands who fall prey to doubt and jealousy because they suspect, and with good reason, that their wives are betraying them. In fact, the sexual relationships portrayed in *İtiraf* and *Kor* fit the archetypal structure that the French cultural critic Rene Girard calls "triangular desire," which, as Girard demonstrates in his classic book *Deceit, Desire and the Novel,* is at work in the novels of great writers of world literature like Cervantes, Dostoevsky, Stendhal and Proust. A concept used by Girard to stress the triangular structure of seemingly dual relations, triangular desire refers to the active role played by a third party in the genesis and perpetuation of the subject's desire:

> In all the varieties of desire examined by us, we have encountered not only a subject and an object but a third presence as well: the rival. It is the rival who should be accorded the dominant role. [...] Rivalry does not arise because of the fortuitous convergence of two desires on a single object; rather, *the subject desires the object because the rival desires it.* In desiring an object, the rival alerts the subject to the desirability of the object (Girard, 1989, p. 145).

Girardian triangular desire, which assigns priority to the rival in the structure of desire rather than to the object as such, seems to echo Lacan's well-known formula that "man's desire is the desire of the Other" (Lacan, 1998, p. 235). Although Girard is inimical to psychoanalytic theory in general and takes care to distance his own theory from Freud's Oedipal triangle, he "has shown some partial sympathy towards the Lacanian

[1] Rejecting Freud's conceptualization of desire as a relation to an object, Lacan (1991b) argues instead that "desire is a relation of being to lack" – a lack that can never be overcome because it is constitutive of the subject (p. 223).

project" (Meloni, 2002). Indeed, the emphasis placed by Girard on the role of imitation, rivalry and conflict in the sexual relationship resonates with Lacan's assertion that "the human object is originally mediated through rivalry, through the exacerbation of the relation to the rival" (Lacan, 1991a, p. 176). Hence, Girard's theory, like Lacan's, reveals the impossibility of a spontaneous, unmediated sexual relationship between a man and a woman, epitomized in Lacan's contention that "there is no such thing as a sexual relationship" (Lacan, 1999, p. 12). The present article presents close readings of four films by the prominent *auteur* director Zeki Demirkubuz, namely *Kor*, *İtiraf*, *Masumiyet* and *Kader*, all of which provide penetrating insights into sexual relationship, or rather the lack thereof, by offering variations on the themes of unrequited love, jealousy, deceit and betrayal. It is argued that all four films demonstrate the impossibility of sexual relationship through the depiction of characters who cling to jealousy, self-deception and the myth of romantic love in order to create the semblance of sexual relationship. The present article asserts that while *Kor* and *İtiraf* probe into the dynamics at work in triangular relationships in a way that accords with Girard's writings on triangular desire, *Masumiyet* and *Kader* portray a modern-day tale of "courtly love" – the idealized, romantic love between a medieval knight and a Lady – that lends itself well to interpretation in terms of the psychoanalytic insights provided into courtly love by Jacques Lacan and Slavoj Zizek concerning the circular movement of desire, the role of the anamorphic gaze and the masochistic contract.

Jealous Husbands, Unfaithful Wives

Zeki Demirkubuz's latest film *Kor* portrays the events that unfold around a love triangle comprised of Emine, the working-class mother of an ailing child in need of medical treatment, Emine's husband Cemal who has gone to Romania in search of employment and Ziya, the wealthy owner of the textile mill where Emine and Cemal used to work before they got married. The opening sequence depicts a chance encounter between Emine and her former boss Ziya, who, unbeknownst to Emine, has harboured an infatuation with her for years. His passion rekindled by the encounter, Ziya pays a visit to Emine, who, it turns out, is in a dire predicament: She can barely get by in her husband's absence by doing needlework, let alone afford the expensive surgery her young son, Mete, urgently needs. What makes matters worse is that she hardly ever hears from Cemal, whose imprisonment in Romania for some obscure reason

deters him from maintaining contact with his wife. Deeply moved by Emine's desperate plight, Ziya readily proffers financial help, not only paying for Mete's surgery, but also securing Emine a job in a textile mill. Before long, Emine gets involved in an extramarital affair with Ziya, which, however, she presently decides to terminate due to her qualms about betraying her husband.

Thus matters stand when Cemal suddenly returns from Romania, at which point the narrative focus shifts from Emine to Cemal, who henceforth becomes the emotional center of the film. After discovering that it was none other than Ziya who paid the hospital bills for Mete's surgery, Cemal suspects his wife of having had a liaison with him, though for some reason he cannot bring himself to openly confront either Emine or Ziya about the matter. In time, Cemal becomes consumed with jealousy to the extent that he spends most of his time brooding in dejected silence in a way that alarms Emine, who senses Cemal's inner anguish and rightly suspects him of nursing a bitter grudge against Ziya. Much like Harun, the jealous husband in *İtiraf* who suspects his wife of infidelity, Cemal is a typical victim of triangular desire. According to Girard, desire is not spontaneous, but mimetic in character in that it neither stems from the inner feelings of the subject, nor from any intrinsic quality of the object, but rather from the influence of a third party that functions as a mediator of the subject's desire. As Girard (1965) puts it, a person

> will desire any object so long as he is convinced that it is already desired by another person whom he admires. [...] The mediation begets a second desire exactly the same as the mediator's. This means that one is always confronted with two *competing* desires. The mediator can no longer act his role of model without also acting, or appearing to act, the role of obstacle (p. 7).

