

Disturbing Identity: Migrants and Refugees as Abject Agents in Fatih Akin's *Edge of Heaven*

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According to psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva, the abject is 'what disturbs identity, system, order [...] [and] does not respect borders, position, rules'.¹ Kristeva defines the abject as a state in which a subject does not fit neatly within a boundary, rendering it undefinable, and thus resulting in feelings of horror, or abjection, towards it. In line with this, Fatih Akin's migrant and refugee characters in the film *Auf der anderen Seite* undermine what is constituted by national categories and identities, by destabilising their very meaning.² Amongst academic criticism on the film, much of the film's politics of nationalism have been examined, particularly in relation to the politics of exclusion and isolation that are brought to light in the film. The way in which characters belong to dual categories, and have multiple allegiances, is of particular prevalence within analysis of the film.³ Within the context of popular Turkish films depicting themes of migration and exile, particularly amongst other films by Akin and

¹ Julia Kristeva and Leon S. Roudiez, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), p. 4. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

² *Auf der anderen Seite* (The Edge of Heaven/*Yaşamın Kıyısında*), dir. by Fatih Akin (Anka Film, Corazon International, Dorje Film and Norddeutscher Rundfunk, 2007). Further references to this film are given after quotations in the text.

³ Máiréad Nic Craith, "'Migrant' Writing and the Re-Imagined Community: Discourses of Inclusion/Exclusion', *German Politics & Society*, 33 (2015), 84–99 (p. 84).

even more so in relation to waves of Turkish immigration to Germany, this film depicts the reality of such migrants and refugees.⁴ For example, similar films by Akin include *Crossing the Bridge* and *The Cut*, and other films in the genre are typified by works such as *Farewell to False Paradise* by Tevfik Başer. Building on this, using a psychoanalytic theory, Kristeva's notion of abjection, often associated with horror, to discuss nationalism in a non-horror film, illuminates the ways in which the treatment of outsiders is innately horrific rather than purely political, and causes equally abhorrent feelings and disgust.

The film is centred around the lives of three families, all of whom are abject due to their dual nationalities or status as exiled. First, there is the Ozturk family—Yeter, the mother, moves from Turkey to Germany and works as a prostitute, eventually being hired by Ali Aksu, another Turkish immigrant living in Germany. His son, Nejat, later meets Yeter's daughter Ayten, after his father kills her mother. He tries to help her, as do Lotte and Susannah, a German mother and daughter who react differently to one another in response to Ayten's illegal status in Germany. The themes of the film are centred around the meaning of immigration, national identity and belonging. In turn, the protagonists do not 'respect rules', leading to the horror caused by such abject states (Kristeva and Roudiez, p. 4). These abject characters disturb the German-Turkish binary and are consequently exiled or hated. This essay employs Kristeva's theoretical framework regarding the abject, in conjunction with ideas about national identity stemming from Homi K. Bhabha's *The Location of Culture*, in order to argue that such characters are presented in this way due to their need to define themselves against such national identities, thereby creating their own individual, hybrid identity.⁵ This discussion will use English subtitles of the film in order to examine its presentation and reception within Europe, although it must be noted that this is indicative of the importance of crossing language barriers,

⁴ James P. Martin, 'Crossing Bridges/Crossing Cultures: The Films of Fatih Akin', *South Atlantic Review*, 74 (2009), 82–92 (pp. 82–92); Muriel Cormican, 'Masculinity and Transnational Paradigms: The Cinema of Fatih Akin', *Colloquia Germanica*, 46 (2013), 21–46 (p. 22).

⁵ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 4.

and thus national borders, a further reflection of the film's transnational aims. This article will analyse how abject figures do not fit within either their home or host culture, before moving on to an examination of how such cultures can never be fully observed, as they are not innately homogenous. This will reveal how the abject state is, in Akin's film, essential, for, in line with Kristeva's ideas, it permits the characters to define and create their own individual identities, rather than conforming to a pre-given set of rules.

Abject characters define themselves as such by departing their native country and attempting to integrate within a host society, in this case Germany. It is their inability to do so, which highlights their outsider status, thus transforming into a rebellion against the system. The abject in this film refers to the subject position in which each protagonist finds themselves, by their position as characters with dual national allegiances. Since all characters openly display signs of both German and Turkish identity, it is arguable that they embody these characteristics due to their inability to hide their full identity, so identify themselves as such. They are abject to both the viewer and to themselves, as they all openly struggle with the sense of belonging. Kristeva argues that abject 'lives are based on exclusion', suggesting that despite initial attempts to integrate, these characters will never be able to fully do so (Kristeva and Roudiez, p. 6). Structurally, the film is based on three parts, the first two demonstrating the incongruity of characters within their host culture. Entitled 'Yeter's death' and 'Lotte's death', both take place outside of the native homeland of the subject, implying the inevitable failure of each character to escape the reach of cultural boundaries, since each character dies once attempting to leave the constraints of their national boundary, or homeland. Yeter Ozturk, a Turkish prostitute living in Germany, and her daughter Ayten, a Turk seeking refuge in Germany, face the struggles of refuge, political asylum and outsider status. Repeated extreme close-ups, for instance on buses, draw attention to their darker complexions in comparison to others on the bus. Both are revealed as Turkish from the start—Yeter through her own

