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Toz bezi

Dust Cloth

Ahu Öztürk

Producer Çiğdem Mater, Nesra Gürbüz, Stefan Gieren.
Production companies Ret-Film (Istanbul, Turkey), Fiction 2.0 (Hamburg, Germany). **Written and directed by** Ahu Öztürk.
Director of photography Meryem Yavuz. **Editor** Ali Aga. **Sound design** Arne Dammann. **Sound** Mustafa Bölükbaşı. **Art director** Asli Dadak, Barış Yıkılmaz. **Costumes** Seda Yılmaz.
With Asiye Dinçsoy (Nesrin), Nazan Kesal (Hatun), Serra Yılmaz (Ayten), Didem Inselel (Asli), Mehmet Özgür (Şero), Asel Yalın (Asmin), Yusuf Ancu (Oktay).

DCP, colour. 99 min. Turkish, Kurdish.

Premiere 17 September 2015, Adana

Nesrin and Hatun are cleaning ladies in Istanbul. They are friends, neighbours and Kurds. Nesrin has kicked her husband out. It was only intended as a warning, but now he hasn't returned, and Nesrin and her young daughter Asmin find themselves in increasingly difficult circumstances. To enjoy proper social benefits, Nesrin would need to find a real job. Hatun, on the other hand, dreams the dream of moving up in the world and of a life in the fashionable district of Moda, where she cleans the apartments of her middle-class clients. Her desire is so strong that she, a Muslim, even prays for it in a Christian church.

Toz bezi is a sensitive, thoroughly unsentimental portrait of a friendship between two women. But beyond the personal story of their relationship and its conflicts, Ahu Öztürk also paints a picture of an entire society in which social and ethnic origins can be insurmountable obstacles. She shows this almost in passing, in the scenes of Hatun and Nesrin at their clients' homes. And when the camera follows the two of them moving between Istanbul's different worlds, it becomes clear that the distance they are traversing is not just geographical.

Anna Hoffmann

Ashamed of feeling shame

It was one of the clearest memories from my childhood: we went to Istanbul to visit our relatives. First stop was my aunt, who lived in a one-room flat. One day, I went with her to a three-room flat. That was the first time I encountered the private realm of Istanbul's middle class. I touched objects I had never seen before and was astonished. We were alone, and I felt I was so close to everything. I could have even lain on the bed, but there was an imaginary wall that prevented me from doing that. This represents a distance that I know intuitively from my indigent life.

When we came back, my mother shared a secret with me: my aunt was a cleaning woman. But I was not to tell anyone. After my years at university, where I met with leftist ideology, the first indication of my carrying this secret was my class resentment. Later, when I started working, my colleagues' conversations about their problems with their cleaning women reminded me of this feeling again. They hired cleaning women because they saw doing so as a symbol of the class they wished to belong to, and these long conversations became a way of highlighting that.

Two years ago, when a relative of mine who works as a cleaning woman came to visit us and told us she is a Circassian, I was shocked. This is the same woman whose mother had died never speaking any language other than Kurdish, and she was standing in front of me like a surreal character, defying any rational explanation. This helped me understand that Kurdish identity can be experienced very differently in Turkey. Hidden in this heterogeneity is the possibility of touching reality.

I thought a lot about my urge to tell the story of my aunt. First, I looked for answers in the cultural, political, and ethical areas. After all these, what I reached was shame – I wasn't ashamed of the cleaning women in my family; I was ashamed of feeling shame. So I decided to write the story, knowing that it is the only way of reconciling with the issue.

When I started to work on *Toz bezi*, I believed I would be able to capture the world it was about, since I felt I was part of that world. But eventually I realised that I do not belong to this world anymore. Belonging to that class means being speechless, silent; but I found a language with which to tell these stories. So although I have tried with *Toz bezi* to capture reality, it is above all a personal film.

Ahu Öztürk

"We live in a world where everything we try to avoid as clichés is actually more real"

The characters in Toz bezi are extremely convincing and realistic characters. Could you talk a little bit about how you shaped them? To what extent were you inspired by your own life, by the people you knew and observed in real life?