Thus, it can be argued that Ziya, the unwelcome intruder who threatens to disrupt Cemal's relationship with Emine, also functions as a mediator since, from the outset, Cemal has been aware of Ziya's sexual interest in Emine, which was no doubt the reason why Cemal was attracted to Emine in the first place. So, the love triangle between *Kor*'s three main characters was already established prior to Cemal's marriage to Emine, while the two were still co-workers at the textile mill owned by Ziya. "Cemal believed I was in love with you, so he was madly jealous," Ziya tells Emine by way of explanation for Cemal's unaccountably quitting his job at Ziya's textile mill and forcing Emine to do the same in the wake of

their marriage. Evidently, the animosity Cemal bears Ziya dates back to the years preceding not only his marriage to Emine, but even his desire for her. In other words, it was Cemal who copied the desire of Ziya, in the same way as Yusuf in *Masumiyet* copies the desire of the older and more experienced Bekir, whom he looks up to as a mentor of sorts. Apparently, Yusuf finds Uğur desirable because Bekir deems her so; by the same token, it is Ziya's desire for Emine that engenders a similar desire in Cemal. Hence, Ziya plays the double role of loathed rival and emulated model at one and the same time.

Conventional wisdom has it that desire precedes jealousy, which is regarded merely as a byproduct of desire, if not a proof of its intensity. However, in *Kor*, this accepted order is reversed so that Cemal's jealousy precedes his desire, virtually becoming its *raison d'etre*, which, however, is a fact that Cemal would not confess to himself on any account. This accords with Girard's claim that, as a general rule, the subject vehemently denies the role of his rival in the genesis of his desire:

> [T]he subject reverses the logical and chronological order of desires in order to hide his imitation. He asserts that his own desire is prior to that of his rival; according to him, it is the mediator who is responsible for the rivalry (Girard, 1965, pp. 11-12).

So, like all victims of triangular desire, Cemal is unwilling to admit that his desire for Emine is not spontaneous, but actually mediated by his loathed rival. Instead, he chooses to live in denial, which is why he shies away from directly asking Emine whether or not she had an affair with Ziya in his absence. Neither does he dare confront Ziya; on the contrary, he takes special care to conceal his jealousy from his rival, betraying no sign of it in his speech or manner, which is always courteous, even deferential. Evidently, it is Cemal's sexual pride that deters him from probing into the matter – though not because he cannot face up to the fact that he has been betrayed by his wife, for he suspects as much already. In fact, Cemal refrains from delving into the dynamics of triangular desire lest he come face to face with the ugly truth that his desire is not his own but copied from another. Yet, the more Cemal strives to elude the truth, the more he falls prey to jealousy, which testifies to Girard's assertion that "[t]he inevitable consequences of desire copied from another desire are envy, jealousy, and impotent hatred" (1965, p. 41). Indeed, hatred and jealousy occupy center stage in *Kor*, which is not so much a film about Cemal's love for Emine as about his hatred for Ziya, which is

further augmented by the class rift between the two men. By depicting the extent to which Cemal's jealousy takes precedence over his desire, *Kor* demonstrates that Emine actually occupies a subordinate position in the triangular structure, which is far from surprising given that in triangular desire, the least important term is the object of desire, which owes its appeal to mediation rather than to any intrinsic merit. So, it naturally follows that in triangular desire, "love is strictly subordinated to jealousy, to the presence of the rival" (Girard, 1965, p. 23). Indeed, love, passion and intimacy are feelings that seem to be utterly lacking in Cemal and Emine's relationship since we hardly ever see them interact in any meaningful way. While Cemal pays little attention to Emine, his thoughts continuously turn on Ziya, with whom he seems to be obsessed, so much so that he furtively watches Ziya's every move with eyes ablaze with hatred. Thus, *Kor* bears witness to the fact that "the bond between rivals in an erotic triangle [is] even stronger, more heavily determinant of actions and choices, than anything in the bond between either of the lovers and the beloved" (Sedgwick, 1985, p. 21). Accordingly, the bond that links Cemal to Ziya is more powerful and intense than that which links him to Emine. As a matter of fact, jealousy appears to be the only bond that ties Cemal to Emine at all, and hence the sole means of sustaining his relationship with her. As Jacques Lacan (1991a) puts it,

> the subject's desire can only be confirmed in this relation through a competition, through an absolute rivalry with the other, in view of the object towards which it is directed. And each time we get close, in a given subject, to this primitive alienation, the most radical aggression arises - the desire for the disappearance of the other in so far as he supports the subject's desire (p. 170).

So, Cemal is caught in a double bind: He feels the most intense aggression towards Ziya, but at the same time relies on him to sustain his relationship with Emine since Cemal's desire for Emine can only be confirmed through competition and jealousy. That is why Cemal readily accepts Ziya's job offer notwithstanding the fact that working in close proximity to his loathed rival only fuels his aggression and hatred. Already filled with resentment because he is indebted to Ziya for paying for Mete's surgey, Cemal willingly increases his debt of gratitude and thus provokes further jealousy by agreeing to work for him. So, it can be argued that Cemal's is "a jealousy that has been wished for and that is provoked and surreptitiously encouraged" (De Rougemont, 1983, p. 286). In his classic

