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Acı Vatan (bitter homeland) revisited: Cold War labor migration and the transformation of the Turkish family

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ABSTRACT

This article revisits the idiom acı vatan ("bitter homeland") as a key Cold War emotional framework through which Turkish society interpreted labor migration to West Germany from the late 1960s onward. Treating acı vatan as an "emotional regime" (Reddy), it argues that migration reorganized intimacy—marriage, parenthood, domestic labor, and patriarchal authority—in ways inseparable from Turkey's deepening integration into US-led Cold War structures (Truman Doctrine, Marshall Plan, NATO) and the 1961 recruitment agreement with the Federal Republic of Germany. Situating Turkish cinema as a major cultural institution that translated geopolitical pressures into everyday moral feeling, the article analyzes three films—Dönüş (1972), Otobüs (1975), and Almanya Acı Vatan (1979)—as a Cold War archive of transnational family life. Dönüş foregrounds women's expanded labor and the fragility of long-distance patriarchal authority; Otobüs stages migration without family to expose abandonment and the collapse of relational infrastructures; Almanya Acı Vatan dramatizes moral panic around female mobility and the sabotage of women's migrant potential through patriarchal crisis. Drawing on Cold War cultural history (May, Westad, Klein, Kwon), affect theory (Ahmed), and transnational/diaspora frameworks (Brah, Hall, Gilroy), the article reads film as interpretive historical text (Rosenstone), showing how Cold War geopolitics became lived experience through the reorganization of care, honor, and belonging across borders.

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Methodologically, the article employs a qualitative comparative analysis of three migration films from the 1970s—*Dönüş* (1972), *Otobüs* (1975), and *Almanya Acı Vatan* (*Germany: Bitter Homeland*, 1979). The focus on this decade is deliberate: the 1970s marked a critical threshold when guest-worker migration ceased to be imagined as temporary and increasingly produced fragile, suspended, and uncertain family formations oriented toward an unstable return. Each film captures a distinct configuration of family life under Cold War migration: strained endurance sustained through women's emotional labor (*Dönüş*), the complete absence of family and the collapse of migrant citizenship (*Otobüs*), and the internal corrosion of patriarchal authority through moral surveillance and gendered violence (*Almanya Acı Vatan*). In analyzing them, the study reveals how the Cold War

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was experienced not only through policies and alliances, but through the emotional routines and moral expectations of everyday family life.

1. Revisiting Acı Vatan as a Cold War family history

The phrase *acı vatan* (bitter homeland) – crystallized in Şerif Gören's 1979 film but circulating widely in newspapers, songs, letters, and everyday discourse from the late 1960s onward – became one of the defining emotional idioms through which Turkish society made sense of the upheavals of labor migration to Western Europe. It describes a place that is both desired and painful, both home and exile, both a promise and a wound. It, in a way, captures the conflicting emotions migrants feel toward the country they must move to or depend on for survival. In Turkish migration narratives, it became synonymous with West Germany – a land offering economic opportunity but imposing emotional, cultural, and social hardship. Therefore, more than a melodramatic slogan, it functioned as what William Reddy (2001) terms an 'emotional regime' encompassing a set of historically specific concerns that migration made newly visible: the effort placed on marriages sustained through long periods of separation; the intensified agricultural and domestic labor that women had to shoulder in men's absence; the emotional and practical challenges of raising children across great distances; and the growing fragility of patriarchal authority when it could no longer be felt through everyday presence. These meant that the intimate reorganization of family structures could not be separated from broader societal anxieties about modernization, shifting gender norms, and the erosion of cultural belonging.

Besides, the emergence of *acı vatan* coincided with Turkey's deepening integration into Western geopolitical structures through the Truman Doctrine, the Marshall Plan, NATO membership, and intensified of US-Turkey strategic collaboration. These Cold War alignments reshaped Turkey's political economy and ideological priorities, embedding the 1961 bilateral labor agreement with the Federal Republic of Germany within a broader architecture of anti-communist alliance. Labor migration thus served both Western Europe's demand for industrial labor and Turkey's position as a reliable Cold War partner. Within this geopolitical realignment, the family acquired heightened ideological significance. Cold War developmentalist discourse framed the patriarchal household as the moral core of the anti-communist nation-state, to be defended through traditional gender hierarchies and sexual morality (May, 2008; Westad, 2012).[1] Against this ideological backdrop, labor migration became an arena of acute anxiety: paternal absence threatened domestic authority, women's mobility raised fears of moral corruption, and remittance-dependent households appeared suspended between prosperity and vulnerability. These domestic tensions were imagined not merely as social disruptions but as ideological risks, situating the family as a symbolic battleground for Cold War anxieties about cultural survival.

Within this landscape, Yeşilçam cinema became one of the most influential cultural structures translating Cold War ideology into everyday emotional life. In fact, social and political orders are reproduced not only through state institutions and formal policy, but also through cultural fields that shape how social change is made meaningful and legitimate (Villena-Oliver & Romero-Reche, 2024). From this perspective, crisis narratives need not be produced or funded by the state in order to contribute to the stabilization of

social order. Therefore, Turkish cinema – despite its commercial and non – state-funded character – played a central role in framing labor migration in Cold War Turkey not as an outcome of capitalism, but as a moral and familial crisis that requires emotional endurance, sacrifice, and narrative resolution.

As Turkey's distinctive cinematic culture defined by melodrama, star actors, musical films, social dramas, and low-budget but high-volume production in the 1960s and 70s (Arslan, 2011); S (Scognamillo, 1998)), Yeşilçam reached millions of viewers and played a central role in crafting national imaginaries at a moment when some of households were beginning to live transnationally. During this period, the industry produced an expanding body of films about labor migration. These films were not made for diaspora audiences – who often lacked access to screenings abroad – but for domestic viewers struggling to interpret the moral, economic, and emotional transformations that migration was introducing into everyday family life. In this sense, Yeşilçam's migration cinema functioned as a cultural repertoire for narrating and negotiating the emerging conditions of Turkish transnationalism.

