

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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***The Tale of Three Sisters* (2019)**

Emin Alper

OVERVIEW

The Tale of Three Sisters is the third full-length feature film of Emin Alper. Although the main themes of the film are very similar to those of his previous films, in this film, Alper depicted the story of sisters rather than brothers as in his other films, and although the film seems on the surface to be about the relationship between sisters, the same themes of paranoia, inequality, uncertainty, uncanny situations, isolation and the collapse of a whole family are present in this film as well.

The film was selected to compete for the Golden Bear award at the 69th Berlin International Film Festival. Some of the awards won by the film are the 2019 Istanbul Golden Tulip (National Competition-Best Film), Best Director (Emin Alper), Best Actress (Cemre Ebüzziya, Ece Yüksel, Helin Kandemir), Best Original Music (Giorgos and Nikos Papaioannou), the FIPRESCI Prize (a National Competition) and the 2020 Sofia Best Balkan Film.

CINEMATIC NARRATION

In Alper's cinematography, a panoptic perspective is considered to be a striking feature. The final frames in Alper's films attract attention in a very determined way. The final frame is quite remarkable, even in different stories in different films, which could be a result of acting with images. In *Kız Kardeşler*, the final scenes show the father gathering the children around him and telling stories. They climb the hill together in *Tepenin Ardında* and the execution in *Abluka* are other examples of this technique. In this way, the films never actually finish. It is clear that they are powerful endings which captivate the audience. The final image appears as an obstacle which prevents the films from reaching their potential and self-determination. When lighting the interior of the space, Alper prefers light sources which we can see in shot. The details of the film which make such a difference are presented in wide-angle and magnificent views in some places and by successful shooting angles in other places. In addition to all these elements in his films, the music factor is also very important. Also, we enter a village with impressive views, exquisite light and an unknown location. We often come across these uncertain villages in Alper's films. In particular in *Kız Kardeşler*, we can observe Alper's emphasis on storytelling; he visually creates a fairy-tale atmosphere and uses geography as a character.

Alper's third full-length feature film *The Tale of Three Sisters* is full of details. The viewer is greeted by familiar faces in a familiar geography and if you look at the framing, you will see that the characters are always carefully arranged. The director focuses on the emotion in a character's face with a simple expression and conveys this to the audience in a very effective way. A reddish-brown colour is predominant in his films. The lighting technique in his films takes into account the position of the character in the frame and enters the frame from the side. It can be seen that the cinematographic expression of the director's films is reflected minimally. The limitation and finality which remain outside the central structure of his films serve the dramatic structure by addressing it from a different perspective and in this respect, his films draw a specific boundary and these limits extend depth and meaning beyond the frame as required by the rule of thirds.

Emre Erkmen, the director of photography for *The Tale of Three Sisters*, said that just as the camera has only one place for some scenes, the same applies to the light. Erkmen tries to make natural light with a small but broad light source. The main thing is that the film looks simple yet sophisticated. The main reason for the continuous shooting of the road scenes used in the film is that the film is a story of return. The three sisters in the story return to their village and cannot go back to the city from there. This inability is reflected in the roads which have no exits. Erkmen is a cinematographer who wants to shoot the movie just as it is, entirely realistic, which was why he thought it would look unnatural to remove the car windows or the headrests from the seats in the scenes in the car. In a simplest detail,

he did not deliberately remove a stain on the glass: he is someone who thinks that this will destroy art. More precisely, he thinks that being overly smooth, clean, correct and sterile in scenes destroys art. According to Erkmen, nothing should be too perfect, it should be natural.

They didn't focus on a single character in the film; they wanted all of the characters to form a whole within themselves. In the scene in which Reyhan and Nurhan talk at home, they contrasted the cold blue of the outside with the warmth of the inside. But the warmth inside is a deceiving factor because all the characters are actually always alone. What Erkmen really wanted to do in *A Tale of Three Sisters* was to use light to describe the characters. He wanted the fire-light inside the house to reflect the inner world of the characters as well as being beautiful, and he used shade to achieve this.