admission, Ayten due to her primary location in Istanbul and heavily accented English, a further example of her inability to leave behind her national roots despite trying to integrate into a more globalized, anglicized society. Perhaps, then, Germany comes to represent Western society, and Turkey the East. Consequently, the film comments upon the inability of any outsiders to integrate within Western society. As such, native national identity is highlighted, and cannot be ignored or escaped for the remainder of the film, in Yeter's case for the rest of her life.

Commentary on the inability to fit into society can be examined from the outset with the character of Ali Aksu, an elderly Turkish man living in Bremen, Germany. During the first scene in Germany, Ali walks in the opposite direction to a protest for European unity, alone. The wide camera angle, focusing on his smile and confidence whilst walking against other Germans, elucidates not only his inability, but also his unwillingness, to conform to German society. His isolation, emphasised through the *mise-en-scène* through his appearance as the sole subject of the camera's focus, in the centre of the wide shot, further accentuates his lack of social integration. He later meets the Turkish prostitute, Yeter. Even whilst trying to conform to Western society, using German prostitutes who speak the German language, Ali is drawn to Yeter, without knowing she is Turkish. The dark colouring of Yeter's apartment draws Ali in by its contrast in tone from the outside, and by its sensual allure, with the main tone being red. He looks down on her, perhaps indicating his attraction to other outcasts, further emphasised. This suggests unquestionable loyalty, and attraction, to his native culture, albeit subconsciously. The reverse camera angle here also alternates between filming from behind each character, whilst keeping the back of the head of the other in the shot. This means that they appear to be on the same level, perhaps indicating their linked identities as outsiders. Ali is later deported back to Turkey, proving his inability to escape his Turkish roots. His nonchalance during the bridging deportation scene reflects his acceptance of Turkey as his

homeland. He tries to conform to German society, but loyalty to his Turkish culture means he cannot fully transcend this border. Consequently, he is stuck in the liminal space, on neither side of a national border, the 'abject' state. Ali cannot integrate, so constantly reaffirms his Turkish identity, which is further demonstrated through the paralleled composition and graphic match of the scenes when showing Ali and Yeter during their first exchange. He is not 'successful in resolving the tensions that [the immigrant's] liminal position at the crossover between differing and overlapping social, cultural and political environments entails'.⁶ He is stuck in this position, unable to wholly conform to new German values of Western superiority and European integration.

Nonetheless, even though migrants and refugees in Akin's film are not fully accepted by their host country, they are no longer acceptable to their home nation either. A direct link can be made between this liminality and the existence of the abject as described in Kristeva's work, suggesting that the horror shown towards these abject characters stems from their inability to conform and society's rejection of them. It is perhaps these migrants from the East to the West, who are not accepted, and are thus seen as abject. Turkish migrants, including refugees and those seeking asylum, like Ayten, are the ones who receive the harshest treatment. This horror, which manifests as hatred in the German characters in the film, namely Susannah, is shown by their double exclusion, whereby they are excluded from Turkish identity as well as German. Yeter's scene on the bus where two Turkish men confront her on a train for her prostitution is paramount to this. In chastising her for her betrayal of Turkish, and specifically Muslim values, the men tell her to 'repent,' the imperative stressing how her actions cannot be a part of Turkish identity (Akin, 09:25). Repetition of the verb 'repent' underlines the severity of her perceived betrayal, thereby highlighting the disgrace she has brought upon Turkish

⁶ Marc Herzog, 'Crossing Back and Forth: Identity and Belonging across and beyond Bordered Worlds in the Films of Fatih Akin', *Bordered Places - Bounded Times: Cross-Disciplinary Perspectives on Turkey*, 51 (2017), 195–205 (p. 199). Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

people living in Germany by undermining her native identity. Visually, the *mise-en-scène* displays Yeter and the two men through individual close-up camera angles, dividing them from one another, thus suggesting that Yeter can share neither their visual space, nor their Turkish identity from their point of view, due to her alleged betrayal of it. Thus, Yeter has strayed too far from her roots to be fully accepted, demonstrated by her initial reluctance to speak Turkish, and consolidated by her lack of return to Turkey until her death. Similarly, her daughter is expelled from a Turkish safehouse upon arrival in Germany, due to the loud and aggressive register she uses against another member. Even amongst other refugees, she cannot integrate, perhaps suggesting her abject state within her own home culture. In direct contrast from the close-up camera angles of Yeter's expulsion from Turkish culture on the train, the director employs a wide shot here, which allows Ayten's violent body movements and aggression to play out on screen. Unlike Yeter, Ayten's abject dislocation from both German and Turkish cultures takes up more visual space, indicating a restlessness and discomfort with her abject national identity, and the anxiety felt through her lack of belonging to any culture. The tone and volume of her voice here is indicative of the passion with which she feels this disconnect from many other Turks. As such, neither Ozturk is welcome within their native culture, and is physically and verbally reminded of this throughout the film.

