



Minik Serçe as a Contrary Example Among the Singer Films in Turkish Cinema

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Abstract

This article is about the Turkish film *Minik Serçe* (*Little Sparrow*, 1978), starring Sezen Aksu, one of Turkey's most legendary female singer-songwriters. The film belongs to the category of musical "singer films" of Turkish cinema, which were popular between the 1940s and late 1980s. It is also a remake of *A Star is Born* (1976). The article examines the similarities and differences between the original film and the Turkish remake and compares it with another singer film from the same era *Yansın Bu Dünya* (1977), which falls into the category of an *Arabesk* singer film. Both films have similar plotlines but very different portrayals of female characters. The focus of the article is on what makes *Minik Serçe* stand out from the other films of its time. In doing so, it also examines the role of its auteur director Atıf Yılmaz, and the clichés of Turkish cinema from the Yeşilçam era.

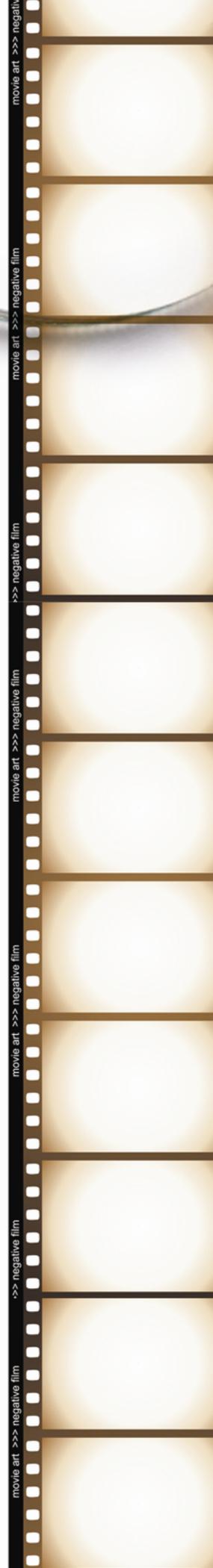
Keywords: film musicals; singer films; arabesk; yeşilçam



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Introduction

Minik Serçe (*Little Sparrow*, 1978) is a singer film based on a loose adaptation of the film *A Star is Born* (1976) starring Barbra Streisand and Kris Kristofferson. It was an adaptation and a singer film made in the Yeşilçam era and an example of a Yeşilçam musical: Singer films. These films differ from Hollywood film musicals, in that they do not include choreography, the songs are not integrated into the plotline and instead of actors who can sing and dance, the film features famous singers as the lead characters (although they were also many films in which the singers were in secondary roles but still had singing scenes). Yeşilçam encompasses the era of filmmaking in Turkish cinema roughly between the early 1950s and the late 1980s/early 1990s. The name (translated as Green Pine) comes from a famous street in Beyoğlu, Istanbul, habituated by film production companies (Arslan, 2011, p.223). Yeşilçam films included not only the total of films made in the era but also a filmmaking practice in which the goal was to make the greatest number of films with the least amount of budget and make sure the film content would appeal to the audiences (Kırel 2005). This filmmaking resulted in a distinct style which shows up in the form of Yeşilçam films: Dubbing was used to save shooting time, minimal camera movements, and sometimes sloppy editing (Erdoğan, 2002, p.234-237). The distinct style of film

production and aesthetics were also directly influenced by the traditional performing arts such as Turkish shadow theater, Meddah and Orta Oyunu, which resulted in two-dimensional depth of field perspective and stock characters (Akser, 2018, p.155). Content-wise, it meant that the film plots were tailored toward the audiences' tastes, or what the scriptwriters supposed the audiences wanted. In an interview from 1973, veteran screenwriter of the period Bülent Oran summarized how Turkish audiences liked to see the films' main characters to be and live in accordance with Turkish morals. To give an example, Oran explains that the audience wants to see the lead female character who is loyal to her boyfriend and does not have sex until marriage. Oran explains that despite half of the audience not living according to those standards, they expect to see the leading character as an idealized version of a real person (Oran, 1973, p.22-23). The male lead would never lose a fight, the female lead would not appear naked in a love scene. Family values, honesty, loyalty, and making money legally were of paramount importance, and if the characters stepped out of the line they would eventually be punished in the storyline (Abisel, 1994, p.72-89). Turkish directors would eventually start breaking this mold in the 1980s, as an auteur cinema started to emerge, and filmmakers began to make films outside of the stereotypes of Yeşilçam cinema.

