

## *Mustang (2015)*

**Director:** Deniz Gamze Ergüven

**Writers:** Deniz Gamze Ergüven, Alice Winocour

**Stars:** Günes Sensoy, Doga Zeynep Doguslu, Tugba Sunguroglu

**M**ustang (2015) is a Turkish-French-German co-produced drama film, directed by Turkish-French film Director Deniz Gamze Ergüven. Ergüven, who was born in Turkey but raised in France, was invited to Cannes Film Festival Atelier. There she met fellow director of Mustang, Alice Winocour, who suggested that Ergüven explores her art by focusing on more intimate scenarios. It was after this conversation that Ergüven produced Mustang. The protagonists of the movie are five sisters who share a strong bond. Through their experiences, Ergüven tells the story of the way in which society deals with burgeoning female sexuality. Specifically, Ergüven explores how the girls discover, live and express their sexuality and empowerment by finding escapes from the structures that demonize their womanhood. The movie has been nominated for “Best Foreign Language Film” at the Academy Awards and won “Best Film” at the Lumières Awards.

The movie is set in a conservative sea side town, where five orphaned sisters live with their grandmother and their uncle. The movie begins with the sisters celebrating the last day of school by swimming in the sea, clothed, with their male classmates. They play games - including one where the girls sit on boy's shoulders and wrestle each other. When they return home, cheerful and happy, their grandmother is waiting for them in rage, having heard the girls had been playing with boys. The most striking sentence the grandmother says is “you were satisfying yourselves on boy's shoulders,” having heard from a neighbour how they were playing in the sea. This is the first time the audience encounters the perspective of the older, traditional women and the way in which they demonise and malign female sexuality. After this event, the sisters are locked up and subjected to virginity tests. They experience a series of events where they are oppressed, locked in their rooms - caged into the big house they all live in - sexually and verbally abused by their uncle and are finally married off one by one to men they have no special interest in.

The movie explores women's issues by focusing on social and private life, rather than structural and legal problems, and through this delineates the way these oppressive structures are recreated within the family and society. What we see in the movie is a patriarchal family. Interestingly, the nature of this patriarchy does not truly come from an oppressive male who is the head of the family. Rather, the grandmother is the embodiment of almost all the structures that oppress the protagonists. For example, after the girls were locked in the house, the first thing the grandmother started to do is give them cooking lessons in order to

make them eligible for marriage. She is also aware of her son secretly going into the girls' room every night to abuse them but maintains her silence on the matter.

The events happening are overwhelming and the movie becomes very hard to contextualize without taking into account its symbolic significance. Mustang is a movie that can be thought of as a microcosm of women's issues in Turkey in general. What comes to mind at first is that it is a good attempt to represent the general gender inequalities and oppressions women face in Turkey through a relatively small, specific case. Some of the remarks from movie viewers claim the movie “exaggerated” real life experiences in Turkey. Indeed, it was exaggerated in a sense that Ergüven tried to encompass more than can be realistically conveyed through one family's story. Though, she has stated that the movie was not intended to represent the reality of everyday Turkish life but, like a fairy tale, was a representation of the things Ergüven experienced as a young woman (Weston 2015). However, when the situation of women in Turkey and the movie are compared, one can find a number of similarities. While gender equality remains structurally embedded, social problems such as rape, honor killings and childhood marriages remain a huge issue in Turkish society. There are scarce attempts to solve these problems at either a structural or societal level. Feminists in Turkey have long been fighting to secure a safer and more equal society for Turkish women. However, exclusion of women's organizations and disregarding the feminist perspective is one of the long running strategies of the 13 year ruling conservative JDP (Justice and Democracy Party) (Afanaseiza and Hogg 2015). Despite the JDP implementation of legal reforms regarding women's rights, thus positioning themselves as the guarantor of gender equality, there has been little change in their actual discourse that limits women's roles to motherhood (see for example Agence France Presse 2016). In this sense, Ergüven's provocative, feminist and critical approach in conveying the struggles of women in Turkey is a noble attempt to challenge and protest the oppressive structures Turkish women have to deal with in every level of their social and private lives.

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