Migration Images in Turkish Art

Nimet Kesera, İnan Keserb

Abstract
In Turkey, from the second half of the nineteenth century, the shaping of an art of painting on the basis of Western understanding was realized with state support. From this period, certain art movements were seen as the means of modernization and Westernization. Therefore, impressionism, cubism, realism, and classicism were supported by the state as a formal artistic understanding. This attitude continued until the 1940s and artists painted certain subject matters on the basis of these art movements. The main theme and subject matters were the presentations of an idealized society such as palace’s life, attractive women in Western appearance, happy peasants, war heroes, and beautiful views from the country. In the early 1940s, significant breakup began to take place in point of the theme and the subject matter of art. Social realism began to take shape for the first time in art in Turkey. The artists of Yeniler Grubu (Newcomers Group) focused on social phenomena related disadvantaged social groups rather than an idealized society. Some artists among the 1950 generation, especially Nedim Günsür, Nuri İyem, and Mümtaz Yener, focused on migration and social problems that occurred correspondingly in the 1960s and 1970s. This paper aims to investigate how these artists depicted and interpreted the migration and its consequences.

Keywords
Turkey, art of painting, social realism, migration, shanty town

The social realism that strongly emerged from the middle of the nineteenth century directed shocking criticisms to the political and social order and by this way to the field of art by focusing on social issues. From this aspect, social realism was an ideological quest rather than a pure technical orientation. For instance, although social realist pioneers such as Courbet, Millet, Daumier brought a destructive artistic and political criticism by transforming poor workers and peasants into the central figures of their paintings rejecting theological or aristocratic figures, German expressionists such as Kollwitz, Grosz, and Dix maintained the social realist understanding with their descriptive approaches which were very different from the pioneers. Social realism paved the way for the emergence of numerous art movements after itself by the breakup created in the art history, however, it could maintain its importance continuously despite the abundance of movements in the twentieth century.

Social realist art began to show its effect in Turkey in a period which was much later than its emergence in the West. Because the history of painting in the Western sense was quite short and state-centric in Turkey. In Turkey, Westernization in art was mainly experienced with the opening of the state school Sanayi-i Nefise Mektebi (School of Fine Arts) and then sending artists who were trained in this school to

Correspondent Author:
Nimet Keser, Fine Art Education Department, Faculty of Education, Çukurova University, 01330, Bakcalı, Adana, Turkey
Europe with the state scholarship in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, and movements such as impressionism, cubism, realism, and classicism were supported as the state’s official understanding of art instead of social realism (Baltacıoğlu 1931; Diranas 1940). Accordingly, the same subjects were always studied until the 1940s despite being with different artistic techniques: the presentations of an idealized society such as happy peasants, peasants trying to learn reading and writing, war heroes, and beautiful women. In the early 1940s, people began to be interested in social realities, more clearly negative aspects of the existing social order and disadvantaged social groups rather than an idealized society.

In 1941, young academy students such as Kemal Sömmezler, Turgut Atalay, who argued that the artist should understand the society in which he lived and this was the source of artistic creativity, established the Yeniler Grubu (Newcomers Group) and began to make the “other Istanbul” visible by drawing the pictures of people from the disadvantaged social groups, harbor workers, and fishermen (İyem 2002: 115; Mengüç 1994: 24). Thus, the painting art began to be a criticism tool since the 1940s, and the subjects which were not frequently seen in Turkish painting art were discussed. Mümtaz Yener’s painting that represented a bakery full of hungry poor people begging for bread from the baker was like a blow to the ongoing understanding of art. During the same years, a social realist tendency also began in the field of literature. Ceyhun Atuf Kansu, Rifat Ilgaz, Cevat Şakir Kabağıçlı, Mahmut Makal, Fakir Baykurt, Yaşar Kemal, Sabahattin Ali, Orhan Kemal, and Kemal Tahir strengthened the social realism as litterateurs who discussed the problems of the large city as well as the reality of the village. In Turkey, social realist art and literature have been mostly adopted by artists who described themselves as socialists. Turkish social realists have been frequently prosecuted, judged, and received imprisonments on a charge of being socialists and communists.

REFLECTION OF SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION THAT BEGAN TO OCCUR IN THE 1950S ON SOCIAL REALIST PAINTINGS

In Turkey, remarkable social changes have occurred since the 1950s. Firstly, Turkish political system experienced a major change with the start of the Cold War, and multi-party political life was introduced. However, the Democrat Party remaining in power from 1950 to 1960 began to exhibit anti-democratic governance such as its predecessor, the one-party regime, in a short time. During those years, the capitalist industrialization gained speed in Turkey as well as in the world. The use of capitalist production methods and technology both in agriculture and in the industry led to unemployment in the rural area and the flow of this emerging labor force to cities that began to become industrialized in a short time. For example, the number of labor unions in cities, which was 78 in 1948, reached up to 543 in 1962, and the number of unionized workers reached from 52,000 to 307,000 with this process (Koç 2000: 2). However, the vast majority of those who migrated to the city were faced with the problem of unemployment since the industrialization in the urban area failed to provide enough work to the labor force heading from rural areas towards cities. Many of the migrants had to be engaged in jobs requiring low economic, social, and cultural capital such as porterage, gatekeeper, pedlar’s trade, hawker’s trade, shoeshiner, and cleaning lady. Regarding this, one of the phenomena that became visible in this period was squatting. In fact, even the description of “shanty house” began to be used after those years (Keleş 1972; Erder 2013; 2015).