The night scenes in the film were actually shot at night. They broke the blackness to show the village in a general form. An example of this is that a distant mountain can be seen in the background of the fireside scene. Normally it is not possible to see that mountain from there, but they deepened the scene by breaking the light and giving a view of the mountain. All the lights in the film are dimmed. According to Erkmen, the beauty of a place does not make a cinematographer better at his job. Of course it helps, but the editing expertise of a cinematographer is also very important. A cinematographer should understand fiction as much as a director does, and must know where and how a scene will be edited.

CHARACTERS

Reyhan:	The eldest of the sisters.
Nurhan:	The middle sister.
Havva:	The youngest sister.
Şevket:	The father of sisters.
Veysel:	Reyhan's husband; a shepherd in the village.
Necati:	A doctor.
The village headman	
Hatice:	The mad woman of village.
Gökhan:	Reyhan and Necati's son.

SYNOPSIS

From a general perspective, the film is about three sisters who have lost their mother and who want to get out of the village where they have grown up. The sisters are Reyhan, Nurhan and Havva, and their father has sent them to the town, several hours away from the village, to work as a domestic servant for a wealthy family. But all three girls had to return to the village for various reasons.

The film deals with the life story of three sisters. Reyhan is the eldest daughter and was the first to be sent as a maid to Doctor Necati's house, but after having sexual intercourse and becoming pregnant there, she was sent back to her father. There is confusing information about who Reyhan had sexual intercourse with throughout the film. Since Reyhan's relationship and the resulting pregnancy were seen as a problem, she was married to Veysel, a half-wit shepherd from the countryside. After this confusion, Nurhan, the middle sister, is sent to the Necati household to replace her sister. The film is full of uncertainty and there is no clear cause and effect relationship. After Nurhan returns home, she does not want to enter the house again and knows that village life is not suitable for her. The third daughter, Havva, is a very tidy and amenable girl. She learns how to read and write in the house where she is sent as a maid, but she has to return home after her foster child there dies. Necati wants to stay in the village on the day when he brings Nurhan back and a raki table is prepared for him. The girls' father tries to settle Havva, the youngest sister, in Necati's house. Veysel sits down at the raki table but he is told to leave it because of his behaviour. Reyhan goes out to get a cauldron from a neighbour and sees Veysel, who has fainted, and she takes advantage of him sexually. Later, Veysel argues with Necati about whether the child is his. Nurhan, on the other hand, argues with Havva, thinking that Havva is trying to get her place in Necati's house. When Veysel gets into a fight with his wife, he drops the cauldron into the fire causing the baby in its cradle to catch fire and die. Veysel walks out and joins a gang of bandits, but he comes back to the village and confronts Reyhan, who tells him that she is pregnant but that she cannot give birth to a child from him, and Veysel commits suicide. The story ends with hope for Reyhan, desperation and death for Nurhan and uncertainty for Havva.

THE PLOT

The starting point of the film is a road. The story unfolds in a mountain village. Havva is taken back to her father's house back in the village as the child of the house where she has worked as a servant in town died. Previously, Reyhan had been sent home pregnant and subsequently had a son Gökhan. She is married to a half-wit shepherd named Veysel. Veysel is afraid of darkness and the shadows of trees and does not want to be a shepherd. When he tells Reyhan's father this, Şevket just makes fun of him.

Scorpions While they are sitting one evening, Havva sees a scorpion next to Gökhan's cradle. Sevket kills the scorpion but Reyhan jokes that it is still alive. Şevket is afraid, but when he realizes that she is joking, he throws the dead scorpion at his daughters and the girls scream. The scorpion becomes a metaphor in the film.

Re-adapting to rural life The next day, Havva collects up the dirty linen and takes it outside to wash it. Her father does not do any washing. For Havva, the sheets are very dirty but in the rural village there are no ways to wash them frequently. Şevket tells his daughters that Necati will come to the village on the following day.

