

# A “Golden Age” Puzzle with Female Audiences of Yeşilçam: Nostalgia, Melodrama and Gender

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**Abstract:** This study focuses on the ways in which the feeling and rhetoric of nostalgia are constructed and made sense of on the basis of the memories of women who went to the movies in the 1960s and 1970s and who watched mostly Yeşilçam melodramas. Experiencing cinema and going to the movies with diverse goals and meanings, these female audiences of Yeşilçam not only provided information about the cinema practices of the past when talking about their memories, but also expressed their feelings, desires and beliefs related to the past. Looking at memories of female cinema audiences suggests looking at the structures of feeling involved in the transformation of experience to memory, and of memory to history in the relationship between the individual and the collective. In line with this suggestion, this article analyzes the feelings of nostalgia in the narratives of historical female audiences by using oral history methods, which I call the myth of the “golden age” and “desire for wooden chairs”, within the framework of experiences and memories of cinema. The analysis shows that female audiences (as historical screen audiences) construct an ambivalent narrative between sense of nostalgia and anti-nostalgia when they recall memories of Yeşilçam melodramas, and sheds light on how women experience and make sense of nostalgia in different ways.

**Keywords:** Golden age, nostalgia, melodrama, female audiences, Yeşilçam

**Öz:** Bu çalışma, 1960’lı ve 1970’li yıllarda Türkiye’de sinemaya gitmiş ve çoğunlukla Yeşilçam melodramlarını izlemiş kadınların hatıralarından yola çıkarak nostalji duygusunun ve retoriklerinin anlam ve kuruluş biçimlerine odaklanmaktadır. Sinemayı ve sinemaya gitmeyi çok çeşitli anlamlar ve amaçlar çerçevesinde deneyimleyen Yeşilçam’ın kadın izleyicileri bu hatıralarında yalnızca geçmişin sinema pratikleri hakkında bilgi vermemiş, geçmiş hakkındaki duygularını, arzularını ve inançlarını da ortaya koymuştur. Kadın izleyicilerinin hatıralarına bakmak bize bireysel ile kolektif arasındaki ilişkide deneyimin belleğe, belleğin de tarihe dönüşü esnasındaki duygu yapılarına bakmayı önerir. Bu öneri doğrultusunda makalede tarihsel kadın izleyicilerinin anlatılarındaki “altın çağ” miti ve “tahta iskemle arzusu” olarak adlandıracağım nostalji duygusu, sinema deneyimi ve bellek çerçevesinde ele alınmaktadır. Analizler, tarihsel izleyici olarak kadın izleyicilerin Yeşilçam melodramlarını ve sinema deneyimlerini hatırlama biçimlerinde geçmişe özlem ile geçmişten kaçınma arasında ikircikli bir anlatı kurduklarını gösterirken, kadınların nostaljiyi nasıl farklı biçimlerde anlamlandırdıklarını ve deneyimlediklerini ortaya koymaktadır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Altın çağ, nostalji, melodram, kadın izleyiciler, Yeşilçam

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## Introduction: Moments and Winds that Bring Out Nostalgia

They are such memories that they can never be repeated, such hopes that they can never be achieved. We sort of feel that, which is why our memories and hopes that are so dear.

*Bir Tereddüdün Romanı [The Novel of a Hesitation], Peyami Safa.*

Why do we use the word “wind” to refer to nostalgia in daily language? Why do we think the two go together? “A wind of nostalgia”, a “wind of nostalgia blew past”, “a wind of nostalgia from the 60s”, “she blew a wind of nostalgia on the scene” and even “a wind of nostalgia on Spotify”<sup>1</sup>. These stock phrases compare nostalgia to a wind. Whether we use them intentionally or not, the answer to the question posed at the beginning lies in the etymological origins of the word “wind”. *Rüzgâr*, the Turkish word for wind, is a compound word consisting of the Persian words *rûz* (meaning “day, time, light or daytime”) and *kâr* (meaning “doing or making”). With connotations like “day, period and time,” *rûzigâr* means also “world, age, fate, fortune and luck” in addition to its weather-related meanings of wind and breeze.<sup>2</sup>

The respondents in this study – which is based on the oral history research conducted for my Ph.D. thesis that I examined the ways in which experiences of going to the movies in the 1960s and 1970s are remembered today – made frequent references to this wind from the past, to “those times” or “those days”. In the process of remembering, memories are narrated around images, objects, feelings and spaces of the past, and during this narration, we sometimes feel a sense of effort to place things where they are believed to belong. When we view these stories as narratives and constructions, however, we realize that this is not a simple desire to “put” things in their proper places. At this point, it would be useful to look at what Ricoeur said about Edward S. Casey’s famous book “Getting Back Into Place: Toward a Renewed Understanding of the Place-world” (1993). Ricoeur (2012) says that Casey’s title suggests something like a nostalgia aiming to put things back in their place, “it has to do with the adventure of a being of flesh and bone who, like Ulysses, is in his place as much in the places visited upon his return to Ithaca” (pp. 169–170). This is because “The navigator’s wanderings demand their right no less than does the residence of the sedentary person. To be sure, my place is there where my body is” (p. 170). What

1 A search of the word “nostalgia” turns up a large number of song lists on Spotify – an international digital music, podcast, and video streaming service that allows access to millions of songs and other content via a web interface, computer program or mobile app.