Yeşilçam Musicals

The singer films of Turkish cinema were quite popular throughout Yeşilçam, in fact, it was one of the most common genres. However, instead of combining dialogue with singing and dancing, along with elaborate choreographed routines and camera movements, Yeşilçam films rather had singing scenes mixed among with a comedy or melodrama film. It was common to see a popular singer acting in films after their song blew up. Many singers started acting in films after having successful careers in music. Most of the time their films would be named after their popular song titles, although Yeşilçam also had an abundance of films named after songs and did not have the singers featured in the film such as *Kara Gözlüm (My Dark Eyed One, 1970)*, *Oh Olsun (Serves You Right, 1973)*, *Ah Nerede (Oh Where, 1975)*, *Delisin (You are Crazy, 1975)*.

Although Yeşilçam cinema has been influenced by Hollywood in many ways, including the film musical genre, it had to be adapted into the narrative style that the Turkish audiences were used to. The film musical genre originates in the USA (Altman, 1987; Grant, 2012), where it comes from musical theatre and gradually adapted from Broadway plays into film form as cinema began to take off as an entertainment sector in the late 1920s (Griffin, 2018, p.22-25), (Barrios, 1995, p.13). It grew into a genre that became synonymous with Hollywood, going through different eras such as the nationalistic musicals during the World War II and the new musicals of

the New Hollywood Cinema, inspired by European cinema, rock music, and the cinema verité movement (Griffin, 2018, p.101-103), (Kessler, 2010). Later on, different countries around the world took over the genre and made it their own, such as India's Bollywood musicals. In Turkey, however, American musical films were not the most popular genre, in fact, they were times when they were shown in theatres with the singing and dancing scenes omitted (Dorsay, 1991, as cited in Gürata, 2007, p.336-337). Therefore, the Yeşilçam cinema does not have musicals in the same way that Hollywood cinema does.

The trend of the singer films started with the popularity of Egyptian melodramas in Turkey in the late 1930s. At a time when Turkish cinema had not yet become an industry and most films were made by the same director Muhsin Ertuğrul, who favored theatre over cinema, Anatolian audiences did not connect to the films being made until Egyptian films were being imported to the country during the World War II (Büker, 2002; Gurata, 2004). The films which had famous singers such as Umm Kulthum and Mohammed Abdul Wahab as the leading actors captured the audiences with their melodramatic storylines and songs (Arslan, 2011, p.67). These films are also cited as starting the Turkish people's love for *Arabesk* music, which later became a very popular musical genre in the late 1960s, and later the name for Arabesque singer films which became immensely popular in Turkey during the 1970s and 1980s (Bengi, 2020, p.22-24). After Egyptian films were banned in 1942 when the authorities cited them as a degenerating influence

on the culture of the Turkish society, Turkish filmmakers began making the domestic versions of these films by featuring Turkish Classical Music (TCM from hereon) singers as the leads like Münir Nurettin Selçuk (Akbaş, 2019, p.282-287). However, according to many film critics, the first film star of the singer film era is Zeki Müren, who was an up-and-coming name in the early 1950s, singing TCM. His notorious fame yielded a fruitful film career and made him one of the most legendary singers in Turkey of all time, earning him the nickname *Sanat Güneşi* (The Sun of Art) (Bengi, 2020, p.62). Müren's film career started with *Beklenen Şarkı* (*The Awaited Song*) in 1953 and continued until the early 1970s. From the 1960s onwards until the end of Yeşilçam, it became a standard practice to feature singers in films. Many singers from different genres, ranging from pop (Erol Büyükburç, Ajda Pekkan, Berkant), to TCM (Emel Sayın, Zeki Müren), to folk music (Nuri Sesigüzel, Yıldız Tezcan, Yıldırım Çınar) began to appear in the main roles. In the 1970s Orhan Gencebay appeared in what many call the first *Arabesk* film, *Bir Teselli Ver* (*Give Me Consolation*, 1971), directed by one of the most renowned directors of Turkish cinema, Lütfi Ömer Akad. It was also in this decade that other *Arabesk* singers like Müslüm Gürses, Ferdi Tayfur, and İbrahim Tatlıses acted in their first films that would start the phenomenon of *Arabesk* films in Yeşilçam cinema. *Arabesk* would later become not only a musical and film genre but also a “kitsch” lifestyle (Avcı, 2021, p.646). It is important to note that in the 1970s

the singer films would take on a more dramatic tone than they were in the 1960s. This could be attributed to the political turmoil the country was in regarding the street clashes of the right- and left-wing political groups (Abisel, 1994, p.71), (Akser, 2018, p.162), but also the fact that all *Arabesk* films were also melodramas. Besides a few exceptions, singer films were either comedy or melodramas and during the 1960s comedy films featuring pop singers were more common, whereas in the 1970s, as the production of *Arabesk* films began, the scale tipped over to more melodramatic films. *Arabesk* as a musical genre is known for its lyrical themes of pain, injustice, and unrequited love, therefore it was not a surprise that the film plots also carried a heavy melodramatic tone, complete with star-crossed lovers, misunderstandings, and one tragic event after another. The clash of the rich and poor, which has provided the plotline of many Yeşilçam films, are also at the center of *Arabesk* films.