book *Love in the Western World*, where he examines the representation of love in literature and film, De Rougement (1983) claims it sometimes happens that "a man or woman wants the beloved to be unfaithful in order that he or she may once again go forth in pursuit and once again experience love for its own sake" (p. 286). Indeed, it can be asserted that Cemal, too, is complicit in his wife's betrayal, which is something that he surreptitiously encouraged not unlike Anselmo, the foolish husband in "The Curious Impertinent" episode in Cervantes's novel *Don Quixote*. Anselmo convinces his best friend to try to seduce his wife in order to test her virtue, but his plan eventually results in his wife and best friend falling in love. Like Anselmo, it is Cemal himself who paves the way for his wife's infidelity and brings upon himself his own demise by going off to Romania in the first place. Indeed, the circumstances under which Cemal travels to Romania are deliberately left unexplained in the film, as are the reasons for his imprisonment there, in such a way as to cast doubt on the veracity of his account of events. Indeed, at the beginning of the film, Ziya can't help wondering how a jealous man like Cemal could possibly go abroad for no apparent reason, leaving his wife and young child behind. In all likelihood, Cemal's trip to Romania was just a scenario devised by Cemal to put Emine's fidelity to test and see how Emine would conduct herself in his absence. What is more, later on in the film, Cemal drives Emine to the arms of his rival once again by gradually distancing himself from her to the extent that not only does he take to sleeping at the workplace to avoid going home at nights, but also refuses to answer Emine's calls. "Anselmo," Girard (1965) claims, is "driven by sexual pride, and it is this pride which plunges [him] into the most humiliating defeats" (p. 51). Similarly, it is Cemal's sexual pride that prompts him to test his wife's fidelity and thus paves the way for his humiliation.

It should be noted that *Kor* contains not just one, but actually two love triangles since Ziya, who is a married man with three children, is involved in a second love triangle comprised of Emine and his wife Zuhal, who appears in a single scene as a betrayed and broken woman. From the outset, Ziya declares his intention to divorce his wife and get married to Emine instead. However, it turns out that Ziya's desire for Emine is as much under the sway of the dynamics of triangular desire as Cemal's. In fact, there is a reciprocity in their relationship in that Ziya relies on Cemal's jealousy to sustain his desire for Emine as much as Cemal relies on his. Furthermore, Cemal's jealousy also serves to boost Ziya's ego by confirming his image as a man to be envied. That is why Ziya wants

Cemal to work under him, prompting Emine, who has forebodings about Cemal's working at Ziya's textile mill, to ask: "Why of all people have you offered the job to Cemal?"[2] Ziya has come to take Cemal's jealousy for granted so that he is all but dumbfounded when Cemal readily accedes to Emine's request for a divorce without making a scene. "This is not like Cemal at all," Ziya tells Emine incredulously, "I had expected him to try to kill you, no less." In the face of Cemal's feigned indifference, i.e. his apparent lack of jealousy, Emine suddenly loses all the appeal she had for Ziya. Consequently, just when all the obstacles are finally removed so that there is nothing to prevent Ziya's union with Emine, Ziya has a change of heart, deciding, at the last moment, not to get divorced from his wife after all. Nor does he carry out his decision to make a clean breast by confessing everything to Cemal. Furthermore, Ziya even tries to persuade Cemal to get back together with Emine, which shows that he wants to save both love triangles from the brink of collapse. It is highly likely that had Ziya not died in a car accident, the triangular relationship would have continued unaltered. Nonetheless, even Ziya's accidental death does not bring Cemal respite from doubt and jealousy since Emine's pregnancy ensures that, notwithstanding his death, Ziya will continue to haunt Cemal and Emine's relationship. The film ends with the image of Emine and Cemal lying side by side in the darkened bedroom after Emine switches off the lights, thereby implying that the truth will never come to light. Cemal will never dare broach the subject of Emine's infidelity, or inquire why she attempted suicide after Ziya's death, but continue to live in doubt wondering whether Emine's child is actually Ziya's or his own.

The dynamic of triangular desire is also at work in *Itiraf*, which centers on a well-to-do couple, Harun and Nilgün, who are involved in two successive love triangles, the second of which is forged as soon as the first one dissolves. In much the same way as *Kor*, *İtiraf* focuses on the sufferings of the betrayed husband, Harun, who is portrayed as a tortured man in the throes of jealousy, agonizing over the possibility that his wife is cheating on him. Harun is so riddled with doubt and anxiety that he abruptly terminates an important business trip because he cannot resist the urge to rush back home in the middle of the night to check up on his wife. His suspicions confirmed, Harun pleads with his wife to confess to the affair, albeit to no avail. In contrast to Cemal, who refrains from

[2] All the dialogues from Zeki Demirkubuz's films quoted in this article are my own translation.

asking Emine to tell the truth, Harun pesters his wife with questions, determined to wring a confession out of her. But, Harun's entreaties are rebuffed by Nilgün, who either preserves her silence or cuts him short, saying she wants to split up. What causes Harun the greatest agony is being left in the dark as to what exactly is going on behind his back. Nilgün has no right, he says, to treat him with such utter contempt and hurt his pride by not even bothering to answer his questions. After giving vent to his anguish, which, he claims, "is eating away at [his] soul and corrupting [his] inner being," he turns on Nilgün, crying, "I am neither your plaything nor your pimp," and attempts to strangle her to death. During the bitter quarrel, Harun oscillates between impotent anger and abject self-abasement, one minute threatening to kill Nilgün and the next falling on his knees and literally kissing her feet to beg forgiveness. The sound of the incessantly ringing phone that is heard in the background points to the presence of the mysterious third party who haunts their relationship though he never makes an appearance in the film. The quarrel ultimately comes to an end when Nilgün leaves Harun for her lover while he stands helplessly by, wallowing in shame and humiliation.

