

Our Anatolia (Bizim Anadolu)

February 15, 2005

Vendetta Song or 'The story of Guzide'

by Ömer Özen

(This article was originally published in Turkish)

In her latest film, Eylem Kaftan is recounting the story of one of the biggest social wounds in Turkey, honour killings. In the film, we see problems which are at the root of this ancient practice: illiteracy of girls, tribal blood feuds and the honour crimes which ruin innocent lives and which are at times, even justified by the law.

After making a film about the August 17th earthquake, Eylem, born in Istanbul, embarks on a journey retracing the clues of 40-year old family mystery, unravelling the life of a "big, fearless, strong woman."

'My father was as excited as I was' says Eylem Kaftan. She was elated to reunite with an aunt who is living in the Kurdish side of Turkey, whereas her father was impatient to find his long-lost sister. For him, finding his sister was a combined happiness: he was going to return to his Kurdish homeland which he had to leave when he was a child. For Eylem, she was going to discover the land, of which she knew little, where her father had grown up.

But the reality they faced was grim. Let's listen to the story of this sad song from Eylem Kaftan:

It all happened when I was 17. That year my grandfather died. My grandmother revealed a secret she had been hiding from us for 40 years.

My grandmother was a quiet, discreet woman. She used to smoke cheap *Maltepe* cigarettes and used to sing sad songs like '*My memories are like dreams.*' I didn't know then what those songs actually meant for her. Her secret was that when she was 17, she had a brief marriage, before marrying my grandfather. She gave birth to a baby girl. They were living in the Kurdish city of Diyarbakir in Eastern Turkey at the time. When she realized her husband had a mistress, her family forced her to divorce him and give up her baby. They believed that she would lose all her chances of remarrying had she kept her baby.

They didn't even let her hold the baby in her arms. The belief was that if she held her baby, she would be attached to her forever. My grandmother had no say over her life; she married the second husband, who was chosen for her, and gave birth to four sons, but always dreamt of the baby girl she had lost. When my father was 12 years old, his family left Diyarbakir for Western Turkey.

-The baby is with the father?

The father also didn't claim the baby so they sent the baby to a remote Kurdish village. Meanwhile my grandmother's family moved to Istanbul. Since my grandfather was an authoritarian man, this topic was never discussed at home.

Only when her husband died did my grandmother tell us about her daughter and asked us to find her. We were thrilled. We started investigating right away to find the whereabouts of this woman. Shortly after, we learned that she had been killed in a mysterious vendetta. Our dreams were dashed.

The people we contacted to ask about her were a little suspicious of us. Since we were asking them about a murder that happened decades ago, they were wondering if we were accusing them of her murder. We suspected that they weren't telling us the truth.

Since then, it has been one of my greatest passions to learn the truth about my aunt's life. It was difficult for us to travel to the east, because of the long distance and the civil war which tore the country apart at the time. Eastern Turkey was like a different country.

I also have this memory of looking at a faded paper, our family genealogy, with my father. It was written in Arabic, but we got it translated. We were able to learn about several generations with this genealogy. We learned that our family had all these well-known artists, poets, politicians. But there were no records of girls in this genealogy. When I look at those old black and white photos, I always wondered what was hidden behind those faces. I had this feeling that they tried to erase these women from history, we didn't even know their names. I always dreamt that they sacrificed their lives for love, I dreamt of stories of legends. Perhaps, I said to myself, they followed their hearts, and they were brave. I craved for role models in my family because there were none. So learning about my aunt, I had to find out: what did she do that cost her life?

To return to our story, in 1999, I was in Ankara shooting a short film. I was actually acting in it. After the shoot, me and my girlfriend were going to go to Eastern Turkey to research my aunt's story with a small amateur camera. The day before I was going to leave, one of the biggest disasters in Turkey's history took place. An earthquake struck Western Turkey, where my hometown was. I had to go back to the west to help my family. So my journey was postponed indefinitely one more time. Then I immigrated to Canada. Only with the help of the National Film Board and DLI Productions was this journey possible again. It was a journey to the unknown. It was actually very difficult and stressful because I had no idea what the consequences would be. I was maybe risking my life and my crews' life since I heard her murderer was alive and I intended to meet him. I also didn't want to disappoint all these institutions who put money in this film. I was afraid I would fail.

-How did you think you were going to accomplish what you set out to do? Maybe you weren't going to get any information.

I had this intuition that although it has been 30 years since her murder, in villages, stories aren't like marks on water, villagers keep stories alive in their memories. I know that there is a vibrant oral history which is passed from generation to generation. I thought, although the people who knew her may be dead, their children would have heard this story from their grandparents.

-Did you get what you were looking for?

This is a difficult question. I don't know. It did give me a chance to reconnect with my father's people, the Kurds. They were so welcoming, so hospitable, beyond my expectations. They are also very proud people. But the ancient practices in their land combined with the underdevelopment of the region still victimize them. It is such a fascinating, rich culture which the world has a lot to learn from. Through this film, I learned a lot about my aunt in a limited time, but maybe one day I would like to write a book about this because there are so many interesting details which didn't make their way into the film.

-Do you think despite the prevalence of TV, these ancient traditions still have influence over people's lives? For example, the problem of girls' illiteracy, does that still exist, are there lots of girls like Leila?

Nothing remains the same, there are improvements if you compare the situation to 30 years ago. With this film I wanted to show the vicious cycle people are caught up in, between their dreams and the traditions which restrict them. However, there are young women like the girl in the cotton field, who says she is standing up against her father to be able to choose her own husband. There are lots of girls like her. People in villages watch TV soap operas and other programs and see the lives of these 'emancipated women' in cities. This helps them have an awareness about the outside world. But it is not easy to get rid of these centuries-old traditions which are based on certain customs and special interests.

I believe that Turkey will change especially with all these pressures from the European Union.

Honour killings don't take place only among Kurds, by the way. They also take place in Arabic and Mediterranean countries.