Whilst Ayten and Yeter are obviously chastised by characters of different national backgrounds, some characters in the film feel their abject status more subtly than this. Nejat Aksu, perhaps the most assimilated within German society as a professor of German literature, also cannot fully integrate with Turkey, despite being partially Turkish by nationality. He is, as Isenberg suggests, indicative of an identity of intersections—that is, a hybrid, whilst also being seen as an outsider and treated with the politics of exclusion, again due to the fear of the other, the disgust towards the abject.⁷ Nejat enjoys Turkish food, including Yeter's 'borek' and

⁷ Noah Isenberg, 'Fatih Akin's Cinema of Intersections', *Film Quarterly*, 64 (2011), 53–61 (p. 58).

Turkish literature alongside his academic passion for German literature, demonstrated through his career as an academic specialist in German literature. But, when he returns to Turkey for the first time in the film, in the film's establishing shot Nejat is seen driving alone, indicating his separation from Turkish culture, and pre-empting the theme of isolation and loneliness which reflects the abject state of protagonists throughout the film. This bridging scene demonstrates the distance Nejat must travel in order to reconnect with his Turkish roots, indicating his separation from them. When arriving at a petrol station on the Black Sea, a seaside region en route to Turkey, he does not recognise the Turkish music of Kazim Koyuncu, to the surprise of the other men at the station.⁸ He stares at the shelves, unsure of what to buy. His insecurity here is reinforced by his lack of eye contact with the other Turkish men, suggesting his inability to fully feel at home, as does his uncertainty pertaining to music and food. The diegetic music, in the background and as the focal point of the conversation, mirrors the paradox of his confused Turkish identity—it is merely a background to his identity, whilst still being constantly present. Therefore, Nejat's loyalty to his Turkish roots is highlighted, but cannot be fully observed, as he has become too integrated within German culture. Nejat's hybrid identity, like Yeter's, depicts his status as abject—he can fully belong to neither culture.

Furthermore, Akin demonstrates the impossibility of conforming to cultural stereotypes due to the 'heterogeneity' of each individual national culture.⁹ As such, his characters do not fit expected moulds, and so they are innately abject even within national boundaries. Applying Kristeva's theoretical framework here, one could see how even within one nation, these characters can be seen as, and present themselves as, 'abject' because they find their own ways of expressing their culture, rather than following stereotypical cultural practices. Writing about

⁸ Berna Gueneli, 'The Sound of Fatih Akin's Cinema: Polyphony and the Aesthetics of Heterogeneity in "The Edge of Heaven"', *German Studies Review*, 37 (2014), 337–56 (pp. 340–42). Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

⁹ Elleke Boehmer, *Stories of Women: Gender and Narrative in the Postcolonial Nation* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), p. 107.

language and music in *The Edge of Heaven*, Berna Gueneli argues the film presents a 'European polyphony':

All characters speak 'differently,' and, therefore, migrants and foreigners are not singled out, but are integral to the film's multifaceted European soundtrack. Appearing in Germany and Turkey, these sounds help to create a similar aural space featuring multilingualism and accented languages across borders.

(Gueneli, p. 350)

Language, accent and music form part of the varied cultural fabric of German and Turkish identity. The music in the film, written and arranged by DJ Shantel, a German DJ, reflects the range of influences in German and Turkish music—a musical reflection of the mixing of national identities throughout the film. During travel scenes, Turkish music without lyrics is played. Whilst this demonstrates the influence of Turkish musical expression, the music also indicates through its absence of lyrics that experience does not always need a national language—it is emotional, not categorizable. Also, the variety of music in both cultures demonstrates their polyphony. In Germany, the night club, which is the culmination of the blend of cultures, plays diegetic Turkish music in the background. The blend is mirrored by Lotte, a German, and Ayten, a Turk, sharing an intimate moment, in a similar way to how the music depicts a sharing and fusion of culture. However, the racking focus of the camera eventually settles on the couple despite being surrounded by many others, and jarring lighting. Simultaneously, the close-up frontal camera angle, focusing on this couple but set against a slightly blurred background of a range of other people, reminds the viewer of the multitude of identities within a nation, represented by the collective, whilst reminding us that it is the creation of individual identity as a result of immigration and fusion, shown by the intimate couple, which is the cause of such variety. As such, the blend of musical styles depicts the

heterogeneity of identities within a culture, and the importance of the individual as its cause. Thus, each individual inevitably falls into the abject state, since it is impossible to fit into one category perfectly as these categories are neither homogenous, nor essentialist (Herzog, p. 197).