Halfway into the film, in the midst of the bitter quarrel, we finally learn the backstory behind Harun and Nilgün's relationship that still casts a dark shadow over their life. From Harun's words we gather that his relationship with Nilgün began when she was married to Harun's best friend Taylan, who committed suicide upon learning about the betrayal. So, it turns out that, prior to the current love triangle involving Harun, Nilgün and Nilgün's secret lover, there existed an original love triangle comprised of Taylan, Nilgün and Harun. This triangular structure is made glaringly obvious during the scene in which Harun visits Taylan's mother in a futile attempt to seek redemption by confessing to his crime. Before Harun makes his confession, the camera slowly tilts up and focuses on the photos of Taylan, Nilgün and Harun hanging side by side on the wall of Taylan's family home. In short, from the very beginning, Harun and Nilgün are trapped in a vicious circle of betrayal, which attests to Adam Phillips's claim that

> [c]oupledom is a sustained resistance to the intrusion of third parties. The couple needs to sustain the third parties in order to go on resisting them. [...] After all what would they do together if no-one else was there? How would they know what to do? Two's company but three's a couple (1996, p. 94).

Indeed, Harun and Nilgün have always been a couple consisting of three people, which is another way of saying that their relationship necessarily entails the existence of a third party, first Taylan and later Nilgün's secret lover. However, in the love triangle forged after Taylan's death, it is now Harun's turn to be relegated to the position of the betrayed husband, i.e. the position originally occupied by Taylan. After he is abandoned by Nilgün, Harun suffers a nervous breakdown and, in a way that evokes Taylan's suicide, commits an act of self-mutilation, whereafter he is hospitalized for an extended period of time. Although the act itself takes place out of frame, the blood dripping on the floor implies that if Harun had not called his best friend, Süha, to the rescue, he might have died of blood loss then and there. Apparently, triangular desire resulting in pain and suffering has become an established pattern in Harun and Nilgün's relationship so much so that if there were no third party to cause perturbation, they would not know what to do, or how to relate to each other. The fact that Nilgün's lover never appears in the film suggests that what matters is not his individual identity, but his position in the triangular structure; in other words, "secret lover" is a generic category that can be occupied by just about anybody. In the end, tragedy resulting from triangular desire also strikes Nilgün's lover – a married man who leaves his wife and children for Nilgün – when his twelve-year-old daughter commits suicide because of him, whereafter his relationship with Nilgün quickly deteriorates.

Evidently, neither Nilgün nor Harun seem to be aware of the dynamics of triangular desire that dictate their actions – though Nilgün seems to have a greater insight into the truth about their relationship than the hopelessly deluded Harun. When Harun says that he betrayed his best friend and led to his suicide because of his love for Nilgün, she, in turn, replies that he is merely deceiving himself; he never really loved her, which is quite true considering that Harun's love for Nilgün is nothing other than a case of Girardian mimetic desire where Harun copies Taylan's desire for Nilgün. Nilgün expresses a key insight into their relationship when she claims that it is actually Harun who is responsible for the dissolution of their marriage: Harun has never trusted her and always expected her to betray him one day; in short, he has never had any faith in their relationship. Nilgün's blaming Harun for her extramarital affair is not ungrounded considering that, like Cemal in *Kor* and Anselmo in *Don Quixote*, Harun has anxiously anticipated, so, in a sense, provoked Nilgün to be unfaithful since he relies on triangular desire to sustain his

relationship with her. In the last analysis, both *İtiraf* and *Kor* demonstrate that a direct, instinctive, unmediated sexual relationship between a man and a woman is virtually impossible, in accordance with Lacan's claim that there is no sexual relationship. According to Lacan, the failure or impossibility of sexual relationship has to do with the logic of sexual difference in that "failure of the sexual relationship [is] characteristic of subjects with masculine and feminine structure" (Barnard, 2002, p. 7). In other words, "there is no direct, unmediated relation between the male and female sexual position, because the Other of language stands between them as a third party" (Evans, 1996, p. 184). In short, the lack of symmetry between the male and female sexual positions within the phallic structures of culture and language renders it impossible for them to establish direct, harmonious relations. According to Lacan, sexual difference belongs to the order of the Real, which is one of the three registers of experience along with the Imaginary, i.e. "the realm of image and imagination, deception and lure" (Evans, 1996, p. 84), and the Symbolic, the order of culture and language. The Lacanian Real is beyond symbolisation and signification; it is "what resists symbolisation absolutely" (Lacan, 1991a, p. 66). Hence, "in so far as sexual difference is a Real that resists symbolisation, the sexual relationship is condemned to remain an asymmetrical non-relationship" (Zizek, 1994, p. 108).

Lacan claims that in the absence of sexual relationship, men and women make do with supposed sexual relationship: "Only 'supposed,' since I state that analytic discourse is premised solely on the statement that there is no such thing, that it is impossible to found a sexual relationship" (Lacan, 1999, p. 9). Both Harun in *İtiraf* and Cemal in *Kor* cling to jealousy generated by triangular desire to maintain the illusion of sexual relationship by sustaining a third party, an Other, that threatens to rob them of their desired object. As a result, the problem intrinsic to the sexual relationship is externalized and projected onto an external obstacle, thereby creating the impression that if it weren't for the external obstacle, i.e. the third party, the relationship would have run smoothly. At the end of *İtiraf*, Harun seeks out Nilgün, who has experienced a drastic fall in social status after she broke up with her lover, which shows that, surprisingly, after all the suffering he has endured, Harun is more than willing to plunge into the same vicious circle of betrayal, deceit and humiliation again for the mere sake of preserving the semblance of sexual relationship.