2 <https://www.etimolojiturkce.com/kelime/r%C3%BCzg%C3%A2r>

the elderly respondents<sup>3</sup> wanted recognition for was exactly this, bearing witness to an age. The testimony of "we were there,"<sup>4</sup> expressed in statements like "we saw those days" and "we lived through those years," can be likened to the wanderings of that navigator.<sup>5</sup>

The interviewees, weaving narratives that were based on their own perceptions of time and place to create certain images in the minds of listeners, making an effort to make the times they witnessed comprehensible through their memories of the cinema, revealing the many contradictions and similarities between Ricoeur's "narrated" time and "constructed" space (2012, pp. 171–172):

Narrative and construction bring about a similar kind of inscription – one in the endurance of time, the other in the enduringness of materials. Each new building is inscribed in urban space like a narrative within a setting of intertextuality. Narrativity impregnates the architectural act even more directly, insofar that it is determined by a relationship with an established tradition wherein it takes the risk of alternating innovation and repetition. It is on the scale of urbanism that we best catch sight of the work of time in space. A city brings together in the same space in different ages, offering to

- 3 An important note is warranted here: The use of elderly people as sources for a study (e.g. in an oral history) is controversial as the interviewees' comments may be unfounded, romanticized, overly nostalgic or not very "reliable" (Henige, 1982: 46). One reason for this is that elderly people may not "remember easily" or misremember, although this argument is problematic, because as Huggett (2002) notes, if we were to claim elderly people are unreliable sources, this would imply that we assume young narrators are completely reliable and do not need verification, which would be wrong for all narrators including the elderly (2002: 242). Huggett also criticizes Henige's warning to oral historians against what he calls the rose-tinted glass effect, saying that it is based on a rejection of the possibility that individual narrators can be critical when conveying their experiences, and views elderly people's narratives as nothing more than nostalgic recreations, disregarding individual differences (2002: 242–243). Huggett supports his criticism with examples of how elderly people are positioned in many academic disciplines.
- 4 Ülkü Tamer's (2012) article entitled "*Biz yaşadık*" ("We lived through it") is a perfect example of this proud testimony: "It is one thing to learn about and evaluate an event afterwards, and quite another to live through it. For example, my generation lived through the April 28 event in 1960, while later generations researched, learned and read about this from newspapers, journals, books, and narratives. They may be able to evaluate it better than we ever did. *Bu we lived through it*" (p. 63). Claims that "We lived through the golden age of cinema, too" provide evidence of a nostalgic way of remembering the film-making, screening venues, and audienceship of the era: "We did not watch a movie years after it was released, with a detached, logical, objective and critical eye. We did not look the actors up in encyclopedias. John Wayne has a famous saying, 'I am not an actor, I am a reactor.' Maybe we were interested in reactors, not in actors. Once the light went out in the hall, our hearts ruled our minds. We felt either joy or anger. When we laughed, we laughed from the heart. For we were in 'Nakıp Ali's Movie Theater' (p. 63–64).
- 5 This can also lift the curtain on the historical reality behind the fact that women are exuberant today when describing the feeling of witnessing things and getting involved in events, and the spirit of wandering brought about by cinema and going to the movies. This was because cinema was also a tool for breaking the routine, doing something other than carrying out tasks considered "simple", being somewhere other than home and its surroundings, being out and about, having some free time, and engaging in a leisure activity.

our gaze a sedimented history of tastes and cultural forms. The city presents itself as something to be both seen and read. In it, narrated time and inhabited space are more closely associated than they are in an isolated building. The city also gives rise to more complex passions than does the house, in as much as it offers a space for displacement, gathering and taking a distance. There we may feel astray, rootless, lost, while its public spaces, its named spaces invite commemorations and ritualized gatherings.

Narrative and construction in the stories of past moviegoers refer, respectively, to the time that is revealed in praise of the “good old days”, and the construction that is achieved through the criticism of “those days are gone, the current situation is such and such”. This approach resembles a construction of the past in the here and now, and an argument that memory is a construct. The narratives revealed changes in movie venues, through the demolition or closure of some and the repair and restoration of others, and we thus witness a narrative that swings back and forth between a sadness related to the shared experiences, values and social relationships rooted in those places are not reproduced in today’s venues, and pride at having witnessed that age. This narrative is most visible upon encountering the “unfamiliar.”<sup>6</sup>

### The Object of Nostalgia: Desire for Wooden Chairs

Open-air cinemas were one of the most popular venues for viewing Yeşilçam melodramas. Referred to also as “summer cinemas”, these places were places for cheap entertainment consisting of a large screen and hundreds if not thousands of wooden chairs, allowing people to watch movies also from the balconies and roofs of nearby buildings, and even from treetops because they had no walls. These places were more flexible and noisier than indoor movie theaters, where the audiences could be more relaxed and “sincere” in their behaviors when watching a movie and where social and cultural encounters took place (Erkan, 2015; Akbulut, 2017; Kayhan Müldür, 2021).