Minik Serçe / Little Sparrow (1978)

It was in 1979 that Atıf Yılmaz, made the adaptation of *A Star is Born* (1976) starring Sezen Aksu and Bulut Aras. Sezen Aksu was in the early days of her fame and a career that would later see her turn into one of the most well-known female pop stars and female singer songwriters, loved equally by people from all sections of society. The original film is a love story between an alcoholic, washed up rock singer John Norman Howard and an aspiring singer, Esther Hoffman.

Although the adapted film bears resemblance to the original, several parts have been edited to fit the budget of the filmmakers and the gusto of the audiences. For example, the original film has several scenes of original footage from live rock concerts and in the remake, the singing scenes are filmed indoors, in *gazino*¹s, while the male lead is a TCM singer. Despite the changes, *Minik Serçe* stands out as a different type of singer film, especially in terms of its leading character, which, contrary to other female singer characters, is a strong-willed and independent woman. The film is named after Sezen Aksu's second LP of the same name and features many songs from the album such as: *Kime Kalmış Bu Dünya*, *Aşk*, *Karam*, and *Kaybolan Yıllar* as well as a few songs from her first LP *Allahımsarladık*. The film's plot is basically the same as the original one: Orhan Erkan (Bulut Aras) is a popular TCM singer who is lonely, tired of fame, and finds comfort in drinking alcohol. He sees a young singer Hülya (Sezen Aksu) perform in a nightclub by chance, and after being impressed by her voice, decides to pursue her romantically. They both fall in love and get married, despite the differences between their lifestyles. Orhan is in need of a friend and Hülya becomes a positive influence for him at first. With the help of Orhan Hülya begins a music career as well and becomes even more popular than him. Orhan has to deal with becoming a "has been" and dealing with the spotlight being on his wife the whole

time. Eventually his inner demons get the better of him as he sinks into drinking and depression again. Hülya gets used to the life of fame in the process but their relationship seems to be on the rocks. Despite their commitment and love for one another, Orhan can't help but feel useless and he is made to feel obstacle in her life by the people around them. Orhan commits suicide and Hülya sings a song to her fans to commemorate her late husband, in tears.

The plot of *Minik Serçe* and *A Star is Born*, is essentially a twofold story. The first one is a story of two people meeting at a time in their lives when one is on the rise and the other is at a downfall, and the other story is about the effects of fame and an artist. The latter one comes across as we see how jaded the Orhan / John Norman is, and how they are disconnected from their art which is in contrast to how enthusiastic Esther / Hülya is in terms of making music. At the beginning of *Minik Serçe* Orhan is known as an alcoholic and womanizer who is enabled by his management team to do more concerts and he even admits to Hülya that he is seen as a milking cow by the people around him because he makes a lot of money. He says: “as your fame grows, you become less of who you are and play the role that has been suited for you. Then your fake persona starts to destroy the real you. There is no turning back. You end up all alone.”

These sentences are poignant in the film because it also mirrors how Hülya will be by the end of the film. As her fame grows, she becomes exhausted from the schedule of the music business and starts to drink as well.

Orhan and her are at the happiest when they can spend time alone and away from the demands of their managers and record company executives. Orhan starts feeling jealous that he is the one whose career is on hold and Hülya finds herself getting molded into her record company's demands to change her image from wholesome to more like a pop star. Regardless, the love between them remains unchanged. In the end, what makes Orhan kill himself is feeling like he is an obstacle to Hülya and believing that he no longer has any value as a person. After he is told by Hülya's management team that he is not relevant anymore and that if it were not for Hülya begging for people to give him a second chance, no one would want to work with him. One of them even accuses him of trying to live off her money. It is this event that pushes Orhan off the edge and makes him get in his car and drive recklessly, only to crash it.