The arrival of Necati The next day, Necati arrives in the village with the middle daughter, Nurhan. Nurhan had gone to work as a maid for Necati, but because she could not get used to the work and did it badly, she has had to return to the village. Necati tells Sevket that he will stay in the village until the evening. As soon as Nurhan arrives, they argue with Reyhan. Şevket then tells Havva to go with him. He tells Reyhan to deal with a churn. Havva sets the table for Necati, Sevket and village headman. Şevket says that he wants to send Havva to the Necati family's house as a serving maid. Just then, Veysel arrives; he wants Necati to give him a job in the town but Necati refuses because Veysel demands too much. Hatice is the village mad woman; she comes to the house but no-one opens the door, so Hatice starts to cavort around outside. Coal was still being mined in the village even though the mine has been closed. Foreign men have been walking around the village. Reyhan hears a voice outside, goes out and sees Nurhan eating earth from the wall of the house. Reyhan calls her sister inside to deal with the churn. Nurhan tells her older sister that she is afraid of Özgür's penis who is the boy of foster family and that she doesn't touch it when she takes him to the toilet at bedtime (he is the young son of Necati). Reyhan goes out to take the boiler and when she sees Veysel unconscious, she has sexual intercourse with him.

Gossip At midnight, Veysel comes to speak again but when he starts to fight with Necati. Sevket and the village headman beat him. Havva tells Reyhan about a dream which she has had and Reyhan opens her mind to her sister. She admits that Gökhan's father is actually Necati but Havva does not understand. Veysel, very angry, returns home, and playing with fire, he tips the cauldron over the fire. Asleep in his cradle, Gökhan burns to death. Veysel runs away. Necati leaves the village the next morning.

Winter and illness Time passes and winter comes. Nurhan falls ill and stays in her bed. Reyhan wants to take her sister to the doctor in town but Sevket tells her that Necati will come to the village. When Reyhan returns home, she sees Veysel, who has been hiding for a long time, in front of the house. She tells him that she is pregnant but will not give birth to his child. Veysel commits suicide by hanging himself on a tree at the entrance to the village. Nurhan's condition worsens and the whole family sit with her waiting for Necati to come. Şevket tries to pass the time by repeating rhymes to his daughters. Nurhan dies in the snow-covered village.

THEMES

Inequality and class difference The subject of domestic service is treated on its own and constitutes the main theme of the film. In this film, we have an opportunity to observe class differences in a sharp and particularly dramatic way. Another theme is gender inequalities. In particular, the confrontational mood of the three girls is an indication of the emphasis on being unable to feel at home anywhere. Inequality in general is a key theme; this is a film which makes the viewer feel the wounds of inequality on the human soul. It depicts situations in which gender and class inequality are deeply felt; it is like poetry of inequality

Roots Another main theme is the failure to adapt to a life which compels us to servitude and creates a longing for our roots. Also involved are class inequality, injustice, hope for a better life, and gender inequality. Wherever we go, the land where our roots are will always pull us back. Social inequality and the unfairness of life are also presented and an example of this in the film is Necati's home as the place where all three girls are sent. Although this gives them a better life, the sisters cannot lose hold of their life in the isolated village where they have lived uneducated and in difficult conditions. There is a better place where people are ready to give them a better life in return for their labour. They are constantly expecting something good from them.

No escape, Themes such as the role of men and women in rural life, the feeling of being trapped, the desire to escape, a yearning for city life, and class inequality are all explored in the film. Sisters being sent by their father to wealthy families to work as servants, the sadness of girls in the hands of their fathers while they sit at home and dream about a better future, and the father's decisions on everything in the girls' lives are vivid examples of the roles of men and women in rural life. We see the feeling of being trapped and the desire to escape in the sisters. Although the sisters constantly want to get away from the country life and live in the city, they find themselves tied to their father's house and trapped in a country life. This creates minor rivalries and jealousies between them. The fact that they cannot escape the country life increases the depression in their inner world. The film is set in a remote mountain village where time and space are uncertain; the village and their lives are squeezed between high mountains. A long, bumpy, winding road is shown at the beginning of the film: at one end is the city and at the other is an undeveloped village, hemmed in by mountains, full of obstacles and with not many people. In the film, the principal themes are the feeling of being trapped, the desire to escape, envy of city life, social inequality and the financial difficulties which we see in many stories of village life.

The hope for a better life The theme of admiring urban life is one of the most pervasive themes in the film. As well as the girls' desire for city life, there are other characters who feel the same, one of whom is Veysel. The pressure which he puts on Necati to give him a job in the city can be given as an example. In the film, urban life is generally shown as something magical, where job opportunities abound and where life is easier. Sending the girls to help urban families with better jobs represents the theme of status difference. In addition, Veysel works reluctantly as a shepherd in the village and is constantly humiliated and belittled, whereas Necati, a city doctor, is depicted as a professional and respected person.