Ahu Öztürk: *Toz bezi* actually started with a female relative of mine who visited me while I was working on a totally different screenplay. Everything started with this woman saying, 'Actually, we're Circassians.' I laughed for days at what she said, then left the screenplay I was working on, and started writing *Toz bezi*. What she said was her way of escaping her Kurdishness with quite a talent; and this woman stood before me like a surreal character very much in the flesh. This incident drew the rough outline of the character of Hatun. I made good use

of this outline while writing the character of Hatun because for this character I could get inspiration from both my mother and myself. Nesrin, on the other hand, is closer to being a victim and she was probably a culmination of my feelings of want and deprivation that came from deep inside me, from my subaltern part, as it were. Both characters are inspired from people I personally know. It is precisely because of this that they were constructed out of my characteristics that remained in my shallow depths when I did not face them, but which I could make out and capture as I confronted them. The middle-class female characters in the film are also women I have observed in real life. These characters were composed of elements from my female co-workers but also from my own self, who left behind her poverty-stricken childhood, and from my own experiences.

The central focus of the film is the cleaning women going to work in a class-coded neighbourhood like Moda. However, there is no excessively explicit imagery or dialogue in the film to indicate that class gap. How did you strike this balance?

When I first started the treatment of the subject matter, I came up with stories much more serious in tone. For instance, I wanted to show the employers of these cleaning women only allowing them to eat and drink off plastic plates and cups or not allowing them to use the toilet. There is a gap lost between reality and art. It is, of course, impossible to tell everything in one film but I thought I must tell it in such a way that the audience will not be able to escape from reality. I thought that way because we live in a world where everything we try to avoid as clichés is actually more real. Although clichés offer a more direct confrontation space, the first thing you try to escape is confrontation. So, these two layers came on top of one another and pushed me down to tell the story from greater depths. Another matter is a paradox I discovered when I focused on the relations between these women from two different classes: The shift of the class conflict from an employer-employee dichotomy to a slippery big sister-little sister dynamic, and the concealment thereof, not to be seen. I mean, exploitation is in a way slipped under the rug through the re-positioning of employer women as 'big sisters'. That's the thing I spent the most time on. I wanted to show the situations and behaviours in which the insult and the exploitation are accidentally blurted out, not easily seen, are not initially deemed hurtful but sink in later on, esoteric and in between the lines.

Were you concerned that Nesrin's problems in the city, starting with Cefo leaving her, could symbolically be construed so as to argue that these problems were the result of the absence of a man in the house and that the woman was left all on her own?

Yes, I had that fear. However, I believe that I prevented that with the negation by means of the character of Şero, a man who is physically there but is in fact absent. That was not an aspect I particularly worked on but from the beginning of the story the one who left was Cefo, and the one left behind was Nesrin. I never gave up on that idea just to dissipate this fear. I do believe, however, that through the Hatun-Şero relationship I get the audience to ask, 'What would be different anyway if Cefo were around? Would anything be different if he had stayed?' Ultimately, we learn that Nesrin pushed Cefo out of her life and the reason was just that. The fact that he was

physically there but not actually present... For me, the institution of marriage represents a bond in appearance only; I've seen many times how great a distance there is between two people in matrimonial union. Therefore, the questions of 'what is marriage or family, or does marriage or family really exist?' were more important for me than the possibility of being misunderstood.

How did you decide to use a hand-held camera all through the film? How do you think this aesthetic preference supports the story and affects the world built in it?

While I was imagining the film during scriptwriting, the scenes were coming to life on their own. When I first thought about this, I realised that my characters did not have fixed constants in their lives. There were two classes I was going to show. I pondered many times whether I could narrate the stories of those who have constants and those who don't using the same camera style, and if I did, what kind of a feeling it would generate. I first thought to have the camera steady in middle-class houses and have it mobile in our ladies' flats, but later on I opted for a perpetually mobile camera, remembering that I was to show the middle-class houses from the perspective of the poor women. The actual camera was to bring onto the screen the inability or the pell-mell struggle of getting a foothold in life, as related to the lower classes, which was my motivation for this preference. My cinematographer, dear Meltem, also encouraged me a lot to do it this way. So we had to work a great deal on a cinematographic language that is not independent from the film's content. Instead of putting on grandiloquent plans and imagery, we worked hard on a language that could convey all that distress. I could say this for the whole process of the film; what I was looking for was not a culmination of impeccable aesthetic choices, but rather a plain style with its flaws that could convey the feeling of the film.

Interview: Ayça Çiftçi, Istanbul, January 2016



Ahu Öztürk was born in Istanbul, Turkey in 1976. She studied philosophy at Ege University in Izmir. In 2004, she directed her medium-length debut film, *Sandık/Chest*. *Toz bezi* is her first full-length feature film.

Films

2004: *Sandık/Chest* (48 min.). 2010: *Open Wound* (21 min., Episode in: *Açık Yara/Tales from Kars*). 2015: *Toz bezi / Dust Cloth*.