A Modern-day Tale of Courtly Love

Zeki Demirkubuz's second feature *Masumiyet* and its prequel *Kader*, which was released nine years later, focus on the tempestuous relationship between Bekir and Uğur that spans two decades before reaching a tragic culmination. In *Masumiyet*, the protagonist is a down-and-out ex-convict called Yusuf, who gets entangled in the relationship between Uğur, a nightclub singer and prostitute, and Bekir, her reluctant pimp and bodyguard. In one memorable scene lasting over seven minutes and including no more than seven cuts, Bekir delivers a lengthy monologue to Yusuf, relating the events that have led up to the current state of affairs – i.e. the events that subsequently make up the plot of *Kader*. Shot with a stationary camera in the characteristic minimalist style of Zeki Demirkubuz, the scene depicts Yusuf and Bekir sitting in a park as the latter describes the origin of his obsession with Uğur, which dates back to his early youth, beginning with how, some twenty years ago, he fell desperately in love with Uğur, who was in turn in love with Zagor, a criminal constantly in and out of jail. When Zagor finally received a life sentence for murdering two police officers, Uğur dedicated her life to following Zagor from one town to the next as he got transferred from one prison to another due to his violent behaviour. Irresistibly drawn to Uğur, Bekir hit the road in pursuit of his beloved, turning his back on his family and comfortable middle-class life, embracing, instead, a miserable existence as Uğur's pimp. His half-hearted attempts to give up on Uğur and return to his wife and children proved futile as he always found himself back on Uğur's trail. Thus began the unending journey which has taken Bekir and Uğur across myriads of small towns, cheap motels and seedy nightclubs all of which resemble one another.

Both *Masumiyet* and *Kader,* which chart the trajectory of Bekir's obsession with Uğur that ultimately leads to his downfall, revolve around the theme of unrequited love. From the outset, Bekir is portrayed as a typical victim of triangular desire whose life is frittered away in pursuit of a woman in love with someone else. The love triangle is established immediately after Bekir's initial encounter with Uğur, which takes place in the carpet store owned by Bekir's father. In this scene, Uğur is displayed as an erotic object of voyeuristic male gaze by means of the subjective shots from Bekir's point of view. Instantly captivated by Uğur's feminine charms and flirtatious demeanor, Bekir becomes even more enamored with her upon discovering some photos Uğur accidentally left in the store,

including one depicting Uğur with Zagor. Soon afterwards, we see Bekir squirm in jealousy as he spies on Uğur passionately embracing Zagor, who has just been released from prison after serving time for some petty crime. Bekir's friends from the neighbourhood describe Uğur as a girl of easy virtue, warning him to stay away from her since her boyfriend, Zagor, is a rather dangerous man. However, the presence of a third party who appears as an unbreachable obstacle barring Bekir's access to Uğur only serves to fuel Bekir's obsession instead of discouraging him. The hopeless quest that Bekir undertakes in the name of unrequited love illustrates the plight of the desiring subject, for whom

> an object which can be possessed is valueless. So in the future he will be interested only in objects which are forbidden him by an implacable mediator. [He] seeks an insurmountable obstacle and he almost always succeeds in finding one (Girard, 1965, p. 176).

So, what renders Uğur desirable in Bekir's eyes is that she is an inaccessible object forbidden him by an insurmountable obstacle, i.e. Zagor. Bekir is willing to die chasing after this impossible love object rather than lead the passionless, run-of-the-mill life sketched out for him by his father who arranges a marriage between Bekir and a woman he does not in the least care for. Indeed, from the outset, Bekir knows very well that his love for Uğur will never be consummated, that his desire will never be satisfied. In fact, Bekir's hopeless pursuit of Uğur becomes an end in itself rather than a means of reaching an end, which accords with Lacan's view that desire does not seek to attain the object; in other words, it does not aim for full satisfaction. Instead, desire circles around the object, and "the real source of enjoyment is the repetitive movement of this closed circuit" (Zizek, 1992, p. 5). As Zizek puts it, "the realization of desire does not consist in its being 'fulfilled,' 'fully satisfied,' it coincides rather with the reproduction of desire as such, with its circular movement" (1992, p. 7). In other words, "desire's *raison d'être* is not to realize its goal, to find full satisfaction, but to reproduce itself as desire" (Zizek, 2008, p. 53). Hence, the object of desire must always lie out of reach as in Bunuel's aptly named masterpiece *Cet obscur objet du desir* (*That Obscure Object of Desire*, 1977), where an aging man's wish to have sex with his beautiful young lover is constantly thwarted and the moment of consummation endlessly postponed by the woman's clever tricks and machinations. Similarly, Uğur sustains Bekir's desire by thwarting his attempts at physical intimacy and harshly rebuffing him

when he attempts to force himself physically upon her, which he has the presumption to do on one occasion in *Kader* and on another occasion in *Masumiyet* immediately preceding his suicide.