The end of the whole family The fact that the traditional roles of authoritarian and strong men and weak and needy women are not included in the film is another element which draws attention. The sisters are strong characters, people who can do anything for the sake of their dreams. The film focuses on the moods and the dreams of the characters; it shows that being a family back together does not come true because of the characters' expectations and dreams.

CHARACTER ANALYSES

Reyhan Reyhan is the eldest daughter. After her mother died, she was sent to work as a servant for Necati's family. She helps Necati's wife Neriman in the kitchen and takes care of the children. But when Neriman finds out that Necati and Reyhan have slept together, she sends Reyhan back to the village, and when she returns to the village, she has to marry Veysel to allay village gossip. Reyhan's son is born, he is Gökhan but she does not want him to grow up in the village like she had to and wants to go to Ankara to live with her aunt. But this proves impossible and she has to stay in the village.

Guilt Reyhan was the first sister to meet Necati and Neriman; she is a reliable leader among the three sisters and she has lived and worked in the town; we watch a character who feels guilty about not being able to hold on to Necati and Neriman throughout the film. This is clear to the audience. The feeling of guilt is expressed by what she says at the start of the scene by the fire-side: 'Oh my lamb, don't be naive like me. I left this house and went to that house with lice and wearing tattered panties. Neriman pulled me round. First she washed me and bought clothes for me. Then she helped me to look like a woman. But I was ungrateful to Neriman. Human beings are ungrateful. Don't you be ungrateful. I will say this: when I left this village, I was a louse, but in that house I thought that I was a woman – more than that, I thought that I was the lady of the house. Then I opened my eyes and I was back in the village'. As can be understood from Reyhan's rueful comment, the feeling of guilt towards

strong people becomes a huge problem for her. The point to be considered within the scope of the film is that she was driven by the desire to return. To put it more clearly, Reyhan's sense of guilt on the basis of her guilty conscience against strength evolves into a desire to return to *Nejat* through her middle sister Nurhan.

Dsire Although Reyhan sometimes acts like a mother to her sisters, she sometimes does not hesitate to argue with them. While she was working in domestic service in the city, she became pregnant by someone whom we do not fully know for most of the film and is sent back to her village where she is married to the half-witted shepherd Veysel in order to prevent gossip. Eventually, she had a child named Gökhan. Although we expect to hear an obvious story of abuse from Reyhan, who came home pregnant and did not say who the father was, there is a devastating revelation when she tells Nurhan about the pleasure she received from her sexual encounter with a naughty smile. This is dramatically opposed to the image of an innocent victim with her head bowed in shame, which was what the family had expected. Reyhan is the eldest of the sisters and the most female; she is a woman who relishes her freedom. She is a brave woman who does not suppress her sexual needs as a woman, but prefers to live however she wants and whenever she wants.

Nurhan is the middle sister. When Reyhan was thrown out of Necati's house, Nurhan went to replace her as a servant. But she does not want to work as a maid so she does not do things properly and gets fired. Even though she does not want to go back home, she has no choice but to return to the village.

Rebellious She is the most rebellious person in the family. She is open-eyed, she does not relinquish her right to anyone, and she speaks her mind. So she is not prepared to do the washing, she makes herself ill and at the end of the film she dies because of her illness. In other words she dies because of her rebellious spirit. She is very honest and even so outspoken as to hurt people. She is an angry but a good young woman, an ambitious person who softens after hurting people and tries to win over them, and her wrong actions cause her first to be fired and then to die. She becomes very sick after eating soil and she dies.

Afraid of sexuality Because of her sister's experience, Nurhan is afraid of sexuality. She pays the price for hitting the baby who cannot hold in his pee because she does not want to look at the child's penis. By making herself sick in order not to be fired, she does not help herself in any way.

Havva The youngest sister is Havva. She is the most docile member of the family. She is depicted as a quiet, compassionate child, but as resourceful as her older sister Reyhan. She has dreams and gets along well with children.

Emotional. Havva is the most emotional sister. When the mother of the house where she goes as a maid dies, she has to return to the village. She helps her older sister Reyhan with the housework. She tries to establish empathy with all the other characters.