This article argues that Cold War labor migration reconfigured the Turkish family as an emotional regime, reshaping authority, gendered responsibility, and intimacy across borders. Rather than treating migration as a purely economic or demographic process, it examines how Yeşilçam cinema rendered these transformations emotionally intelligible, translating geopolitical alignment into everyday family life. To investigate how Yeşilçam expressed these Cold War – era transformations in emotion and family, this article considers three films: *Dönüş* (1972), *Otobüs* (1975), and *Almanya Acı Vatan* (1979). The corpus is chosen with care: each film offers a different lens on Cold War migration and the reconfigured Turkish family. *Dönüş* highlights the redistribution of domestic labor and the destabilization of gendered authority in the father's absence. *Otobüs* offers a radical counterpoint by depicting migration stripped of families entirely, revealing the emotional collapse that follows when the Cold War family infrastructure disintegrates. *Almanya Acı Vatan* dramatizes the Cold War moral panic surrounding young women's mobility, staging female sexuality as a battleground for anxieties about Western influence and national honor. Taken together, these films show that Yeşilçam migration cinema is not merely a record of social change but a Cold War archive of how family structures were reshaped under transnational pressures. Viewed in this way, they demonstrate that the Cold War was experienced not only in foreign-policy debates or NATO bases but in the reorganization of intimacy – how people worked, feared, waited, communicated, cared, and imagined home across borders.

2. Literature review

Research on Turkish labor migration to Europe has generated an extensive body of scholarship since the 1990s, producing detailed analyses of mobility, gender, class, and state policy. Foundational migration studies of transnationalism conceptualize migration as a set of social fields connecting migrants, families, and institutions across borders (Glick Schiller et al., 1993), while ethnographic and sociological studies have demonstrated how households negotiate emotional, moral, and economic obligations across distance (Bryceson & Vuorela, 2002; Levitt, 2001). Within the Turkish context, scholars have shown that labor migration – especially to West Germany under the 1961 recruitment

agreement – reconfigured kinship structures, gendered divisions of labor, and domestic expectations. Seminal contributions by Abadan-Unat (2011, 2017), already highlighted the social dislocations of guest-worker migration, while studies by Akgündüz (1993), Kirişci (2017), Rottmann (2014) and Kaya (2007) explore how families navigate legality, hierarchy, and precarity within transnational regimes. These works collectively demonstrate that Turkish households were active sites of negotiation in response to migration rather than passive recipients of migration-driven change.

Yet despite its empirical richness, much of this scholarship is oriented toward policy frameworks, legal structures, and socioeconomic outcomes, offering comparatively limited engagement with the intimate, emotional, and representational dimensions of family life under Cold War migration. Parallel body of work in cultural and media studies addresses the representational dimensions of migration. Göktürk's (2003) influential work on migration cinema analyzes how Turkish-German films articulate themes of mobility, identity, and displacement. Aksoy and Robins (2003) discuss how Turkish migrants used media to fashion diasporic cultural identities, while scholars such as Berghahn (2013) addresses questions of race, hybridity, and visibility within European film cultures. Besides, Erdoğan (1999), Suner (2010), and Arslan (2011) offer some of the most comprehensive analyses of Turkish cinema, demonstrating how its melodramatic idioms, comedic conventions, star system, and narrative structures mediated collective anxieties about modernization, mobility, and national belonging. Their work firmly establishes Turkish cinema not merely as a popular entertainment industry but as a central cultural arena in which social tensions, including those surrounding migration, were interpreted, negotiated, and emotionally processed for mass audiences. Together, these bodies of scholarship confirm that film has been a key cultural site for producing and circulating the emotional and symbolic meanings of migration.

Despite this expensive literature in cultural and media studies, there remains no comprehensive analysis of how Yeşilçam films represented the emotional and familial transformations produced by Cold War labor migration to Germany, nor of how these narratives shaped domestic interpretations of transnational family life. Bringing migration and transnationalism studies into dialogue with Turkish cinema thus reveals a significant historiographical gap. This article addresses that gap by analyzing three key works—*Dönüş*, *Otobüs*, and *Almanya Acı Vatan*—to show how Yeşilçam translated global Cold War pressures into intimate emotional and familial narratives, shaping popular understandings of migration during a period of profound social transformation.

3. Theoretical framework & methodology

To situate these films within a broader analytical frame, insights from Cold War cultural history offer a crucial bridge. Of course, the emotional and familial dynamics represented in Yeşilçam's migration films did not emerge in isolation; they were shaped by a global ideological environment in which the household acquired heightened political significance. In this context, the regulation of family life became a key site through which Cold War states sought to manage social order, moral authority, and ideological loyalty beyond the formal institutions of politics. May's (2008) influential concept of domestic containment underscores how, across much of the Cold War West, the family was imagined as the moral nucleus of national stability – responsible for disciplining emotion, regulating

sexuality, and insulating society from ideological threat. Scholars such as Westad (2012), Dudziak (2000), and Suri (2003) further demonstrate that Cold War geopolitics penetrated far beyond diplomatic arenas, restructuring everyday social norms by encouraging states to govern reproduction, gender roles, and household order in the name of security. These perspectives clarify that the intimate tensions depicted in Yeşilçam's migration narratives – disrupted paternal authority, heightened anxieties about honor, the reallocation of domestic labor – were embedded within a broader ideological landscape in which global power struggles were routinely mapped onto the domain of family life.

Klein (2003) and Kwon (2010) expand Cold War cultural history by shifting analytical attention from high politics to the emotional structures that shaped everyday life. In *Cold War Orientalism*, Klein argues that US-led Cold War modernity operated not only through military alliances or developmental aid but also through narratives – stories of benevolence, aspiration, intimacy, and sentimental connection – that invited global publics to imagine the capitalist West as a desirable horizon of modern life. These narratives cultivated longings for prosperity and mobility while simultaneously generating anxieties about dependence, cultural erosion, and moral vulnerability. Kwon, in *The Other Cold War*, extends this insight by examining how the global Cold War produced what he calls emotional geographies of fear, suspicion, rupture, and loss. He shows that the Cold War was lived at the level of personal relationships: through grief over disappeared relatives and the breakdown of familial networks.