The wooden chairs were the most frequently mentioned – remembered – memory when talking about going to the movies in the 1960s and 70s, and particularly to open-air cinemas. In some venues their wooden chairs were tied to one another or fixed to the ground to stop people from removing or breaking them in excitement,

6 In his article entitled “das Unheimliche” (1919), which discusses the concept of *unheimlich* in its modern sense through A. Hoffman’s short story “Der Sandmann” (“The Sandman”), Freud says the concept is the exact opposite of the terms *heimlich* and *heimisch*, which refer to “familiar,” “local” and “belonging to home,” and is used because it refers to the frightening aspects of the “unknown” and “unfamiliar”. “Not everything that is new and unfamiliar is frightening”, but new things can feel eerie and can easily frighten you, which can occur in different ways (1919, p. 2).

while others had special cushions on them, sewn at home, to make them a little more comfortable. As another memory, boys would kick the chairs to signal their interest in the girls sitting on them, yet it was as if the more uncomfortable the chair, the sweeter the movie felt.<sup>7</sup>

How women remember the movies they once watched on wooden chairs reflects also the moral statements made in the classical narratives told through Yeşilçam melodramas, particularly by family movies. In these movies, people are expected and manage to be stoic in the face of any disasters they may face or poverty they may live in, to be content with their lives, loyal to their friends, and thankful for what they have, and most importantly, to be "human". The wooden chair served as a reference to being poor but proud, poor but happy, and poor but content – a classical theme in Yeşilçam movies. What matters is not what you sit on, but what you share, with whom, and how you enjoy yourself. This is why, in the words of one interviewee, "young people nowadays are never satisfied" and are "greedy", whereas the "hungry but happy people" of the past never had high expectations and said "some bread and butter would suffice".

In the nostalgic narrative that emerged in the interviews, the desire for wooden chairs represented the disappearance of everything good, beautiful and aesthetic in the past – the honesty, solidarity and unity, or in other words, the myth of the "golden age". It is not that the wooden chair itself is missing, but rather that an "empty space" now exists that cannot be filled. In the words of Tanpınar: "We certainly do not like these old things for their own sake. What attracts us to them is the emptiness. We are looking for a part of ourselves in them, a part that we believe to be missing because of our internal quarrel, and whether or not any traces of it still exist." (Tanpınar, 2014, p. 213). We are thus compelled to think about why some women try to fill this void with Yeşilçam melodramas, being unable to enjoy contemporary movies, but watch old movies again and again with the same feelings of happiness and excitement.

7 Today, open air cinemas in Turkey feature loungers and pear cushions rather than wooden chairs, ticket prices are higher, and people consume chips and popcorn instead of sunflower seeds and soda.

## Movies with Songs: Melodramas

A new movement began after these cheerful movies as movies based on songs started to be made. These were usually Turkish classical music songs, and we loved them because we didn't really have the chance to watch singers perform in concert; we could only see them in their movies. There is a movie I always remember based on a Turkish folk song – a Nuri Sesigüzel movie entitled *Kara Yazım (My Ill Fate)*. I remember the songs and whatnot, very clearly. I have the kids search for it on the Internet and find it. It is a nice movie in which a woman is forced into prostitution, and Nuri Sesigüzel falls in love with her. Nice songs, really ... Tearful songs, so to speak ... We cried a lot

(Saliha, 1962, Lüleburgaz).

The term “melodrama” is derived from the Greek word “*melos*”, meaning song, and “drama”, meaning play, performance or movement. The Turkish Language Society's dictionary defines *melodram*, the Turkish word for melodrama, as follows: a) a dialogue with songs between a choirmaster and an actor in Greek tragedies, b) a type of play in which actors enter and exit the stage accompanied by music, c) a type of play based on sensational and sad events in modern theater, and d) sad, touching.

The “golden age” of Yeşilçam from 1960 to 1975 was also a “golden age” in the production, screening and audienceship of melodramas as a way of creating meaning and experiences. The trajectory of melodramas in Turkey prominently features such emotions as desire, fear, anger and joy, with plots centered on the conventional ideas of masculinity and femininity, reproduced by the dominant patriarchal ideology in an environment of rapid cultural, social, political and economic change. The narratives of Yeşilçam are based on dichotomies, and the constant conflict between the modern and traditional, the urban and rural, the Western and Eastern, the ugly and beautiful, the poor and rich, and the good and bad. Melodramas contain “pathos (a strong display of feelings of sympathy and compassion), moral dichotomies, excessive and exaggerated emotions, special meanings assigned to specific objects, sounds and things, excesses arising from the accumulation of psychic energies – suppressed by the narrative by blocking full expression, satisfaction and solution – in specific elements such as lineage, family and inheritance, and finally, a tension between law and desire” (Arslan, 2010, p. 85). These are, however, the characteristics of only the content of melodramas, as according to Singer (2001), the defining feature of melodramas is the “reproducible pleasure” of their form.

When it comes to the experience of womanhood, in the words of Depeli, Yeşilçam melodramas “socially frame the experience of womanhood, and construct it as a naturalized phenomenon and/or a narrative of fate” through these stories (2016, p. 126). Depeli uses the word “damage” to describe the ideological effect of popular movie

narratives on women, and this damage is clearly apparent in the narratives of the historical audiences of Yeşilçam on their cinematic experiences. The representations of women preferred by dominant ideologies and found in popular Yeşilçam movie narratives were reproduced by the respondents as they spoke about their memories of cinema, which is sufficient grounds to argue that the damage is real:

We female audiences in particular watched these movies with a naive appetite, and got carried away. This was because once you eliminated all the valid reasons for not believing in these movies, which were colored in the so-called "Abdurrahman color" style, occasionally contained shooting mistakes, and were full of rushed scenarios and exaggerated acting, some emotion or knowledge still remained that we were ready to buy. In other words, we were always left with a surplus in our hands (Depeli, 2016, p. 127).

In its conservative and nostalgic format, melodramas end by returning to the field of innocence, regardless of where it may have started (Williams, 1998, p. 65). The opening scenes of Yeşilçam melodramas usually depict moments of "innocence" in a happy life, or the "age of purity", which is then disturbed by a threat, usually from the outside, that disturbs these moments or purity. The moments of innocence and fields of purity thus turn into things that need to be earned back, as happiness is conditional on earning these moments/fields back, while endless grief awaits in case of failure (Doxtater, 2012, p. 21).