So, what is the significance of this nationally dictated state of abjection? In Akin's film, abject characters use national categories to define themselves relationally and contrapuntally; that is, against cultures and ideas, rather than confining themselves to them. Applying Bhabha's theory of hybridity here, that individuals create a discrete identity against constrictive national categories, one can see how Akin uses his film to question these constructed boundaries, thereby allowing the protagonists to break these constraints and forge their own identities. Through Bhabha's 'Third Space' theory, the characters must forge identities that belong to neither category—they are unique, individual (Bhabha, p. 6). This theory posits that no being can fall entirely within one national identity if they are the subject of various backgrounds, countries of birth, or parental nationality. As such, they must occupy the Third Space, which, like the abject, is a state in which the subject falls into multiple categories, but also none. Instead, the subject has their own individual identity, which is distinct from all and any others. This is in line with Kristeva's approach, as she writes that:

What is abject is not my correlative, which, providing me with someone or something else as support, would allow me to be more or less detached and autonomous. The abject has only one quality of the object—that of being opposed to I.

(Kristeva and Roudiez, p. 1)

Akin's film is about defining oneself in relation to, and in opposition to, national culture. It is not important whether or not one fits the typical 'support' network of a culture, but whether they are 'opposed' to it. It is about 'individual and social struggles for recognition,

self-determination and the freedom to develop one's communal and social attachments without coercion', rather than needing to fit within a national culture (Herzog, p. 202). The film depicts abjection as a process, an experience of relations and exclusions, rather than the refusal of assimilation. For instance, Ayten's actions are driven by the need for social change in terms of equality and education, not out of innate attraction to a certain culture. She defines her desires against what she sees in other cultures. In a pivotal scene in Susannah's kitchen, she shouts 'I don't trust the European Union', and 'fuck the European Union' (Akin, 48:58). Taking place during Ayten's stay in this German home, it is indicative of the dichotomy between Ayten's anti-establishment views, and Susannah's pro-European stance. Ayten is neither driven by Turkish values, against which she is fighting, nor by European values, as demonstrated by her aggressive tone in responding to Susannah, Lotte's German mother, and her affirmation of Eurocentric values. She is purely fighting for what she personally and individually believes is right. The costumes Ayten wears are significantly darker than those in Susannah's kitchen or clothing. Her clothes are partially borrowed from Lotte: she has learnt and been influenced by both cultures, and then takes her own approach. This is mirrored through her journey in the film—she has left Turkey, but cannot integrate within Germany, the culmination of which is her deportation. Thus, she is an outsider in both cultures, so defines herself in opposition to both, as Susannah labels her, 'someone who just likes to fight' (Akin, 48:39).

Visually, Ayten's politics of 'self-location' are displayed.¹⁰ When she leaves Turkey, she sits on a boat amongst others, however, when she returns, she stands at the front of the boat. The camera angle films her from behind, staring out into the open sea, away from the direction in which she is moving, so facing Germany when returning to Turkey. She is alone and is the focus of the medium shot, perhaps depicting her success at forging her own individual

¹⁰ Gönül Dönmez-Colin, *Turkish Cinema: Distance, Identity and Belonging* (London: Reaktion Books, 2008), p. 15.

identity. The pace of the scene slows, and there is an absence of dialogue, suggesting Ayten's individual sense of peace that cannot fit within common discourse and language. The angle from behind indicates Akin's perspective that this is the goal, the creation of the 'I', to adopt Kristeva's phraseology. The sea, as well as the wind blowing Ayten's hair, depicts her freedom, which has only arisen as a result of her experiences rooted in various national cultures. As such, the depiction of Ayten as 'abject' highlights the purpose of the abject as a need to define oneself against national cultures, breaking these boundaries, in order to develop a sense of self.

To conclude, through an analysis of Kristeva's notion of the abject in relation to the portrayal of migrants and refugees within *Edge of Heaven*, it can be argued that Akin's characters become excluded from multiple national identities, resulting in a state of a lack of belonging, or isolation. Against the backdrop of Turkish and German cultures, Akin's characters fail to fit within either binary. They are neither fully German nor wholly Turkish, and even so, cannot fit within either due to the heterogeneity of each culture. As such, Akin's message goes a step further. His abject characters are shown as such not because of a failure to conform, but rather a need to rebel or fight—a need to, as Kristeva argues, define oneself in opposition to what causes such horror, the ultimate abject state.

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