Together, Klein and Kwon demonstrate that the Cold War produced a distinctive emotional order-one marked by aspirations toward Western modernity alongside vulnerabilities generated by geopolitical asymmetries. Their frameworks offer a powerful lens for understanding Turkish labor migration and the reorganization of family life during the same period. The West appeared simultaneously as a site of opportunity and threat; familial separations generated hopes for advancement while also producing fear and moral anxiety. In this sense, the everyday experiences depicted in Yeşilçam's migration films – destabilized marriages, reconfigured gender roles, anxieties about honor, and the challenges of long-distance parenting – emerge not simply as personal dramas but as expressions of a broader emotional landscape structured by Cold War modernity. Here, while Klein and Kwon focus primarily on the US or East Asia, their insights are highly relevant to Turkey, a NATO member and semi-peripheral state whose modernization agenda and migration policies were deeply embedded within Cold War developmentalist perspectives.

Furthermore, theoretical frameworks on mobility and emotion offer additional tools for understanding how migration reconfigured Turkish households. Brah's (1996) concept of diaspora space emphasizes the fact that migration does not simply relocate individuals but reorganizes entire social fields: migrants, those who remain behind, and state institutions become mutually implicated in producing new geographies of belonging and obligation. Building on this, Gilroy (1993) and Hall (1990) highlight hybridity and fluidity of diasporic identity, showing how 'home' becomes unstable and negotiated identity once everyday life unfolds across borders. Ahmed's (2004) theorization of affective economies further demonstrates how emotions such as fear, longing, shame, and pride circulate through households and cultural narratives, attaching themselves to particular figures – mothers who wait and fathers who send money – thereby shaping how families interpret migration and its risks.

Within this emotional and theoretical landscape, *gurbet* emerges as a crucial idiom. In Turkish, *gurbet* literally refers to being away from home – dwelling in a distant or foreign place – and living in a state of longing and estrangement. More than a geographic concept, it marks a deeply emotional condition: a blend of homesickness, vulnerability, and ambivalent belonging with no direct equivalent in English. Historically, the term has captured both physical displacement and the psychic experience of living 'out of place,' encompassing loss (*kayıp*), longing (*hasret*), fear of moral decay, and the continuous expectation of return to the real home. In fact, during the era of Cold War labor migration, *gurbet* became the central language through which Turkish families articulated the moral and emotional consequences of mobility. The concept, basically, summarized the paradox at the core of the guest-worker system: movement promised economic advancement yet produced domestic crisis; it was desired and feared, temporary yet continuous, liberating yet destabilizing. In this sense, *gurbet* embodies what Brah (1996) describes as the double anchoring of migrant life: the persistent attachment to the homeland alongside the necessity of building a life abroad. This emotional vocabulary intersected with the rise of the phrase *acı vatan* widely circulated in newspapers, songs, letters, and later in Şerif Gören's film. Whereas *gurbet* describes the affective condition of distance, *acı vatan* names the contradictory space that produces it – West Germany as a site of economic promise yet emotional and cultural hardship. Together, these two idioms created a shared vernacular for understanding the reorganization of family life under Cold War migration regimes.

Yeşilçam cinema translated this condition into accessible visual narratives.[2] Through melodrama, political realism, and comedy, these films narrated *gurbet* as a Cold War emotional and domestic experience, showing how families absorbed and interpreted geopolitical transformations within the rhythms of everyday life. Within this framework, Cold War visual culture scholarship deepens this family-historical reading. Scholars such as Klein (2003), McAlister (2005), de Grazia (2005), and Carruthers (2011) demonstrate that Cold War cinema did not simply depict international conflict or ideological rivalry at the level of states. Instead, film industries across the Cold War world routinely translated geopolitical tensions into the intimate terms of everyday domestic life. Rather than showing the Cold War through military confrontations or diplomatic negotiations, these films embedded ideological anxieties in stories about households, marriages, gender norms, and familial responsibility. In this body of work, the home becomes a symbolic microcosm of geopolitical struggle: threats to national integrity are refracted as threats to the family, anxieties about ideological contamination become anxieties about morality, and global aspirations for modernity appear as domestic desires for comfort, consumption, and stability. This scholarship thus reveals how cinema served as a cultural mechanism that made abstract geopolitical forces understandable by locating them within the familiar terrain of domestic routines and interpersonal relationships.

Thus, following Rosenstone's (1998) framework of film as an interpretive historical text, this article approaches Yeşilçam's migration films not as transparent records of migrant experience but as cultural interpretations shaped by the ideological and emotional structures of their time. As Rosenstone argues, films create their own historical arguments through narrative condensation, symbolic imagery, and emotional framing. They reveal how societies understand history, rather than how events took place in reality. In this

sense, Yeşilçam's migration films provide insight into how Cold War Turkey imagined family, authority, mobility, and belonging under conditions of transnational change. At this point, Naficy's (2001) theorization of accented cinema further reinforces this approach. For Naficy, films produced under conditions of exile, displacement, or cultural marginality carry distinctive stylistic and narrative markers that reflect the lived experience of cultural in-betweenness – fragmentation, repetition, voice-over letters, and narrative oscillations between 'here' and 'elsewhere.' Here, it is worth to emphasize that although Yeşilçam was not an exilic cinema in Naficy's strict sense, its migration films adopt similar strategies: letters, for example, become narrative tools for managing distant authority and symbols of divided geographies. These features allow migration to be represented as a disruption of everyday routines rather than solely as economic mobility.

In this context, recent literature has moved beyond institutional and structural analysis to engage more fully with culture, representation, narrative, and everyday life as key sources for understanding social transformations (Li & Karimi, 2025). Within this broader turn toward cultural and narrative sources, cinema occupies a particularly privileged position, as it condenses social anxieties, ideological assumptions, and emotional expectations into accessible and widely circulated forms. This article aligns with that trajectory by treating Yeşilçam cinema not as a secondary illustration of migration history but as a historical-sociological archive through which Cold War labor migration and family life were made understandable to mass audiences. Film narratives are thus approached as sites where social structures, ideological projects, and emotional regimes intersected and became experientially meaningful. In fact, film narratives could be interpreted as active participants in the construction of social identities and power relations (Prathap & Kabaleeswaran, 2025). When applied to the context of Cold War Turkey, this perspective draws attention to popular cinema as a key site where questions of authority, belonging, and moral order were negotiated for domestic audiences. Building on this insight, the present study approaches Yeşilçam's migration films as cultural technologies that produced meanings of family, gender, and belonging under conditions of Cold War mobility. Rather than reading these films as descriptive accounts of migration, the analysis foregrounds how cinematic form, narrative structure, and affective cues shaped popular understandings of transnational family life.