The 12 women I interviewed, using the oral history method – the youngest was born in 1964 and the oldest in 1932 – were among the first audiences of Yeşilçam melodramas when they were released. During our interviews, while the respondents displayed an ambivalent attitude toward melodramas, the main subject of this study is this attraction to and repulsion by the past – in other words, how memories go back and forth between a yearning for the past and the desire to avoid it. The focus is on how women recall these movies in the context of female audienceship, making fun of and laughing at the deficiencies, errors and problems with these movies, but turning serious and embrace those days long gone as "cherished memories" when it comes to values, emotions and virtues.

Arslan (2010) compares the ambivalent relationship with Yeşilçam to the ambivalence one feels in front of a mirror or under the gaze of other people (p. 75). The narrative of endless love in Yeşilçam melodramas, lovers united for eternity when they cannot come together in this life, punished criminals, women who "turn beautiful", resolved misunderstandings, mistakes corrected, painful experiences that are forgotten easily, sins forgiven – whatever happened remained private, sobbing ended, tears were wiped away with a handkerchief and the last thing that is remembered – being the last scene of the movie – is a feeling of relaxation and

relief. If the relief is absent, on the other hand, there is nothing but feelings of irretrievable loss and constant grief. The past, however, is sometimes tripped up by the present, and disappointment may be remembered that instantly removes the charm of happy images,<sup>8</sup> and a hole is thus created in the narrative of the marvelous past. For example, the streets were not safe at all in those years – the 1970s. While people trusted one another back then, you could not go out after 6 PM as a simple cold could result in death, exacerbated by the shortage of medical physicians. Being a single woman or a widow was difficult. Workers had to fight their bosses, and peasants their landlords. Last but not least, “love was just sweeter”, but as one of the respondents observed, “no one was able to be with their first love” (Melahat, 1957, Istanbul).

### The Gender of Nostalgia – Gendered Nostalgia

Nostalgia is a compound word consisting of the Greek word *algos* [ἄλγος], derived from “*algea*” meaning pain, suffering and trouble, and the word *nostos* [νόστος], derived from “*neomai*” meaning return to home/nest/hometown. “Homesickness”, on the other hand, observed first by Johannes Hofer in Swiss soldiers, was the name given to a condition that was said to be “curable” and had such symptoms as exhaustion, sleeplessness and loss of appetite. Today, interestingly, this “condition” has become a form of medicine used for treatment in which refuge is taken from these uncanny modern times (Niemeyer, 2014).

If we were to follow Raymond Williams and think of nostalgia as a “structure of feeling”, we could argue that this structure of feeling contains a perspective that yearns for and thus affirms the past, from a place (here and now) that is increasingly “devoid of values and compassion”. Thus, the nostalgic subject tries to find/construct the ties and values that they believe to be threatened, diminished, loosened and in retreat by looking to the past, which they feel reminds them of who they really are (Tannock, 1995). However, Tannock also notes that the nostalgic object does not have to view the past as “a field of overall happiness, stability, peace or freedom”, as stimulated by the past, they may want to rejuvenate their weakened sense of

8 “As it turns out, Yeşilçam was a bad imitation of Western movies and emotions. The weird thing is that we find ourselves carried away, once again, by the attraction of the feelings of sadness and pride. We talk about how these melodramas remind us of things that we used to have, but that are now lost, and sigh with a feeling of sadness triggered by this absence” (Arslan, 2010, p. 76). Thus, the stories of melodrama audiences provide an excellent example of the identification with the familiar and distancing from the unfamiliar found in the narratives of Yeşilçam that constructs both us and them.



agency by retreating to the past from the present to try to repair the sense of loss that they feel "today" (p. 454).

Boym (2009) views the concept of nostalgia as a "historical feeling", and makes three important points. The first is that nostalgia is not opposed to modernity, as the two are in fact contemporaries. Nostalgia and modernity are siblings, like the two faces of Janus. Aside from being the expression of a local yearning, it is also the result of a new understanding of time and space that cuts across the local and universal. The second point is that although nostalgia is mainly associated with a yearning for a specific home or hometown, that is to say, for a space, it is in fact a yearning for a lost time. This lost time refers to one's childhood, youth, first love, dreams and innocence, to the "empty picture frames" of the past,<sup>9</sup> and in essence, to the "slow-motion" rhythm of daily life. In a sense, it is not the past that we are after, but time itself. As we run out of time and our trust in people, we take refuge in the "small" world of those familiar and known faces, sounds, colors and smells. This refuge resembles Bachelard's (1996) house of "dreams",<sup>10</sup> and Baudelaire's description in his poem *Le Voyage*: "Ah! How vast is the world in the light of a lamp!/ In memory's eyes how small the world is!"