Smart Havva is also perceived as the smartest; because she watches everything around her, remains unresponsive to what is happening, does not oppose, obeys and does what she is told, behaves sensibly, does not cause any tension. Throughout the film, she is more moderate and warmer than her sisters, but like her older sisters, she is fascinated by city life and wants to study in the city. Despite her generally moderate attitude, when it comes to going to the city, we see her combative and quarrelsome side.

To be rewarded Like a reward for her attitude, she leaves the family home at the beginning of the film but comes back with gifts. Unlike her two sisters who were both expelled from the same family for different reasons, Necati specifically asks for her to work in his own house because of her attitude.

Şevket Şevket is a father who tries to put pressure on his daughters. He is someone who tries to show his compassion through a joke. At the request of his deceased wife, he tries to send his daughters away from the village.

An unconventional father He says that his daughters are ungrateful to him but he is glad that he is with his daughters. He is a father who has raised his daughters on his own even though he can marry again, and he has accepted that his daughters will grow away from him so that they can have a better

life, and he sent them away to work as domestic servants. Although his daughters return home because they cannot stay in the town, he is also happy to be with them. He is constantly making jokes with them, he treats them with compassion, and although he tries to insist that they must listen to him, he treats it as a joke when he fails. Even when his oldest daughter returns home pregnant, he does not punish her. Şevket is stuck somewhere between being an authoritative and a caring father; in fact he seems pleased to be with his daughters but he also thinks that he should fulfil his dead wife's wish that the girls should live in the city. The fact that he jokes with his daughters is an indication of this. Şevket is totally unlike the traditional character of a secretive, unresponsive and authoritarian father figure who is generally juxtaposed with a nagging and hysterical mother who complains constantly. He is someone who cannot establish his relationship with his daughters through power and he proves his masculinity through his son-in-law Veysel, whom he considers to be less male. The reason for this is, of course, because the sisters constantly mock and joke about their father's ability as a story-teller.

Veysel He is known as a half-witted shepherd in the village. He was married to Reyhan who was pregnant. He does not like being ridiculed.

Coward Although Veysel is afraid of the dark, of shadows and of death, his job as a shepherd means that he has to stay out on the mountains at night. He is the most striking character in the film. After he meets two strangers on the mountain, he feels that has to take his wife and child and move to the town.

Angry Because of his subordinate status, he always pushes at the boundaries and his persistent behaviour can be regarded as the triggering event in the film. We see that Veysel is so insistent because he is tired of being deceived and despised. As a reaction to all this, Veysel pours out his anger at the innocent baby. He comes face to face with the tree on which his father had hanged himself, and although he regrets his action, he suffers the same fate.

Necati He is a doctor who used to live in that village. He is married and has two sons. He tries to act in a fatherly way toward the girls but he likes to know that the girls and the villagers need him.

Pretending Necati is someone who seems to be doing people a favour but actually despises them and only wants to satisfy his ego. He is a cowardly father who could not take responsibility for his illicit relationship with Reyhan and could not admit that he is Gökhan's father. He is the employer of the sisters and represents the only salvation for them, but he is very aware of this and does not fail to take advantage of the situation.

Upstairs/downstairs Necati is the head of the house where the sisters were sent as maids by their father. While she was working there, Reyhan became pregnant and rumours about Reyhan and Necati started in the village. As a doctor in the city, he is far above the rural people in terms of status, and as a result of this superiority, he is one of the most respected characters in the film and the villagers do everything that he says. He is also the most dominant character in *Kız Kardeşler*. He tries to balance his oppressive side with a remote paternalism. Although he tries to continue to represent a kind of hope for the sisters, he keeps his compassion under control despite knowing how much they need it. It is important for him to appear to welcome everyone. Although Necati does not seem to like the sisters, Şevket, Veysel or the village headman who are deifying him, he deeply enjoys it. Necati treats people with a humanistic approach but this is just one of his intellectual pretences.



Reyhan, the eldest sister, with the baby



Nurhan, the middle sister



Havva, the youngest sister



Veysel, Reyhan's husband



Şevket, the father of the three sisters



The first night after Havva's arrival home



The mountain village