Film-centered analyses have increasingly shown how emotions are mobilized and regulated through narrative and visual form in order to sustain social order (Heo, 2025). Drawing on this perspective, this article conceptualizes *acı vatan* not simply as a melodramatic expression of loss, but as an emotional regime through which Cold War migration was governed and moralized. Feelings of longing, guilt, anxiety, and sacrifice were not incidental to migration narratives; they functioned as emotional mechanisms that redistributed responsibility within the family and stabilized patriarchal expectations under conditions of transnational movement. Within this framework, Yeşilçam's migration films can be approached as cultural texts that translated broad social anxieties into accessible emotional narratives. Concerns about shifting gender roles, the erosion of honor, the risks and promises of mobility, and attractiveness of the West were presented through familiar melodramatic and comedic conventions. In doing so, these films transformed large-scale geopolitical processes – from NATO alignment to the expansion of capitalist modernity – into stories rooted in everyday family life.

Through their plots, character arcs, and moral dilemmas, Yeşilçam's migration films provided viewers with narrative tools for thinking through the tensions and contradictions of *gurbet*, offering emotionally resonant frameworks for understanding the changing place of the family in Cold War Turkey. At the same time, they mobilized familial metaphors central to Cold War nationalism – home as homeland, father as protector and return as redemption (Anderson, 1983; Davidoff & Hall, 1987; Yuval-Davis, 1997) – thereby transforming global ideological conflicts into intimate domestic dramas. In this context, threats to the family became legible as threats to the moral and symbolic order of the nation. Migration thus appeared not merely as an economic process but as a crisis of domestic authority, gendered responsibility, and emotional coherence. By foregrounding such dynamics, these films reveal how the Cold War was experienced not only in foreign policy debates or NATO bases, but in the reorganization of intimacy itself: in how people worked, waited, feared, communicated, cared, and imagined home across borders.

In fact, Cold War film scholarship highlights cinema as a crucial instrument of what Joseph Nye (2004) terms 'soft power': the capacity of states and political blocs to shape preferences, values, and worldviews through attraction rather than coercion. Therefore, movies do not simply entertain; they work to naturalize geopolitical positions by presenting them as part of ordinary, relatable human stories. Cold War films often embedded ideological messages – about national strength, moral order, or the superiority of a political system – within narratives of family cohesion, personal sacrifice, romantic loyalty, or ethical dilemmas. Because these themes resonated with everyday emotional experience, audiences were more likely to internalize the geopolitical assumptions they carried. Thus, cinema functioned as a cultural platform through which Cold War alliances, anxieties, and hierarchies became part of popular common sense. This methodological frame allows to interpret Yeşilçam's films not only as entertainment but as tools that mediated Turkey's uneasy entry into Western modernity (Sarı-Karademir, 2012). In this sense, Yeşilçam became a Cold War pedagogical apparatus: a cinematic space where audiences rehearsed competing desires for belonging, advancement, and protection. The contradictions of Turkey's geopolitical position – between NATO alignment and Third World solidarities, between developmentalist ambition and cultural defensiveness – were thus experienced not only in official discourse but also in the intimate sphere of film viewing. This viewing context is crucial for understanding how migration films helped audiences make sense of changes within Turkish households, translating global Cold War tensions into the emotional dynamics of everyday family life. Through this lens, cinema becomes both a historical source and a cultural laboratory in which Turkish society negotiated the emotional consequences of migration during a period marked by ideological polarization and political tension.

Methodologically, this article employs a qualitative comparative film analysis grounded in family history and cultural interpretation. It combines close textual analysis with a family-historical perspective to examine how Yeşilçam's migration films constructed domestic scenes, interpersonal conflicts, moral dilemmas, and emotions shaped by the structural pressures of Cold War developmentalism and transnational labor mobility. Rather than treating the family as a mere narrative backdrop, the analysis positions it as an active historical site in which ideological projects – nationalism, modernization, anti-communism, and gender discipline – were negotiated and rendered meaningful in everyday life.

The focus on the 1970s is deliberate. This decade marks a critical threshold in the history of Turkish labor migration, when guest-worker mobility ceased to be imagined as temporary and increasingly reshaped long-term family structures through prolonged separation, family reunification, and the growing uncertainty of return. It was also the moment when the promises of economic advancement through disciplined labor abroad came into visible tension with their social and emotional costs at home. Yeşilçam's migration films of the 1970s responded directly to this shift, offering some of the most sustained cinematic engagements with the reorganization of family life under transnational conditions.

The selection of *Dönüş* (1972), *Otobüs* (1975), and *Almanya Acı Vatan* (1979) is therefore analytical rather than representative. Together, these films form a comparative constellation: *Dönüş* depicts the strain placed on a rural household by paternal absence; *Otobüs* imagines migration in the absence of family altogether; and *Almanya Acı Vatan* stages the internal collapse of patriarchal family relations abroad. Across these cases, the analysis focuses on domestic scenes – such as letters, marriage, childcare, household labor, separation, and return – treating cinema as a cultural and affective archive through which family life was interpreted, moralized, and emotionally regulated during the Cold War. In this sense, Yeşilçam's migration films are approached as cultural technologies that shaped how ordinary viewers made sense of geopolitical transformations through the intimate routines and moral expectations of everyday family life. Therefore, rather than tracing a comprehensive history of migrant families in European settings, the article deliberately focuses on films that foreground temporariness, suspension, and familial fragility, treating them as symptomatic of an early Cold War migration imaginary.