Boym's third point is that nostalgia is not always about the past, as it can also have future-facing aspects. Fantasies of the past are shaped by today's needs, and therefore, have a direct effect on the reality of the future, and having this perspective of the future allows us to take responsibility for our nostalgic stories. Unlike melancholy, which is limited to the field of the individual mind, nostalgia involves a connection between the individual and collective stories, and between

9 The empty frames mentioned in the song "*Eskidendi, çok eskiden*" ("It was in the past, way past") by Sezen Aksu implies that we are not yet mourning our losses: *Remember everyone were friends/remember we used to play/remember the frames were empty/remember our drunken youth/remember when the songs did not hurt so much/it was in the past, in the past, way past.*

10 In his *Poetics of Space*, Gaston Bachelard aims to demonstrate that "the house is one of the greatest powers of integration for the thoughts, memories and dreams of mankind." And he argues that the main requirement for this integration to take place is "daydreaming." The house is a place where one can store their belongings, a shelter that protects a person from "bad" weather such as rain, storm, wind, or scorching heat, and a space that soothes and relaxes the soul. However, the main benefit of the house is that it allows daydreaming in peace and protects the dreamer (p. 34). This is because "Thought and experience are not the only things that sanction human values. The values that belong to daydreaming mark humanity in its depths." Thus, Bachelard argues that life at home, which is the first universe for human existence, is warm, protected, and closed, and this is the reason why life begins well (1996: 34). Through daydreaming, the different houses in our lives become entangled with one another, and protect the treasure of past days. In other words, when we recall memories of our old house, we go back to the motionless land of our childhood (to a time when the rhythm was slow, in the words of Boym, to childhood), we go back to that motionless land called "the past, way past." We establish things, we establish happiness. We comfort ourselves by reliving hidden memories. (This issue of comforting, in turn, requires preserving what is good. For we are comforted by good memories, not by bad ones.)

the individual and collective memories, although nostalgia has also a utopic aspect, even though it does not directly point to the future (Boym, 2009; Huyssen, 1999).

Gayle Greene (1991) begins her article entitled “Feminist Fiction and the Uses of Memory” with two quotes from Lee Sanders Comer (1972) and Monique Wittig (1969) that call on women to “remember who you are,” and *reminds* them that in the relationship between women and memory, men have shaped women’s past, present and future by appropriating their memories. Greene says, “Though there are nostalgic tendencies in some feminist efforts to reclaim the past, the novelists I am interested in critique nostalgia and disallow complacency about the past,” and “Nostalgia is a powerful impulse that is by no means gender-specific.” This is because everyone longs for an image of the past – for home. The words “We were poor but in peace” reflect the belief that the past had some warmth, virtue and peace that made poverty bearable, despite all the material deprivations. However, just as remembering can have different forms and meanings for men and women (Lourie, Stanton and Vicinus, 1987), nostalgia can also mean different things to women and men – and to different groups of women – and can be perceived, experienced and narrated differently (Greene, 1991, p. 296).

In *An Everyday Magic*, Kuhn (2002) noted that men and women spoke in different ways when listening to her interviewees’ stories of growing up. The male interviewees spoke more about their childhood than their adolescence, and described how they would re-enact what they saw in the movies, turning them into stories and making up games. Women, on the other hand, shared little about their pre-adolescent years, and used more comprehensive, in-depth and varied themes when recalling their memories of growing up. Most importantly, as I have also observed in the field, women recall their memories in a more collective manner, with a greater connection to other people and the communities around them, than men. In response to the question, “What do you remember about your first experience of cinema?”, the most detailed answers, containing the most variety in terms of other people, events, places, and emotions, were those provided by the female respondents.

There are two different perspectives of the argument that nostalgia means different things to men and women (Greene, 1991). The first perspective argues that women tend to be more nostalgic than men as the present has little to offer to them, and thus, they prefer to live mostly in the past (and with the past). This is also why they are also the ones who tend to keep diaries, photo albums and family records. The second perspective argues that women would of course be stimulated by the enviable times of childhood and youth, and remember fondly the vast green spaces of a past when there were not as many buildings, and when fragrant non-

GMO tomatoes were grown, but they are also aware that these were traditional and restrictive times when they were told to “know their place” as women. As a result, the argument is thus that women do not yearn to return to these times. Moreover, these were women who would do anything to be able to go out at night and go to the movies – and without permission at times, risking a beating – and it would not be very accurate to say they yearn to return home.

### The Myth of the Golden Age in Nostalgic Rhetoric: The Female Audiences of Yeşilçam or Seamstresses

“People trusted one another in the past,  
we didn’t fear anyone. (...) No one went out after 6 pm.”  
“Who wants the old times? We are in heaven now.”  
“We had nothing in the past. Now we are able to see the world.”<sup>11</sup>

In her novel *Orlando*, Woolf compares memory to a capricious seamstress, saying she “runs her needle in and out, up and down, hither and thither. We know not what comes next, or what follows after” (2014, p. 100). The women I interviewed also had no problem running their needle hither and thither. This is not, however, because they are capricious, but more like trying to solve a puzzle. I cannot thus help but think that nostalgia, in terms of the ways in which women experience and assign meaning to it, is a needle that women run *in and out, up and down, hither and thither*.

In the 1960s and 70s, going to the movies was not only a popular and affordable form of entertainment in Turkey, it was also a social activity, more so than when compared to today. It became apparent during the oral history interviews conducted for this study that cinema and going to the movies provided different opportunities to women, including “having a good time”, “hanging out with friends”, “dating”, “meeting new people”, “going out”, “indulging in luxury”, “seeing the world” and “learning how to look, behave, talk and flirt, and where to put the fork and knife on the dinner table”. The following quote from Saliha (1962, Lüleburgaz), who lived in Istanbul from the age of three onwards, provides some insight into her experiences of cinema in those years, and those of others:

11 These statements are not from the fieldwork for my PhD thesis, but from other interviews conducted with elderly women on the history of food and culture. For a study of nostalgia, I was compelled to quote these statements as they poke holes in the narrative of the magnificent past. I would like to thank them, and each and every woman who agreed to be interviewed.