Insofar as Uğur remains unattainable for Bekir, the relationship between the two fits the pattern of the medieval tradition of courtly love, where "the object involved, the feminine object, is introduced oddly enough through the door of privation or of inaccesibility" so that "the inaccessibility of the object is posited as a point of departure" (Lacan, 1997, p. 149). Courtly love refers to the platonic love between a bachelor knight and a Lady of noble birth who is inaccessible because she is married. Courtly love is based on the rule of prohibition in that "the techniques involved in courtly love [...] are techniques of holding back, of suspension, of *amor interruptus*" (Lacan, 1997, p. 152). In *Masumiyet* and *Kader*, the medieval courtly lover is relegated to the status of a pimp and the noble Lady to that of a prostitute; nevertheless, this does not rule out the fact that their relationship is governed by the logic of courtly love: As long as Uğur withholds her sexual favours from Bekir, she acts out the role of the unattainable Lady and Bekir, in turn, plays the part of a typical courtly lover who elevates his Lady to the status of a sublime object.

Lacan compares the courtly lover's idealization of his Lady to anamorphosis,[3] which is a term originally used in visual arts to refer to a perspective technique where an image can only be clearly seen when viewed form a specific vantage point. A well-known example of anamorphosis is contained in Hans Holbein's painting "The Ambassadors", where what looks like a formless spot towards the bottom of the painting assumes the shape of a human skull when viewed form a specific angle. Similarly, when viewed straightforwardly, i.e. from an objective standpoint, the courtly lover's beloved Lady appears to have little to distinguish her from other women, let alone render her an object of obsession. She appears as the idealized Lady only if you look at her at an angle, that is if you look awry:

> if we look at a thing straight on, i.e., matter-of-factly, disinterestedly, objectively, we see nothing but a formless spot; the object assumes clear and distinctive features only if we look at it "at an angle," i.e., with an "interested" view, supported, permeated, and "distorted" by desire (Zizek, 1992, pp. 11-12).

[3] See the chapter "Courtly Love as Anamorphosis" in Lacan, 1997, pp. 139 – 154.

Thus, it is Bekir's gaze which is distorted by desire that elevates Uğur to the status of an ideal Lady who is worthy of devotion. In *Masumiyet*, Bekir tells Yusuf that after their initial encounter in the carpet store, he continually dreamed of Uğur, which shows that, for Bekir, Uğur assumed the status of an imaginary fantasy object rather than a woman made of flesh and blood. In his analysis of courtly love, Lacan claims that the courtly Lady functions as a stand-in for the forbidden object of desire called "the Thing" (*das Ding*), which can be defined as "the lost object which must be continually refound. It is the prehistoric, unforgettable Other – in other words, the forbidden object of incestuous desire, the mother" (Evans, 1996, p. 207). The elevation of the Lady to the status of the Thing is achieved through the process of sublimation. In the Lacanian sense,

> "sublimation" occurs when an object, part of everyday reality, finds itself at the place of the impossible Thing. Herein resides the function of those artificial obstacles that suddenly hinder our access to some ordinary object: they elevate the object into a stand-in for the Thing. [...] What the paradox of the Lady in courtly love ultimately amounts to is thus the paradox of detour: our "official" desire is that we want to sleep with the Lady; whereas in truth, there is nothing we fear more than a Lady who might generously yield to this wish of ours - what we truly expect and want from the Lady is simply yet another new ordeal, yet one more postponement (Zizek, 1994, p. 96).

Ostensibly, Bekir desires to sleep with Uğur, or better still, to get married to her and move back with her to İstanbul to lead a more or less normal life, which is what he proposes to her in *Kader* as an alternative to a life of prostitution, poverty and misery. Herein lies a paradox, however, i.e. the paradox of courtly love: the courtly Lady is desirable for the sole reason that she is inaccessible. So, if Uğur were to yield to Bekir's wish to get married and settle down, it would put an end to the circular movement of desire which serves to sustain Bekir as a desiring subject. This paradox also explains why *Masumiyet*'s Yusuf, who copies Bekir's desire for Uğur in a glaringly obvious case of Girardian mimetic desire, shrinks from the prospect of having sex with Uğur when the opportunity presents itself. After Yusuf professes his love for her, Uğur flies into a fit of rage, demanding to know whether he wants to "fuck her" and provokes him to do so by sitting on the bed and taking off her underwear. Yusuf is

horrified at Uğur's offer to have sex since, following Bekir, he has elevated Uğur to the status of the inaccessible object, i.e. the Thing. Because she is elevated to an abstract ideal, Uğur is robbed of her human qualities and relegated to the status of an inhuman object with whom no relationship is possible. This points to the deadlock of sexual relationship that courtly love serves to conceal: Even if there were no external hindrances barring the lover's access to the Lady, she would still remain inaccessible because

> external hindrances that thwart our access to the object are there precisely to create the illusion that without them, the object would be directly accessible - what such hindrances thereby conceal is the inherent impossibility of attaining the object. The place of the Lady-Thing is originally empty: she functions as a kind of "black hole" around which the subject's desire is structured (Zizek, 1994, p. 94).

To sum up, the external obstacles in courtly love serve to conceal the impossibility of a harmonious sexual relationship between the lover and the Lady. Bekir, and by implication Yusuf, views Uğur through a gaze distorted by desire – a gaze that transforms her into a fantasy object that has no resemblance to the living, breathing Uğur. This creates an asymmetry, and hence an unbridgeable gap between how Bekir views Uğur and what Uğur knows herself to be. "What do you want from me?" Uğur demands to know halfway into *Kader*, when Bekir shows up yet once again, begging to be accepted into her favour. Many years later, Uğur poses the same question to Yusuf in *Masumiyet* after his declaration of love. According to Lacanian theory, "What does the other want from me?", or "What am I in the gaze of the other?" are quintessential questions that point to the deadlock of sexual relationship. As Zizek (1994) puts it,

> I can never answer the question "What am I as an object for the other? What does the other see in me that causes his love?" We thus confront an asymmetry – not only the asymmetry between subject and object, but asymmetry in a far more radical sense of a discord between what the lover sees in the loved one and what the loved one knows himself to be. Here we find the inescapable deadlock that defines the position of the loved one: the other sees something in me and wants something from me, but I cannot give him what I do not possess - or, as Lacan puts it, there is no relationship between what the loved one possesses and what the loving one lacks (p. 103).

