

Turkish movie : 'Ottoman Republic' a glimpse of what might have been

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A tragicomedy, the film also narrates the story of a sultan who never lived in reality. Screenwriter and director Gani Müjde emphasizes that "Osmanlı Cumhuriyeti" was never intended to be disrespectful to Atatürk.

"I have roots both in the Ottoman Empire and in the republic. How can I dare to disparage it?" says Müjde, who also raises strong objections to prejudices about Ottoman sultans.

The director notes that he does not accept the official version of Turkish history. *"It is a great insult to turn a blind eye to the Ottomans,"* he says. *"But never can they [Ottoman sultans] be described as traitors."* Müjde argues that because the country today lacks the tolerant atmosphere of the Ottoman Empire, Turks must deal with problems such as the headscarf issue. Müjde spoke to Today's Zaman about his new film.

- When did you first come up with a story in which Atatürk was never a leader, the War of Independence was never fought and an Ottoman Republic was established instead of a Turkish one?

Well, actually, since our school days, we have been hearing sentences that start with the assumption, "If Atatürk had not lived ..." I wrote the script based on this assumption.

I am very excited. This film will be a turning point in my career as a director. Until now, I have been known as a writer of absurd comedies. This is my first dramatic comedy. It is my first. The topic is interesting both for me and for spectators. If the War of Independence had not been fought and the Treaty of Sèvres had been accepted, what would have become of the Ottoman Empire in the 21st century? In the beginning, I was writing a parody, but it turned into a drama as I progressed. I came to realize that the ability to select our rulers in an independent and free country is a precious opportunity.

- Having heard the criticism against Can Dündar's "Mustafa," are you worried?

No. This is because my film is built upon generally accepted facts. I had no ulterior motives in doing so, but I am a son of this country, and I have grown with my roots in the past of this country. For this reason, I have roots both in the Ottoman Empire and in the republic. I have tried to fuse them. My film cannot be criticized for its deficiencies or its narrative because it is based on my perceptions. Everyone may have different perceptions. Thus, if one says, "This is not the Ottoman Empire I would imagine," then I would reply: "It is OK. This is already a republic I imagined." This is what I had created in my mind. For this reason, I do not fear criticism. Yet, this approach is in my opinion quite unfair. A film should not be criticized in this way. One might question why "Mustafa" has been screened in movie theaters. I don't think it is proper to watch a documentary in a movie theater.

- "Mustafa" has been criticized for portraying Atatürk as fearing the dark.

In my opinion, this is utter nonsense. I have always perceived Atatürk as a human being, and this has not changed since watching the movie. My perception has never lessened my respect and love for Atatürk. Thus, I guess such criticisms will not be raised about my film. Nevertheless, I have my answers to any question that can be asked.

The Ottoman Empire is a soft spot for Turkey. We have ignored an entire era. Haven't you ever hesitated in treating such a complicated issue in such a manner?

It is a great insult to turn a blind eye to the Ottomans. I am a child of a Kosovar family. I am a descendant of the Ottoman conquerors. I am an Albanian. The Ottomans represent a center of attraction for me, but this also applies to the republic. Currently, we are indebted to the republic for our democracy. Nevertheless, both are our culture. Culture is not what is written in the books. Accordingly, if these cultures are part of me, then I claim possession of them.

-The official version of our history has been telling us that the Ottoman sultans were traitors. How is your sultan?

I object to this official account of history. Of course, sultans made their mistakes, as rulers are prone to errors. But never can they be described as traitors. I refuse to use the word "traitor." If a person does not harm the Christians as we will live together with them." on is a traitor, he will not be buried with funeral services provided by a municipality. This is because traitors are paid abundantly in return for their treason. The word "traitor" does not fit the Ottoman sultans. In my film, the sultan is a patriotic one with good intentions.

- Which sultan do you like the most?

My favorite is Mehmet the Conqueror. He was a perfect man with his achievements and vision. Imagine a sultan who, immediately after conquering İstanbul, ordered, " "Do not harm the Christians as we will live together with them." This was a grand worldview.

- We do not see such behavior in the 21st century, do we?

If only the today's governments had such great visions. This mosaic of culture is what distinguishes us from other Middle Eastern countries. If only we could accomplish in republican Turkey what Mehmet the Conqueror accomplished in the past, we would be living in a very different country. We would not have secularism or headscarf issues, etc. I really miss this vision.

- What will spectators feel about the film?

First, they will realize that independence is a precious thing. They will say that the right to vote and democracy are very important. They will understand that republican Turkey has achieved many things, but the Ottoman Empire, too, made a big impression on history.

- Will the film's diversity attract spectators from diverse groups?

This is what I believe. I even have a claim: Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Deniz Baykal and Devlet Bahçeli can sit side by side and watch and enjoy the film. Only the enemies of the republic would not like it as the film has all the colors of life. The bartender is a Kosovar, and one of the drivers is a Kurd, and one of the bodyguards is Bosnian. I tried to reproduce the diversity of life in the Ottoman era.

Sources

Source : [Today's Zaman](#) 25 November 2008, Tuesday