At the time we did not really have a choice. We considered ourselves lucky if we were able to watch a movie, any movie, and we watched all of them with great interest. The important thing was to be able to go to the cinema. I was a little bit obsessive about elegance. As I said, it was not possible for me to see different cultures in my social environment. I lived in a place where people migrated west. I learned about table settings from the movies. I really liked the tables in movies, at a time when not everyone had tables in their homes. We did not have tables in our culture, people had *sofras*. I used to turn the chests at home upside down, and make myself a table. I would then set the table. I also never forgot the words I heard, and I tried to use words that sounded different in my daily life. For example, I heard the expression “I beg your pardon” from a movie. It was not a common expression at the time. There were Arabic expressions too, like “*Berhüdar oldum efendim*.” (“I am truly delighted, madam”) We found expressions like these very interesting. We did not really know what they meant, but we could guess from the content and the plot (Saliha, 1962, Lüleburgaz).

Women viewed cinema as a field for social and cultural exchange, appreciating some aspects of old Yeşilçam movies, and finding some aspects to be ridiculous or absurd. Nevertheless, some women found the melodramas and their predictable storylines, and their lack of any ambivalent characters, more emotionally satisfying than foreign movies, even though they contained less action:

We could tell that some characters were definitely bad; we knew they would do something horrible. We also knew the good characters, and expected them to do good ... If the movie was a little too cheerful, some would complain, saying they did not get to cry at all (Ayşe, 1964, Yozgat).

Turkish movies were, well... You know how someone has furniture given as charity, and they keep turning and rearranging them to make them look new ... You go to all this trouble, and they show you only one or two things. So I did not really like them. I preferred going to foreign movies. They felt more realistic. Turkish movies were monotonous. It was always the same. If it was a romance, for example, you knew how it would end. With the foreign movies, however, I could not predict the end that easily. I don't know if it was because of my age, but we were really curious about them. I like captivating movies. When I knew how a movie was going to end, I just up and left (Yıldız, 1960, Erzurum).

When women recalled a movie during our interviews, they also remembered the smells and sounds of the movie theater, and what they experienced and felt at the time. In their minds, they were back with the people they watched the movie together with, remembering where and how. This shows, adopting a Halbwachsian perspective, that remembering is not an individual, as-is and exact act. As in the case of childhood memories, memories of cinema also spring from social and gendered places and relationships. The nostalgic pleasures that arise during the narration of personal stories also carry traces of the social. For example, one respondent

described how she begged the carpenter in the neighborhood to make her a sword after watching and greatly enjoying John Wayne movies, giving us clues as to how childhood thought at the time, and providing a social history of being a child (or a young girl).

We had a carpenter in our neighborhood. I used to go and beg him to make me a sword. “Uncle Zekeriya, can you please make me a sword?” He would say, “why do you ask for a sword when none of the boys want one?” (*she laughs*) My mom used to make me a cape from sugar sacks, and my older brother, who worked with heating stoves, painted the crescent and star on some cardboard. There was a post underneath our house. He cut a piece of cardboard, painted the crescent and star on it using stove paint, complete with gilding and whatnot, and pinned it to the post. Zekeriya *Amca*, may he rest in peace. “Why do you want one when no one else asks for it?” he would say. I did everything. I played house, I also pretended to be a warrior (Lale, 1951, Adapazarı).

In those years, when going to the movies at least once a week or once every two weeks was the norm, going to the cinema was still considered “unusual” for women. Movies allowed women to break the repetition of daily life, and going to the movies was undertaken with different goals and in different ways by each woman, giving rise to different stories. Those years that one “yearns for” represented a time when they could still get excited:

My blood brother was named Yasemin. Our two families ... would go to women’s matinees with our moms ... The women’s matinees were so nice; they were on Wednesdays and we went to them a lot. There would be singers at those matinees, and we would watch them perform live. We did not dance, though there were some that would. [Yasemin’s] mom would make stuffed peppers and pastries. We used to have that nice thing in our lives, and now we don’t. We remember those days, though. They were our best days. We used to get excited, like “Yay, we are going to the movies. What movies do they have?” We would check out the posters. We would get excited thinking about the schedule of the screenings, and get worked up and be happy (Meryem, 1954, Bursa).

The respondents recalled even painful memories of the past with smiles and longing, relating how much they had cried, been scared or blushed during a movie, and the female respondents also gave clues as to what was supposed to make them sad, frightened or shy in those years. For example, *Senede Bir Gün [One Day a Year]* (Ertem Eğilmez, 1970), one of the most frequently mentioned movies by the interviewees, was a “very naive, nice and emotional” movie, in their own words,<sup>12</sup> but as we delve

12 Watching the movie today, we can see that it contained scenes about ideal womanhood in love and in family, as was the case in many melodramas. One example is the scene where Nazlı (Selda Alkor) gifts her hair to Emin (Kartal Tibet), saying “My grandma used to say, a woman must be the angel in the house.”

deeper in the interviews, the women who cried the most watching this movie went on to tell stories about why they stayed away from their sweethearts, and how and where they learned about love.

There was also Hülya Koçyiğit's *Boş Çerçeve [Empty Picture Frame]*, which was also very nice, but *Senede Bir Gün* was something else. (*whispering*) I loved someone ... I could not have him because he and his family were Persians. You do not marry your daughter off to a Persian ... I don't know, that was what my late mother used to say, and it just didn't happen. Maybe I was influenced by them, I was so emotional, I mean ... I still have a card he sent. He posted it from Balıkesir. That card is still in my album. You know, here were these postcards in the past. Maybe that was the reason why it felt so emotional, I don't know ... It's all in the past now (Ayfer, 1940, Istanbul).