The first painting showing people’s migration from rural areas to the city in Turkish painting art is Turgut Zaim’s painting entitled Doğu ve Batı Halkının Arz-ı Şükram (The People From East and West Are Presenting Their Thanksgiving to Atatürk) (see Figure 1) dated 1933. This painting, as it is
understood from its name, shows peasants as people who voluntarily turn to the leader of the new regime and to the city which is its symbol not to find a job but to show that they are in favor of the new regime. Turgut Zaim, who supported the official ideology in the 1930s, tried to affirm the political, hence, the social transformations of the 1930s with this painting by presenting the migration as an ideological migration (Keser 2012: 135-172). Since the dates constituting the limits of this study, in other words, since the 1960s, migration has been addressed with the purposes and contents which were very different from the painting in question in Turkish art. Nedim Günsür, Nuri İyem, and Mümtaz Yener tried to explain the social tragedy of a period by focusing on the beginning of the migration, migration process, and its results.

These social realist artists turned to these groups because they argued that it was necessary to be sensitive to the problems of the disadvantaged social groups and this was the most important responsibility of an artist. Artists such as Nedim Günsür, Mümtaz Yener, and Nuri İyem who were the members of middle-class educated families were also the artists who adopted socialism. For example, Nedim Günsür who worked in the distribution of the daily newspaper L’Humanité managed by communists when he was in Paris, was taken to the police station when he came to Istanbul with reference to the reports kept in this regard, and then he was followed for a long time, and the expression of “passive communist” was put in his registry when he worked as a teacher (İşanç 2008: 31). For a period since 1959, Nedim Günsür depicted the life of miners in Zonguldak and when he brought and exhibited these paintings to Istanbul for the first time, his paintings were regarded as the continuation of his socialist trend (Özsezgin 1983: 4; Tansuğ 1976: 176). When Nedim Günsür began to live in Istanbul, he also showed the same social realist attitude focusing on migration and squatting, a social problem in Istanbul.

This period was a time when significant breakups occurred in Turkey’s art history, since this period, the dominant aesthetic perspective for the fact that the work of art was something which showed beautiful things and was a source of pleasure started to be eroded though it was difficult. Istanbul, that had been the source of romantic/Orientalist paintings with its sea, palaces, mansions, and palace life for years, began to be built as an another city in the paintings of social realists from that time: younger sellers, unemployed people, construction workers, guest workers, shanty house demolitions, and consequently resulting riots. While Nuri İyem and Nedim Günsür’s panoramic paintings (see Figure 2 and Figure 5) depicting the migration caravans consisting of exhausted adults and children who were lined up one after another on barren lands were the texts explaining the reason for migration, the paintings of shanty houses reflecting the same composition concept indicated that the city was not full of hope for migrants. People were just trying to change their place without any indication of hope, happiness, or excitement while going on arid lands with blankets on their backs and small food bags attached to the stick. This fatigue was like the herald of a challenging life in the city. The figures related to finding a new area to settle, unemployment, poverty, physical and mental exhaustion, squatters, and the conflicts emerging in shanty house demolitions were portrayed on these paintings as if the result of a social analysis.

On Nedim Günsür’s painting entitled Gecekondular ve İşçi Ailesi (Shanty Houses and the Worker Family) (see Figure 3), there was not any indicator that could give rise to the thought that people who were standing almost like a dead around a number of shanty houses with one room without nothing to do within a barren land were happy in this composition. The only reason for their presence appears to be the factory located in the background. This factory that polluted the skies with its smoke, the arid land, and togetherness created by these skinny adults and children waiting stiffly stands as a depiction of dystopia. In the painting
Figure 1. Turgut Zaim, Doğu ve Batı Halkının Atatürk'e Arz-ı Şükranı, 1933.

Figure 2. Nedim Günsür, Gurbetçiler, 1965.

Figure 3. Nedim Günsür, Gecekonular ve İşçi Ailesi, 1963.

Figure 4. Nedim Günsür, Gecekonular ve Çomak Üzerinde Uçan Adamlar, 1965.
entitled *Gecekonular ve Çomak Üzerinde Uçan Adamlar* (Shanty Houses and Men Flying on Sticks) (see Figure 4), how those who migrated from rural areas to Istanbul, a place where the streets are paved with gold, came to the city, how they built the shanty houses to live on the mountain, hill, and rock, how they reached those hills that were difficult to go and climb, the difficulty of living without water, roads, and electricity, and what it meant to achieve the impossible are expressed as “men flying over the sticks”.