4. Dönüş (*Return, 1972*): the myth of familial restoration

Dönüş (1972), directed by and starring Türkan Şoray, is a social melodrama about the emotional, economic, and moral pressures created by labor migration from Turkey to Germany in the early 1970s. The story centers on a young village couple, Gülsüm (Şoray) and İbrahim (Kadir İnanır), whose lives are pulled apart when İbrahim leaves their impoverished Anatolian village to work as a guest worker in West Germany. Here migration is depicted as both economic necessity and emotional rupture that reorganizes intimacy, authority and moral responsibility within the household. Besides, Şoray's authorship adds a further layer to the film's significance. As a woman directing a narrative about migration, an arena traditionally dominated by male filmmakers, she reorients the story toward the emotional labor of those who remain behind. Rather than portraying the migrant as the sole protagonist, she positions Gülsüm's endurance and quiet resilience at the center of the narrative. In doing so, she anticipates later feminist scholarship that interrogates how global mobility regimes disproportionately reshape women's everyday lives. The film's insistence on the centrality of female experience challenges male-centered national narratives of migration and opens space for thinking about Cold War modernity as a gendered project: one that relied on women's unpaid labor to stabilize the domestic sphere while men were mobilized in the name of national development. Thus, through Gülsüm's experience, the film visualizes how labor migration reshaped the Turkish household by reorganizing gender roles, redistributing labor, and destabilizing

the patriarchal order that Cold War ideology held up as the foundation of national strength.

When İbrahim leaves for Germany, the rural home becomes a site where geopolitical pressures, economic necessity, and moral expectations converge. In his absence, Gülsüm assumes responsibilities that had been traditionally linked with male authority: agricultural work, household management, and financial decision-making. In this case, the long, silent shots of her working alone in the fields serve as a visual record of a family structure stretched to its limits. Here, her responsibilities expand with the departure of the make breadwinner. *Dönüş* presents these shifts not as empowerment but as an unstable adaptation – necessary for survival but threatening to the ideological coherence of the Cold War family model, which depended on stable gender hierarchies and male presence.

What makes *Dönüş* analytically distinctive is its ability to transform the Turkish household into a microcosm of Cold War geopolitics. The home is not merely disrupted by migration – it becomes the stage upon which broader ideological anxieties are enacted. Throughout the film, the mise-en-scène emphasizes the vacuum created by paternal absence: wide shots of empty thresholds, half-open doors, unused tools leaning against the wall, and unlit interior spaces. These visual details evoke what Elanie Tyler May (2008) calls 'domestic containment': the effort to preserve emotional and moral order within the family under conditions of external ideological pressure. Here, containment is no longer guaranteed by male authority but sustained precariously through women's labor.

Moreover, the correspondence between İbrahim and Gülsüm further reveals the fragility of long-distance patriarchal authority under Cold War conditions. İbrahim's letters operate as emotional and moral tools, attempting to continue control through emotion, warnings, financial instructions, and promises of a better future. While migration enhances his economic position through Western industrial labor, it simultaneously displaces him emotionally and symbolically from the domestic sphere. The camera isolates Gülsüm reading these letters, and her shifting expressions – hesitation, anxiety, resignation – function as what William Reddy (2001) terms 'emotives': gestures that do not merely express emotion but reproduce the norms and anxieties of a patriarchal system in crisis. In doing so, *Dönüş* exposes the gap between authority maintained from afar and the household's lived adjustments to the absence of İbrahim. Then, the letters from him become tools through which he attempts to maintain his masculine authority despite being physically absorbed into the West German industrial machine. His language of evoking duty, sacrifice, and future prosperity mirrors the rhetoric of Cold War developmentalism, of course, which framed migrant labor as a patriotic contribution to national modernization. The distance between emotional desire and geopolitical aspiration becomes visible in these letters, revealing the emotional labor required to sustain Cold War masculinity across borders. In fact, *Dönüş* anticipates later scholarship on 'transnational fatherhood.' İbrahim's attempts to govern from abroad reveal the difficulty of sustaining masculine authority without physical presence, a theme that becomes increasingly central in Yeşilçam's migration cycle. In this way, *Dönüş* visualizes the fragility of Cold War patriarchal ideology – an ideology stretched across borders and reliant on emotional labor that could be easily exchanged with material wealth.

The film also constructs a distinctly Cold War moral geography. Turkey is represented as a center of authenticity, emotional belonging, and moral coherence while West Germany appears as a distinct but powerful presence – economically necessary yet

cultural threatening. Germany remains largely unseen, rendered instead through absence, letters and imagination, while its industrial promise looms ominously over village life. This spatial division echoes Cold War Turkish discourse that simultaneously aspired to Western prosperity and feared moral contamination. The home thus becomes a symbolic homeland: its vulnerability mirrors anxieties about national integrity under conditions of Western alignment.

The film's final sequence offers one of the most powerful critiques of guest-worker migration in Yeşilçam cinema. İbrahim's fatal car accident while returning from Germany with his German wife and child collapses the fantasy of return that underpinned Cold War migration ideology. Return does not restore the family; it produces tragedy. İbrahim's death signifies that the migrant subject cannot simply come back unchanged, while the death of the German wife symbolically erases a morally unsettling transnational bond. Yet this narrative 'cleansing' fails to resolve the tension created by migration. When Gülsüm takes responsibility for İbrahim's surviving child – biologically half-German and the embodiment of transnational life – the film stages a decisive shift: familial continuity now depends on women's caregiving rather than patriarchal authority. The family survives, but in a radically transformed form. It is no longer secured through blood, marriage, or male command, but through women's emotional labor and ethical responsibility. In this sense, *Dönüş* suggests that transnational families persist under Cold War conditions only through new, uneven arrangements that undermine patriarchal and nationalist ideals.

Finally, *Dönüş* participates in the broader cultural formation of the *acı vatan* discourse that crystallized in the 1970s. Its emphasis on loss, homesickness, betrayal, and emotional distance captures the ambivalence of a society caught between the promises of Western alignment and the precarities such alignment produced. The film thus operates as an allegory of Cold War Turkey itself: a nation striving toward modernity through the West while fractured by the costs of that movement. By locating geopolitical transformation within kitchens, fields, bedrooms, and letters, *Dönüş* demonstrates how the Cold War was lived not only through doctrines and alliances but through the intimate reorganization of family life.