Women's narratives about their past loves sometimes paralleled those of classical Yeşilçam melodramas, but when it came to their own life experiences, they adopted an attitude of avoidance of the past, and criticized the old days:

Nazlı liked my older brother, but my mom said no because she was Alevi. There was this crazy notion at the time, this ignorance. Otherwise, Nazlı was a great girl, she knew sewing, embroidery ... She was working too. My brother liked her too, naturally. They exchanged letters and whatnot. The girl even ran away from home and came to us. We left this house and moved to a house down the street, and she followed us there. She would say she had suitors, but she did not want them, she wanted my brother. My mom told her that he was engaged. In the end, he could not marry that girl. My brother was a silent type. He could not bring himself to say "but I love this girl". Mom always got her way. She was such a woman ... She was petite but fierce. She did not allow my other brother to marry his first love either. We learned that he loved the daughter of our landlord in Koca Mustafapaşa. My mom objected, saying she went out too much, walking the streets and whatnot... What I am trying to say is that no one was able to marry their first love. The only exception was my other brother, Kemal, and he had to abduct his bride. That was how he managed to do it (Melahat, 1957, Istanbul).

I never got married. I never got engaged, never got married. I did love someone back in the day, but it didn't work out because my mom looked down on him. He was Kurdish. My mom wanted to marry me to a Muslim. Now, wherever I go, they will keep talking about how I am an Armenian, and they will call me an infidel. This is marriage we are talking about, not just for a few days (Victoria, 1950, Mardin).

Melahat's observation that "no one was able to marry their first love" was not limited to her own experience. The stories of Melahat, Ayfer and Victoria all speak about the social and cultural history – that "crazy" history, in Melahat's words. The ambivalent attitude of women who described "nice, close-knit neighborhoods" but who were not allowed to marry the sons of those same neighbors, open a window into the relationship between the individual and the collective, and the emotions

involved in the transformation of memory to history. Here, emotions swing back and forth between the actual and the (supposed) ideal.

The respondents stated that they “had no fear at night at all, because no one would hurt you, there was this trust”, but describe also how the opportunities to “go out” and “make choices” had been so limited in the past. Ceyda (1952) displayed both attitudes during our interview, providing a good example of both the yearning for and avoidance of the past:

You could not go alone at night. You had to have your mom, sister, or brother with you. You had to go as a family, or with the neighbors. We used to be so close to our neighbors in the past, we were like relatives. We were always together anyway, day and night. In small places like ours, there was no going out at night; everyone would just sit outside their doors and the children would play. We would play, and our families would chat with the neighbors in the street. They opened an open-air cinema in a large square, and people in the nearby houses would watch from their windows. It was nice.

Social life back then was something else, it was unlike anything today. Of course, everything was limited back then. It was frowned upon. A young girl could not go out very much. Forget about going to the movies ... Everything was limited. We could not go out to the shopping district or a friend’s house alone. We could not go out on our own. There is freedom now, which is very nice. Young people are educated, both boys and girls. Everyone is educated.

Women compare the “old” actors, movie theaters, cities, relationships, values and loves with those of the present day, and experience nostalgia as a structure of feeling that underlines and cherishes the good aspects of the past. This comparison involves, as in the melodramas, clear-cut boundaries between the good and bad, friends and foes, while these clear-cut boundaries of the past are now becoming vague, which was often viewed as a sign of moral decay and depravity by the respondents. The keywords that are most frequently used when describing this process are “peace,” “trust” and “neighbors” – making a stark contrast between the tastes of the past and the tasteless present:

There was peace. People had less to eat, but were happier. Why? Because they never had high expectations. They were content with having some bread and butter, and were not greedy like the current generation. People today are never satisfied. Family members, relatives and neighbors had closer relationships with one another. When a neighbor was sick, others would cook her meals and clean her house. (Melahat, 1957, Istanbul).

Sweetie, there was trust in the past, you could go out without any fear whatsoever. Can you go out without your husband or partner now? ... People trusted one another in the past, it was so nice. Singers were nice, neighbors were nice. If they had Turkish movies today, I would still go to see them. We still go, but I don’t like them now. They have reruns on TV, but I don’t get the same taste, that old taste is no longer (Fatma, 1958, Kayseri).

And the pride of having lived, seen and been educated by these old days is shared again:

Say you were to ask for a glass of water from your daughter. You would go, “Rabia, dear, would you be so kind and fetch me a glass of water?” See? [knocking on the table] How can you not miss the old manners? Today, you ask for a glass of water saying “Get me a glass of water”, and they talk back, saying “Get it yourself.” This is how it is now. We saw those days (Nimet, 1932, Istanbul).

The hidden pride in having witnessed “those days” and “that age”, on the other hand, suggests that whatever deviates from the familiar is uncanny. Objects, places and values that feel different are now pushed outside the boundaries of the familiar, while criticism of the present is most clear in the uncanny moments:

The people [of Büyükada] ... When I first came here we used to go to the shopping district. We would arrive 4 or 5 hours earlier than our acquaintances. Now, when I go, there is not a single acquaintance. I return home without seeing anyone. You miss those things, naturally. Even the shopkeepers miss the old days. They say the good old days are gone. We used to ... Our exchanges were different ... Everything was different. You are young, you wouldn't understand it because you haven't seen it, but it has changed a lot, life has changed a lot. (Maria, 1936, İmroz).