One of the most important aspects of the film is how Hülya is portrayed compared to the other female singers in films, at the time. In the singer films of the 1970s -similar to much of the Yeşilçam era- the female leads were portrayed in a specific way. The formation and continuation of the family were important. All the characters who fell in love eventually wanted to get married and have a family. The outsiders who threatened the happiness of the family were the bad people and most of the time they were high class, degenerate people whose evil actions were not explained. While marriage was every female lead's dream, the male characters only wanted

to get married when they were in love or if their partner got pregnant. The women were expected to keep their virginity until marriage and be loyal to their husbands (Abisel, 1994, p.72-88). The ones who did not were the femme fatale of the film, which was never a role assumed by the main female character.² In comparison *Minik Serçe* breaks many of these rules as Hülya is a woman who lives by herself, she sleeps with Orhan before they are married and she refuses to marry Orhan the first time he proposes to her, citing their differences. She comes across as a strong, independent woman who also writes her own lyrics, which was a novelty at the time. It is revealed through dialogue that she used to have a fiancé but broke up with him when he wanted her to quit making music. Although in the latter part of the film Hülya reveals her selfless and loyal side by putting her husband's happiness before her career, the film allows her to be complicated rather than perfect. At the beginning of the film, she has a healthy lifestyle and is opposed to drinking. In time, she becomes a positive influence on Orhan to quit his alcohol consumption. However, at the same time she brings a drinking habit, one that she seems to continue throughout the film, and she succumbs to the industry managers trying to mold her image. Usually, a woman who drinks alcohol in Yeşilçam films is either a rich person with European lifestyle or a femme fatale.

Another aspect that breaks the Yeşilçam rules is that Sezen Aksu's own voice is used in the film. The production of Yeşilçam included having the actors' voices being dubbed and save for a few instances, most of the time voice actors were used instead. Zeki Müren is one of the most well-known exceptions to this, as he insisted to do his own dubbing in his films (Boyacıoğlu, 2016, p.34). All of these aspects make *Minik Serçe* a more realistic and sincere portrayal of a story. The film uses her own image of a down to earth singer-songwriter and her acting is noticeably natural and devoid of the trope of the overacting melodrama actresses such as Hülya Koçyiğit (Sarıkartal, 2003, p.105-107). In his article on the same film, Hepkaner (2018), points out that the film foreshadows the huge fame Aksu would inevitably encounter in her own life and the prices she would have to pay, just like her role. In the film, Hülya struggles to find her image and when she first presents herself on stage to Orhan's management team she puts on wigs and dresses and starts imitating the singing characteristics of other singers. The first time she comes on stage she imitates Ajda Pekkan, which, as Aksu admitted years later, is something she did early on in her career (Haberler, 2007 February 28). Aksu also had two of her musical collaborators and romantic partners Onno Tunç and Uzay Heparı pass away, one from a plane

crash, and another from a motorcycle accident (Hepkaner, 2018). Later on, Hülya gets tired of imitating other singers and takes off her wig saying: “Please, let me be me.” (Fig.2)



Figure 1: Hülya gets tired of imitating others

Even though Hülya’s lifestyle and her choices mirror Esther from *A Star is Born*, such living by herself, making a living singing in nightclubs, and also choosing to be intimate with Orhan before they get married, the director Atif Yılmaz could have easily changed those elements to make the film more suitable for the Yeşilçam cinema audiences, and yet he chose not to.

Yılmaz’s career spans almost six decades as he began making films in the early 1950s and until his death in the mid-2000s. In the 1980s he once again put his mark on Turkish cinema by featuring films that depicted women liberated from the constraints of society. The films he made in this era also coincided with the feminist movement in Turkey was beginning to form as they revealed society's double standards against women, especially in terms of sexuality (Büker, 2002, p.165). While writing this article, I have not come across an interview he did on the film,

however, one can assume that the director wanted to portray a different kind of leading woman.

At the time of the filming, he was not yet known as a director of “women’s films” but he had directed his arguably best-known film *Selvi Boylum, Al Yazmalım* (*The Girl with the Red Scarf*, 1978) which features Türkan Şoray as a peasant woman Asya, who does not tolerate being cheated on by her husband Ilyas (Kadir İnanır) and decides to leave him and marry another man (Cemşit, played by Ahmet Mekin) who had been a good father to her son and a loyal partner.

Therefore, the signals of the direction he wanted to go, in terms of how he wanted to portray women, were already being signalled in his films. Yılmaz, however, did adapt the musical genre of the film according to the taste of the audience. The original film has stadium rock concert footage which is reminiscent of the musical documentary films of the era such as *Monterey Pop* (1968) and *Woodstock* (1970) (Griffin, 2018, p.242), while in *Minik Serçe*, Orhan is a TCM singer who performs in *gazinós*. In the Turkish musical mainstream, was not dominated by rock music yet (that would later happen in the 1990s and 2000s). *Gazinós* were a fixture in many singer films as they were usually the stage where the singing scenes took place and also an important part of the nightlife. Besides the choice of music, Orhan does not share the casual drug use of John Norman, only his alcohol problem. This also ties to the cultural aspects of Turkish

society as drug use is considered taboo (especially at the time the film was made), while drinking alcohol is not.