In Lacan's view, courtly love, or romantic love in general, is a fictional construct, a fantasy that serves to conceal the absence, or rather

impossibility of sexual relationship. Given her rambling diatribe against Yusuf following his confession of love, Uğur seems to be well aware that romantic love does not exist outside of the fictional universe of films and literature. That is why she immediately orders Yusuf to "cut out the play-acting" when he declares his love for her. Yusuf's offer to go someplace else to start a new life, which echoes Bekir's proposal to Uğur in *Kader*, triggers a flood of insults from Uğur, who knows that there is nothing other than the circular movement of desire, the endless postponement of its fulfilment. In short, courtly love "is a highly refined way of making up for the absence of the sexual relationship, by feigning that we are the ones who erect an obstacle thereto" (Lacan, 1999, p. 69). In place of sexual relationship, courtly love substitutes a contract based on a strict code of conduct, according to which the courtly lover worships and idealizes his Lady, declaring himself to be her humble servant and vassal. He pines away from love, complaining about the cruelty of his capricious Lady, who withholds her sexual favours from him while assigning him as many difficult tasks, missions, or ordeals as she sees fit. Indeed, the Lady is "as arbitrary as possible in the tests she imposes on her servant" (Lacan, 1997, p.150), which shows that courtly love involves a master-slave dialectic which links it to masochism:

> The knight's relationship to the Lady is thus the relationship of the subject-bondsman, vassal, to his feudal Master-Sovereign who subjects him to senseless, outrageous, impossible, arbitrary, capricious ordeals. [...] We are dealing with a strict fictional formula, with a social game of "as if", where a man pretends that his sweetheart is the inaccessible Lady. And it is precisely this feature which enables us to establish a link between courtly love and [...] masochism (Zizek, 1994, pp. 90-91).

Accordingly, in *Masumiyet* and *Kader* we see Uğur in the role of the sovereign Lady and Bekir in the role of her servant subordinated to her every whim and caprice. Thus, Bekir and Uğur's relationship takes the form of a masochistic contract based on the dominance of Uğur and the submission of Bekir. When, at the end of *Kader*, Bekir seeks her out in Kars, Uğur allows him to remain with her on condition that he will obey a strict code of conduct and never cause her any trouble again. Bekir vows to abide by this contract, which not only precludes physical intimacy, but also prohibits Bekir from interfering in Uğur's affairs. Thrust into the role of Uğur's pimp, Bekir endures debasement and humiliation of

the most abject kind. If he so much as utters a cry of protest or shows a sign of jealousy, he is sharply rebuked by Uğur who showers him with insults and orders him to leave right away. What is more, Uğur does not miss any opportunity to hurt Bekir's pride or humiliate him. "Haven't you got any pride? Aren't you a man?" she screams at Bekir in *Kader* when he comes back to seek her for the hundredth time despite her repeated attempts to drive him away, whereafter Bekir attempts suicide by slitting his wrists. In fact, the master-slave dialectic between Uğur and Bekir resembles Severin's relationship with his beloved in the novel *Venus in Furs* by Sacher-Masoch, from whose name the term masochism is derived. In *Venus in Furs*, Severin goes to great lengths to persuade his beloved to dominate and humiliate him, even giving her instructions on how to best achieve this; hence, "the victim participates in forming a fantasy that takes the form of an agreement or contract" (Taylor, 2000, p. 64). Similarly, in *Masumiyet* and *Kader*, Bekir collaborates with Uğur in staging his own servitude and humiliation. Uğur's attempts in *Kader* to dissuade Bekir from following her and to convince him to go back to his family shows that she is initially an unwilling torturer loath to agree to the contract which assigns her the role of Bekir's master. "Imagine that you are doing me a favour", Bekir tells Uğur at the end of *Kader*, literally begging her to allow him to stay. Hence, Bekir's accusation that Uğur has ruined his life, which he utters time and again, is utterly ungrounded in the light of the fact that Bekir willingly subordinates himself to Uğur's caprices, voluntarily assigning her the role of his master. Thus, Bekir is a willing player in "the masochistic theatre of courtly love"[4] acting his role in a play that he has participated in writing. The dramatic quarrel between Bekir and Uğur in *Masumiyet* initiated by Bekir, when, in a fit of jealousy, he refuses to allow Uğur to go out with some clients, has a staged air as if they are acting their roles in an oft rehearsed play, Uğur playing the part of the cruel Lady and Bekir that of the tortured lover. When Bekir takes out a gun and threatens to shoot Uğur, the latter preserves her serenity and tries to taunt him into pulling the trigger. Apparently all of this drama has been staged countless times before, and Yusuf, who witnesses it for the first time, is surprised to see that the next morning Bekir behaves as if nothing has happened. That Bekir persists in remaining with Uğur even though his relationship with her promises him nothing other than pain and humiliation shows that Bekir actually

4 See "The Masochistic Theatre of Courtly Love" in Zizek, 1992, pp. 89-94.

relishes his own suffering and wishes to prolong it as long as he can. In an inversion characteristic of masochism, he seeks success in failure:

> The masochist perceives the necessary relation between unhappiness and [his] desire, but he nevertheless does not renounce his desire. [...] he now chooses to see in shame, defeat, and enslavement not the inevitable results of an aimless faith and an absurd mode of behavior but rather the signs of divinity and the preliminary condition of all metaphysical success. Henceforth the subject bases his enterprise of autonomy on failure; he founds his prophet of being God on an abyss (Girard, 1965, p. 177).