In the painting entitled *Gecekondu Yaplanlar* (The Builder of a Shanty House) (see Figure 6), Nuri İyem answers the questions of what the shanty house is, how it is built, and where it is built. The shanty house is depicted as a shelter rather than a house built scratchily with found/waste materials in an environment with reinforced concrete buildings rising in the background and classic silhouette of Istanbul. Despite having a more colorful palette than Nedim Günsür, Nuri İyem tries to explain poverty which is not embellished, beatified, and smoothed in his migration and shanty house-themed paintings.

Nuri İyem’s painting entitled *Göç* (Migration) (see Figure 7) in which peasants who migrated are not seen but there are other indicators related to migration provides information about what the unemployed peasants in rural areas brought to cities and to which cities they migrated. There is the writing of Istanbul, Ankara, Izmir, and Adana under the writing of *Göç Turizm* (Migration Tourism) on the signboard which is located at the top left of the painting. The expression of *Göç Turizm* (Migration Tourism) is most likely the name of the bus company, and the artist forms the satire by using two phenomena that we can consider to be related to two different social classes together.

Mümftaz Yener was an artist who placed unemployment, one of the consequences of migration, and poverty in the city to the focus of his paintings although he did not mention about migration and shanty houses. For example, the fact that a crowd of people consisting of peasants, town-dwellers, modern, conservative people, youngsters, old people, women, and men curiously and also desperately analyze a job posting on a board is depicted on the painting entitled *İlan Tahtası* (Advertisement Board) (see Figure 8).

Nedim Günsür’s painting entitled *Gecekondu Yıkımı* (Demolition of Shanty Houses) (see Figure 9) that describes the demolition of unlicensed shanty houses, which is most likely the unique subject in the art history, depicts the riot that occurred in the demolition of a group of shanty houses. There is a crowd of people who are trying to save their houses which have been converted to the ghost of shanty houses with pickaxes within a panoramic view outside the city, and who are feeling faint and beating their heads. The goods saved from the demolition indicate that these people do not have more than those which are seen on Nuri İyem’s and Nedim Günsür’s paintings describing the process of migration from the village to the city.

It should be noted that social realism began to affect cinema in the 1960s after painting and literature. The film entitled *Gurbet Kuşları* (Birds of the Foreign Land) shot by Halit Refiğ in 1964 was the first film addressing the phenomenon of migration. Apart from the social realist painters of the 1950 generation, artists such as Bedri Rahmi Eyüboğlu and Turan Erol, who believed that the painting should be shaped based on the traditional handicraft motives which are unique to the Turkish culture, addressed the shanty houses since the 1970s. However, there was an important difference between these artists and the social realist artists. Bedri Rahmi Eyüboğlu’s selection of shanty houses was a continuation of turning towards Anatolia. The shanty house for him is Anatolia that has come to Istanbul. Bedri Rahmi Eyüboğlu was interested in the colorfulness and folklore of shanty houses instead of the social weakness of Anatolia that has come to
Figure 5. Nuri İyem, Göç, 1970.

Figure 6. Nuri İyem, Gecekondu Yapanlar, 1976.

Figure 7. Nuri İyem, Göç, 1978.

Figure 8. Mümtaz Yener, İl Tanıtı, 1977.
Istanbul and the problems in the social order that caused it. Turan Erol’s main concern was the color and pattern in his compositions consisting of shanty houses which were placed side by side, one on the top of the other as if the repetition of the same unit in Altındağ, one of the shanty settlements of Ankara. Similarly, Oya Zaim Katoglu addressed the shanty houses with a painter’s sensitivity.

CONCLUSIONS

The social realism that emerged in France of the nineteenth century where social and political transformations gained speed and quickly spread to the world had effects in Turkey almost a century later, in a period where significant social and political transformations were experienced. Since the 1940s, artists from the different fields of art began to be interested in social issues as the subject of a work of art. The artists who are called as the 1950 generation are particularly interested in social issues of migration and correspondingly the social weakness of migrants and the inequality of social structure.

The social realist artists of the 1950 generation did not turn towards the daily life of socially disadvantaged groups only with pictorial concerns or depending on the concern of developing a national sense of art although it was very popular in those years. These artists did not belong to peasants or working class families but to educated middle-class families, accepted themselves as socialists and believed that they could raise the social consciousness through their paintings analyzing and presenting the social issues and that social problems could be solved depending on the rise in consciousness. In this sense, painting was conceived as a necessity, not only an artistic endeavor.

Acknowledgements

The authors thank the Çukurova University Research Fund for financial support.

References


——. 2015. İstanbul Bir Kervansaray mı (Is Istanbul a Caravanserai). İstanbul: Bilgi Universitesi Yayınları.


Tansuğ, S. 1976. *Beş Gerçekçi Türk Ressamı (Five Realist Turkish Painters)*. İstanbul: GelişimYayınlar.

**Bios**

*Nimet Keser*, Ph.D., professor in Fine Art Education Department, Education Faculty, Çukurova University, Adana, Turkey; research fields: art history methodologies, art criticism methodologies, women art.

*İnan Keser*, Ph.D., associate professor in Sociology Department, Dicle University, Diyarbakır, Turkey; research fields: religion, ethnicity, art, child sexual abuse.