5. Otobüs (Bus, 1975): migration without family and the politics of abandonment

Tunç Okan's *Otobüs* (The Bus, 1975) occupies a unique position within Yeşilçam's migration cinema by imagining labor migration entirely severed from the family. The film centers on a group of Turkish migrant men smuggled into Stockholm in search of employment and a better life. Abandoned by the driver and unable to speak the language, they become trapped inside the bus, terrified of the police, the cold, and the unfamiliar urban environment. Their isolation intensifies as days pass without food, communication, or support. The film depicts their gradual physical and psychological deterioration, culminating in tragedy. To put it basically, with this narrative, *Otobüs* exposes the vulnerability of undocumented migrants and criticizes the dehumanizing conditions of European labor regimes. Besides, *Otobüs* presents Turkish migrants as Cold War subjects who traverse borders without the ideological protections offered by Turkey, that is the patriarchal household. Therefore, unlike *Dönüş*, which centers on the

household strained by migration, *Otobüs* stages migration as a condition in which the family, understood as a moral, emotional, and social infrastructure, has disappeared. This absence is exactly what gives the film its critical force.

Furthermore, the abandoned bus in cold Stockholm functions as a Cold War metaphor for Turkey's semi-peripheral status. The bus is immobilized – not by mechanical failure but by geopolitical asymmetry. It is trapped between worlds: neither able to enter European modernity nor return to the protective sphere of the homeland. This paralysis maps onto the broader diplomatic uncertainties of the 1970s, when Turkey's Western alignment coexisted with intense anxieties about dependency, neocolonialism, and cultural subordination. It is a space stripped of all the elements that Cold War developmental ideology elevated as essential to national strength: a coherent home, a recognizable community, a stable moral order. The bus is placeless, kinless, and unprotected – a miniature 'anti-home' that negates everything the Turkish state imagined the family to be. Its frozen interior echoes Brah's notion of the 'unhomely diaspora space,' a void produced by global inequalities and the dislocations of postwar labor regimes (1996). At another level, the bus also mirrors Turkey's own geopolitical precarity in the mid-1970s: peripheral yet dependent, present in Europe but without full recognition or protection

The emotional trajectory of the men also reveals the problems with the emotional survival in conditions of displacement requiring relational infrastructures – letters, remittances, caregiving networks, moral obligations – that enable affective life across distance. *Otobüs* deprives the characters of all such structures. They are linguistically isolated, unable to navigate urban space, terrified of police and employers, and incapable of interpreting the social cues around them. Their silence, trembling bodies, and vacant gazes signal not simply fear but the collapse of the emotional regime that ordinarily structures masculinity within the Turkish family. Without the relational anchor provided by family, masculinity dissolves into paralysis. The film thus shows that what appears as individual weakness is, in fact, a symptom of family disintegration – an emotional implosion made visible through Cold War migration.

One of the film's most striking scenes, a man falling into the frozen river, transforms these dynamics into a stark allegory of migration without familial protection. His action symbolizes not only the failure of familial bonds but also the failure of the nation-state to extend protection to its citizens abroad, a recurring concern in 1970s diplomatic correspondence. In this sense, *Otobüs* stages a double abandonment: the abandonment of the migrant by the family and the abandonment of the citizen by the nation in the asymmetrical power landscape of Cold War Europe. So, migration without family becomes migration without citizenship. The 'failed return' becomes not merely a narrative ending but an ethical indictment of a geopolitical system that made certain lives unguarded and ungrievable.

The ending of *Otobüs* is one of the starkest and most unsettling conclusions in Turkish migration cinema. After the Stockholm police forcibly remove the migrants from the abandoned bus, the men are shocked, disoriented and terrified. No family member, compatriot, or institution comes to their aid. The final images – figures swallowed by urban anonymity, slipping into the cold – leave the spectators without closure, reconciliation, or even narrative explanation. The film ends not with return, rescue, or reintegration, but with disappearance. This suggests that, under certain Cold War conditions, migration

does not merely put family under hard conditions but even makes familial belonging impossible.

Besides, the ending dramatizes what Klein (2003) describes as the emotional side of Cold War modernity: the experiences of subjects whose lives fall outside the ideological promises of development, prosperity, and mobility. The men in *Otobüs* are actually the casualties of two systems: Cold War capitalism, which imported cheap labor but denied social inclusion, The Turkish state, which treated migrants as exportable workers but offered little protection abroad (Abadan-Unat, 2011) The ending challenges what Naficy (2001) terms the 'sentimental resolution' of classical exile narratives. Instead, it aligns with the aesthetics of transnational art cinema, offering: no moral lesson, no ideological consolation, no fantasy of return. The absence of family is not only emotional; it is political. Okan shows that without kin or institutional support, migrants become what Sassen (1999) calls 'disposable labour' – workers valued only for their economic utility. And so both masculinity and family do not stretch; but disintegrate.

Thus, by imagining migration in the complete absence of domestic structures, Otobüs offers a radical counterpoint to films like Dönüş. Where Dönüş reveals the fragility of the Cold War family stretched across borders, *Otobüs* reveals what remains when that family disappears. Therefore, *Otobüs* stands as one of the most uncompromising cinematic critiques of Cold War migration, making the emotional and political costs of a capitalist system that valued workers while ignoring the conditions of belonging visible.[3]

Taken together, *Dönüş*, *Otobüs*, and *Almanya Acı Vatan* map three distinct but interconnected configurations of family life under Cold War labor migration. Rather than offering variations on a single narrative, the films trace a spectrum of domestic reorganization produced by transnational mobility. *Dönüş* presents the family as strained yet enduring, sustained through women's emotional labor as patriarchal authority is displaced across borders. *Otobüs* radicalizes this condition by imagining migration in the complete absence of family, exposing the collapse of masculinity, citizenship, and belonging once the domestic infrastructure that Cold War ideology relied upon disappears altogether. *Almanya Acı Vatan*, in turn, occupies a third position: the family survives in form but is internally disturbed, as patriarchal expectations, economic dependency, and moral surveillance converge to sabotage women's capacity for adaptation abroad.