Sometimes, however, some of these unfamiliar things are described as “innovation” and “convenience”. For women who say their lives have become easier thanks in particular to technological advances, “innovation” does not refer to a nostalgic field; what gives rise to a feeling of nostalgia is the alienation in terms of relationships and values:

We lost respect, order and rules. Disrespect for rules is everywhere ... The market is full of thugs. Everyone is a thug in this market of life. This a free country, they say, what is it to you? We lost all of these things, isn't that enough? When you don't have love and respect, you have nothing. We lost solidarity, we don't support one another now. We lost many of things, it was such a beautiful life. This is not to say I am missing the good old days. New is better. We have access to everything now. If you are away, you can just call using this phone. My mother was the one who suffered from that separation, we did not have a phone. Someone from the post office would come riding a bike saying “you have a call from Canada”. On Canada time too. We would up and go, and they would talk. So, when I say yearning for the past, it is not to say I would like to live in the past. No, I want to live in the present. We have planes now, isn't that nice? Can you say horse-driven coaches are better when you have a car that takes you there in 5 minutes? Yes, coaches are nostalgic, but if I am to make it on time, I would rather take a taxi (Lale, 1951, Adapazari).

Lale is of the opinion that women were more highly regarded in the past, saying, “If women are disregarded, they are disregarded today.” Lale recalled begging Uncle



Zekeriya to make her a sword after seeing Western movies, while in the same interview she gave clues as to how women were expected to dress (another case of the *seamstress* running her needle hither and thither):

Sitting in the bank with a loose t-shirt ... I still can't get my head around it. I go to the bank now, and I compare it to the time when I was working. Suits ... Matching shoes and bags ... High heels ... Pantyhose ... Frilly shirts under suits ... Now I don't see any of that. I don't like these things; it is not supposed to be like this. Believe me, women used to get more respect. If women are disregarded, they are disregarded today. It was different in the past. They would open the door for us when we went somewhere.

This quote serves as another example of how the ideal past is constructed through narratives, or how the traditional/ideal womanhood of the golden age is reproduced:

Chiffon dresses were all the rage. I always remember, there were fewer buildings in this neighborhood, and it used to be windy. The skirts of the older girls' chiffon dresses would ruffle in the wind. I still remember it vividly. People started to wear their hair like movie artists. Compared to today, if I were to make a comparison, women were definitely more feminine at that time (Saliha, 1962, Lüleburgaz).

The words of Saliha, who says "women were more feminine", carry traces of a narrative that focuses on the aesthetic aspects of womanhood and fashion, on attraction, beauty and sex appeal, and that at the same time reproduces the fiction of the idealized femininity and masculinity of the past through feminist fears. This is very similar to Janice Doane and Devon Hodge's (1987) description of nostalgia as "a frightening, anti-feminist impulse". According to Doane and Hodges, nostalgia "is a desire for an imagined past that affirms the traditional place of women at a time when men were men and women were women and truth could not be questioned, a desire that permeates American politics and mass culture" (p. xiii-3).

## Conclusion

This study focuses on the ways in which the feeling and rhetoric of nostalgia are constructed and made sense of on the basis of the memories of women who went to cinema in the 1960s and 1970s and who watched mostly Yeşilçam melodramas. The twelve female cinema audiences I interviewed, using the oral history methods, were also among the first audiences of Yeşilçam melodramas. The examples of memory narratives discussed in this article concentrate on generational memories of cinema-going in what has been discursively construed as the Golden Age of Turkish cinema, a period figured around the Yeşilçam era of the 1960s and 1970s. Nostalgic

and anti-nostalgic narratives and the women's experiences/memories of cinema-going were analyzed descriptively and discursively. During the interviews the main subject of this study is the attraction to and repulsion by the past. The focus is on how women recall their memories about the Yeşilçam melodramas in the context of female spectatorship, making fun of and laughing at the deficiencies, errors and problems with these movies, but turning serious and embrace "good old days" long gone as cheer up memories when it comes to values, emotions and virtues of the past.

Women's cinema experiences with various purposes these female audiences of Yeşilçam not only provided information about the cinema practices of the 60s and 70s in Turkey, but also expressed their feelings and thoughts related to the past in a nostalgic or anti-nostalgic ways. Looking at the memories of female cinema audiences suggests us to look at the structures of feelings involved in the transformation of experience to memory, and of memory to history in the relationship between the individual and the collective. With this suggestion, this article analyzes the feelings of nostalgia in the narratives of historical female audiences by using oral history methods, which I call the myth of the "golden age" and "desire for wooden chairs", within the framework of experiences and memories of cinema. The analysis shows that female cinema audiences construct an indecisive narrative between the sense of nostalgia and anti-nostalgia when they recall memories of cinema-going in a different way.

The oral history interviews conducted with women who went to the movies in Turkey in the 1960s and 1970s showed that they all had a "place" they missed, but each made sense of and imagined nostalgia in different ways. As they recalled their experiences of cinema, the female audiences of Yeşilçam displayed an ambivalent attitude, going back and forth between yearning for the past and the desire to avoid it. Comparing the past and the present in their narratives, the respondents praised the "values" and "morality" of the past, but were critical of the past when it came to "freedoms", "opportunity" and "education." However, nostalgia also made the women rethink "who they are" in the light of what they remembered about their childhood, in particular, and review the past "dreams" that shaped their present lives. Thus, nostalgia is occasionally used as a structure of feeling that motivates and heals, while as a historical and collective feeling, nostalgia seems to have an aspect that unites people, strengthens the sense of belonging, and builds partnership and community. That said, we can also see traces of rhetoric of nostalgia that reproduces the imagined womanhood of an ideal past.

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