It can be argued that Bekir is a masochist playing the part of martyr who seeks a kind of inverted transcendence through humiliation and suffering. He follows Uğur with the devotion characteristic of a martyr ready to die for a holy cause: "Everybody has faith in something in this goddamn life, and for me it is you," he tells Uğur in *Kader*. In the famous monologue he delivers to Yusuf in *Masumiyet*, Bekir even compares himself to Yunus Emre, the 13th century Turkish poet who is one of the most prominent representatives of Islamic mysticism, saying he "became a wanderer in the name of love just like Yunus Emre." Moreover, the suffering that Bekir undertakes becomes a token of the greatness of his love, which aligns him with the legendary lovers in great love stories like "Leyla and Mecnun" or "Kerem and Aslı", the latter of which is explicitly referenced towards the end of *Kader* when his friends from the neighbourhood compare Bekir's love for Uğur to Kerem's love for Aslı, saying that Bekir has endured countless hardships, received gunshot wounds, survived suicide attempts and got locked up in mental institutions in the name of love. In the end, Bekir crowns his quest for love with martyrdom by committing suicide after staging a dramatic showdown with Uğur, which results, as he knows it will, in abject humiliation. In fact, it can be argued that death was Bekir's ultimate aim all along, for when Bekir devoted himself to following Uğur, he set on a journey of self destruction leading to death. So, the whole quest for love was just a detour, a circuitous path Bekir took to reach that final destination. Hence, Bekir resembles the courtly lovers in medieval romances whom De Rougemont (1983) describes as

> hankering after love for its own sake, which implies a secret quest of the obstruction that shall foster love. But this quest is only the disguise of a love for obstruction *per se*. Now it turns out that the ulti-

> mate obstacle is death and at the close of the tale death is revealed as having been the real end, what passion has yearned after from the beginning (p. 54).

However, the saga of Bekir and Uğur does not come to an end with Bekir's death because it did not begin with him in the first place. Indeed, it is very fitting that *Masumiyet* concludes with a shot of the dead and shrouded Zagor, who was actually the starting point of all the action, the unmoved mover, as it were, who did not pursue anyone but was pursued by others. It was Zagor who set in motion the circular movement of desire in the first place by prompting Uğur to follow him and Uğur in turn dragging Bekir after her. Ultimately, the circular movement of desire ends in the death of all the three characters involved in the whirlpool of desire, namely Bekir, Uğur and Zagor, who make up the three poles of the original love triangle.

Conclusion

> We stand upon the brink of a precipice. We peer into the abyss – we grow sick and dizzy. Our first impulse is to shrink away from the danger. Unaccountably we remain [...] it is but a thought, although a fearful one [...] It is merely the idea of what would be our sensations during the fall from such a height. And this fall – this rushing annihilation [...] we now the most vividly desire it (Poe, 1990, p. 270).

In the above passage from Edgar Allan Poe's short story "The Imp of the Perverse", the narrator reflects upon the strange tendency in human beings that leads them to seek their own destruction. A man standing upon the brink of a precipice, he claims, can't help being seized with the desire to hurl himself into the abyss. It is this irrational impulse that the narrator of Poe's story calls "the imp of the perverse." Neither Bekir, who readily rushes toward the precipice and hurls himself into the abyss, nor the tormented husbands in *Kor* and *İtiraf*, who willingly embrace jealousy, envy and humiliation, are strangers to the imp of the perverse. Indeed, it is generally held that "Demirkubuz is very much concerned with the irrational side of the human psyche. His films are often about the characters' actions that do not have a comprehensible rational explanation" (Suner, 2010, p. 116). As a general rule, Demirkubuz's characters blame their misfortunes on fate, assuming that it is "fate that creates for them so many rivals and throws so many obstacles in the way of their desires" (Girard, 1965, p. 12) – like Bekir, who claims that

his obsession with Uğur is his inescapable destiny. Nevertheless, no matter how irrational the characters' actions may seem at first glance, they need not be attributed to some inexplicable power like fate, for on closer inspection, these actions turn out to be dictated by the dynamics of desire. Hence, it can be argued that the imp of the perverse is nothing other than desire as such, which Lacan (2001) describes as having a "paradoxical, deviant, erratic, eccentric, even scandalous character" (p. 219) not unlike an imp – a supernatural creature always up to some mischief. In *Kor*, *İtiraf*, *Masumiyet* and *Kader* alike, the characters' actions are always geared towards sustaining themselves as desiring subjects regardless of the consequences: While Bekir becomes a willing player in the masochistic theatre of courtly love, both Cemal in *Kor* and Harun in *İtiraf* depend on triangular desire to sustain the mere semblance of sexual relationship. In the last analysis, all four films undermine the myth of romantic love by revealing the impossibility of sexual relationship, thus testifying to Lacan's contention that there is only the endless circulation of desire, the constant postponement of its satisfaction.

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