From a comparative lens, these films reveal that Cold War migration did not produce a single family outcome but generated uneven and gendered regimes of intimacy. Where *Dönüş* aligns with Cold War developmental narratives that framed migration as a temporary sacrifice compensated through return, *Otobüs* exposes the limits of that ideology by stripping migrants of familial anchoring and state protection. *Almanya Acı Vatan* pushes the critique further by showing how the structures meant to preserve moral order such as marriage, patriarchal authority, and gender discipline, turn into sources of emotional exhaustion and violence. Together, the films demonstrate that the Cold War family was not a stable foundation but a contested site through which geopolitical aspirations, moral anxieties, and gendered labor were negotiated. In this sense, Yeşilçam's migration cinema does not simply depict the effects of migration; it actively theorizes the family as a fragile and unevenly sustained institution at the heart of Cold War modernity.

6. Almanya Acı Vatan (Germany bitter homeland, 1979): patriarchal sabotage and the moral regulation of women under Cold War migration

It is within this trajectory – from the strained endurance of the family in *Dönüş*, through its complete disappearance in *Otobüs*, to its internal corrosion that *Almanya Acı Vatan*, directed by Şerif Gören, situates its critique of the Cold War migration. The protagonists are Güldane (Hülya Koçyiğit) and Mahmut (Rahmi Saltuk). The plot revolves around a 'marriage of convenience' between them: Mahmut wants to migrate to West Germany, and Güldane – already working in Germany – agrees, in exchange for money and a piece of land. Once in Germany, the film shows the harsh conditions of migrant life – alienation, exploitative work, social isolation, and conflicts around gender, honor, and belonging. Then, *Almanya Acı Vatan* becomes not simply a story about individual migrants – but a representation of how migration fundamentally reconfigures family structures, gender relations, and emotional economies. In doing so, the film shifts the analytical focus from the endurance or disappearance of the family to its deformation under Cold War moral structure.

The film opens with what should be a foundational and conventional moment of family formation – a marriage. Yet instead of intimacy, affection, or communal celebration, the scene is marked by negotiation, calculation, and economic exchange. This scene dramatizes how Cold War labor migration transformed marriage into an instrument of mobility and a bureaucratic tool. It reveals a profound shift: economic survival replaces emotional continuity as the organizing principle of family formation.

From its earliest sequences, the film subtly constructs Güldane as a woman who might have succeeded as a migrant worker had she been given the space to pursue autonomy on her own terms. She actually possesses the traits of a potentially successful migrant woman: she adapts to factory discipline, sustains herself economically, manages the emotional solitude of diasporic life, and quietly builds a routine that could have given her long-term stability. One of the clearest examples is the factory sequence early in the film: we see her operating machinery with methodical precision, following rhythm, discipline, and industrial tempo. The camera reveals her exhaustion, yet it does not depict incompetence or disorientation; rather, Güldane functions, adapts, and learns. Her quiet competence suggests – almost in the style of Morokvašić's 'women cope' thesis – that she is developing the repertoire of survival skills essential for migrant women: endurance, routine, emotional containment, and social navigation (Morokvašić, 1984). The possibility of her success becomes even more visible in the shared apartment scenes, where Güldane navigates mixed-gender living arrangements with dignity and self-regulation. She cooks modest meals, keeps to herself, attempts to maintain boundaries, and manages small interactions with other workers. In these scenes, Germany is framed not as a hostile terrain for her, but as a challenging yet potentially navigable environment. It offers her, in the Kandiyotian sense, a momentary loosening of the 'patriarchal bargain': without the constant gaze of kin or village surveillance, Güldane is briefly able to carve out a space of self-determined labor and routine (Kandiyoti, 1988).

However, Mahmut's presence gradually erases each of these gains and Güldane's tentative autonomy collapses. Traditionally, the father or husband holds moral and economic leadership. But in the film: Mahmut cannot secure work, cannot protect or provide, he becomes dependent on Güldane. What we see is his emasculation

and disorientation. Consequently, his insecurity becomes domination; his failures become her burden. Migration destabilizes him, but he stabilizes himself by destabilizing Güldane. Her personal freedom is curtailed, her emotional labor exploited, and her migrant potential thwarted by a man who brings with him the very structures she had momentarily escaped. Through time, she also lives through alienation. The scenes showing Güldane in German factories – fatigued, mechanized, emotionally mute – expose the gendered burden of migrant life. Her long hours, isolation, and exhaustion undermine traditional expectations of femininity, domesticity, and care. This reverses the idealized Cold War model of the patriarch as a stable provider and moral center of the household.

Güldane, in a way, is sabotaged in her adaptation process. The most devastating example of patriarchal sabotage emerges in the violent confrontation scene, where Mahmut shouts, and physically corners her. In this moment, the film visually echoes Kandiyoti's insight that patriarchal bargains rely on women's emotional and physical containment. Güldane had attempted to exit that bargain by working, surviving, and stabilizing herself; Mahmut pulls her back in, not through economic power but through aggression. This dynamic reveals a core contradiction of Cold War gender ideology: while women's labor abroad was economically necessary, their independence remained morally intolerable.

At some point, Güldane decides to leave Mahmut and go to Turkey. In the final sequence, she walks through the airport when the luggage cart is pushed and her belongings in the bag spill across the floor. This moment of physical disorder visualizes the emotional, economic, and familial fragmentation that has accumulated throughout the film. Here in this scene, the audience sees that she could never carry the emotional load. Her tears, in a way, represent the cumulative weight of unequal emotional labor. Therefore, the family's patriarchal structure has collapsed, men are in crisis, and the emotional burden of this collapse falls disproportionately on women. Unlike the imagined return that structures Cold War migration ideology, this departure offers no redemption. The family has not been destroyed from the outside, as in *Otobüs*, nor held together through endurance, as in *Dönüş*; it has been eroded from within. Migration here produces neither prosperity nor cohesion but exhaustion, shame, and loss of dignity.

In this sence, *Almanya Acı Vatan* offers one of the sharpest critiques of Cold War migration in Yeşilçam cinema. It reveals how the moral frameworks designed to protect the family such as marriage, patriarchal authority and gender turn into mechanisms that harm under transnational conditions. By focusing on Güldane's lost capacity for adaptation, the film shows that Cold War migration did not simply destabilize families through separation or paternal absence, but also through preservation of patriarchal norms. Here, the family survives in name, but its emotional foundations are all disturbed.

Together with *Dönüş* and *Otobüs*, *Almanya Acı Vatan* completes a comparative axis that exposes the Cold War family as a deeply unstable institution. Where *Dönüş* emphasizes endurance and *Otobüs* stages abandonment, *Almanya Acı Vatan* reveals internal corrosion as the defining condition of transnational family life. These films demonstrate that Cold War migration reshaped the Turkish family not as a unified social form but as an uneven, gendered, and morally contested terrain through which the promises and contradictions of Western-aligned modernity are revealed.

7. Concluding remarks

Treating films as historical evidence – less for direct factual accuracy than for the emotional and ideological contours they reveal (Rosenstone, 1998) – this article demonstrates that Yeşilçam dramatized the intimate consequences of Cold War geopolitics, translating global realignments into domestic anxieties about family, morality, and belonging. Approaching *acı vatan* as a Cold War idiom helps recover the ways in which emotions circulated transnationally. Migrants carried not only money but also anxiety, guilt, and longing across borders; families managed not only remittances but also hopes and fears. These emotions shaped migration flows, marital decisions, long-distance parenting practices, and the reception of those who return. They also shaped how the Turkish state narrated its role within the Western alliance, oscillating between pride in 'modern citizens abroad' and fear of 'moral deterioration' within migrant communities. Yeşilçam thus offers a pre-diasporic cultural archive that captures how ordinary families experienced the Cold War not through diplomatic negotiations or military alignments but through the reorganization of intimacy, labor, and care within their own homes. At this point, the article contributes to family history scholarship that understands the family not as a stable unit but as a historically contingent formation shaped by mobility, political economy, and emotional regimes.

To put it very simply, *Dönüş* (1972), *Otobüs* (1974), and *Almanya Acı Vatan* (1979) chart three distinct yet interrelated trajectories within Turkey's migration cinema of the 1970s. Each film narrates the disruptive effects of labor mobility on family structures, gender norms, and emotional life, but they do so through sharply different representations. While *Dönüş* foregrounds the family as the central unit threatened by migration, *Otobüs* imagines a world in which the very possibility of familial belonging has vanished, and *Almanya Acı Vatan* situates its characters in a moral and emotional landscape where patriarchal expectations, economic pressures, and transnational dislocation harm the family from within. The films offer complementary perspectives on migration's impact on the Turkish family. *Dönüş* imagines the family as resilient, capable of surviving even small disruptions. *Otobüs* suggests that under certain conditions – especially where migrants are cut off from family networks – the family cannot survive at all. *Almanya Acı Vatan*, perhaps the most ambivalent of the three, depicts a family that continues to exist but only in name, leaving the migrant woman alone to navigate the emotional wreckage. Collectively, the films depict the shifting emotional, gendered, and structural realities of Turkish migration in the 1970s, revealing how mobility remade the family into a fragile, contested, and deeply uneven terrain. What unites these otherwise divergent narratives is their shared focus on the family as a provisional and unsettled institution, caught between departure and return, obligation and disintegration. This emphasis marks the 1970s as a transitional phase in the history of Turkish migrant families.

The military coup of 1980 marked a critical turning point for both Turkish family life and therdoe political economy of cinema. As Nilgü Abisel (2006) has shown, the post-coup period witnessed a severe economic collapse of the Turkish film industry, bringing an end to Yeşilçam as a mass national cinema. At the same time, the growing circulation of VHS tapes among Turkish families living in Europe provided an unexpected and vital lifeline for Turkish films, transforming migrant households

into a new and transnational audience. This shift reshaped not only the conditions of film production and distribution, but also the social location of cinema itself. Read in retrospect, the fragile, provisional family formations depicted in 1970s migration films appear as a prelude to this post-coup reconfiguration, in which Turkish cinema increasingly addressed settled diasporic families rather than temporary, return-oriented households. Situating Yeşilçam's Cold War migration narratives against the backdrop of the 1980 coup thus underscores how transformations in political authority, media economies, and family life were deeply intertwined. Later films from the 1980s and 1990s, such as *Gurbetçi Şaban* (1985), *Polizei* (1988), or *Sarı Mercedes* (1992), increasingly depict more settled migrant families and longer-term diasporic arrangements. Their exclusion from the present analysis is deliberate. By focusing on the 1970s, the article examines an earlier moment in which family life under migration remained provisional, emotionally unstable, and oriented toward an uncertain return. In this context, future research could productively trace how these fragile family formations later crystallized into more stable diasporic households in post – Cold War Turkish cinema. Furthermore, comparative work could explore how other peripheral Cold War states – such as Greece, Yugoslavia, or South Korea – visualized similar anxieties about gender, mobility, and Western modernity. A transnational visual history could link Yeşilçam to West German cinema, labor documentaries, and migrant autobiographies, tracing broader patterns of Cold War family life.

Thus, situating Yeşilçam at the intersection of Cold War studies, migration history, and the history of the family therefore enriches our understanding of how geopolitics became lived experience – felt, negotiated, and reimagined within the household. These films show that the Cold War was experienced not only in diplomatic arenas or military alliances but in the everyday rhythms of domestic life: in how families worked, waited, feared, disciplined, and hoped across borders. Ultimately, Cold War becomes historically legible as an emotional regime, one that shaped Turkish understandings of mobility, morality, gender, and belonging during one of the most transformative periods of the twentieth century.

Notes

1. Other sources on gender regime during the Cold War include: Dudziak (2000), *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy*; de Grazia (2005), *Irresistible Empire: America's Advance Through 20th Century Europe*; Latham (2000), *Modernization as Ideology: American Social Science and 'Nation Building' in the Kennedy Era*; Dean (2001). *Imperial Brotherhood: Gender and the Making of Cold War Policy*; Cuordileone (2005), *Manhood and American Political Culture in the Cold War*.
2. Recent studies of political subjectivity emphasize that legitimacy is often negotiated through struggles over visibility and voice rather than through formal institutional participation. From this perspective, Yeşilçam's migration films can be read as early cultural arenas in which migrant-sending families revealed their claims to belonging, even if their political agency mostly remained confined to the domestic sphere (Sevinç, 2025).
3. This vision of migration as isolation and dispossession resonates with later films such as *Gül Hasan* (1980), which similarly foregrounds migrant precarity and social dislocation, even if family life remains peripheral to its narrative.

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