Yansın Bu Dünya / May This World Burn (1977)

Another film, that tells the story of a seasoned singer discovering a young ingenue, making her famous, and falling in love with her in the process, is *Yansın Bu Dünya (May This World Burn, 1977)*. The film features Adnan Şenses and Esengül. Şenses was more than a decade into his musical career, while Esengül was in her first acting role. Şenses was known primarily as a TCM singer but his repertoire also included Arabesk, whereas Esengül was an *Arabesk* singer. The film can be categorized as an *Arabesk* singer film/ melodrama. Besides the fact that Esengül and Adnan play characters in their own names, they also had a romantic relationship in real life. But the biggest coincidence is how Esengül's character survives a car crash and the fact that she died in a car crash two years later, in 1979 (CnnTürk, 2018, Jan. 31). In the film, Adnan Şenses is a famous singer and Esen is a young woman living with her father, sister, and nephews in a working-class neighborhood. She is a fan of Adnan Şenses and attends one of his concerts in a music hall and after the concert decides to introduce herself to him and ask for singing lessons. Adnan is kind but rejects her offer saying that he does not give lessons. One day during a celebration with her family Esen goes on the stage and starts singing. Adnan and his manager

happen to be nearby, and they are impressed by her voice. His manager goes up to Esen and gives him his card and offers to make her a singer. Realizing how talented Esen is, Adnan is impressed and decides to help her become a singer. Esen and Adnan start to work together and despite having partners they fall in love. Despite Adnan's insistence that his love for her is platonic, his girlfriend Saadet is deeply jealous. Esen's singing career takes off and as she becomes popular another music hall makes her an offer to work with them and she agrees. Meanwhile, Adnan's career is in decline but all he cares about is his love for Esen. Realizing that she has been pushed to the side, Saadet decides to seek revenge. She overhears Adnan saying that he will invite Esen to her house the next day to propose to her. Saadet arrives at the house before Esen does and says that she wants Adnan to kiss her one last time before she leaves for good. While Adnan kisses her Esen arrives in the house and is visibly devastated. Instead of explaining what is going on, Adnan tries to diffuse the situation by talking about business, but Esen acts distant and leaves. Realizing what Saadet has done, Adnan slaps her and kicks her out of the house. Esen is so distraught that she gets in her car, drives too fast, and crashes into a tree. Esen survives the accident but her relationship with Adnan is never the same. Adnan spirals into depression and starts drinking heavily. He is fired from the music hall that he sings in and after learning that Esen is getting engaged, he withdraws even more and becomes a depressed

alcoholic. Because of his worsening financial situation, he almost loses his house but just as his house and belongings are about to be confiscated, Esen arrives in the house and pays for his debts as a gesture of gratitude.

In the last scene of the film, Esen's wedding is being broadcast on television and as she exists at the wedding venue with her husband, she sees Adnan in the streets. Having watched Esen on television Adnan is having a breakdown as they run into each other. Esen stops the car and goes over to him, but Adnan is giving his last breath (both from alcoholism and sadness). As he is dying, they both confess their love for each other.

The film is obviously filled with melodramatic plot twists and the fact that the star-crossed lovers cannot have a happy ending is not their incompatibilities, but the fact that they are set up by a jealous "bad" character who is Adnan's girlfriend. The misunderstanding is never explained, and the chance of happiness is wiped away with one mistake, similar to the storyline in most Yeşilçam melodramas. At the beginning of the film, Esen is a young woman, living with her family and we are not given any information on whether she has a job or not. She believes in her singing voice and wants to take singing lessons from Adnan Şenses, her favorite singer, but besides that, we do not see any indication of her trying to pursue a musical career. She has a fiancée who is away on compulsory military service, but she is not in love with him and since the relationship between her and Adnan is never consummated, we are hinted that she may still be

together with him after she becomes famous. Although both Hülya and Esen are similar in the way they are loyal to the man they love and help them in their time of need, Hülya is much more independent and has a sense of what she wants, at least in the first half of the film. Both films tell the tale of a male singer sinking into alcoholism and depression at the expense of their career, while the woman they love succeeds. At first glance, the two films have similar plotlines, however, *Minik Serçe* is more than a tragic story as it also discusses topics such as artistic integrity, the evil side of the music business, and jealousy in relationships. Unlike *Yansın Bu Dünya* the film does not chalk up the couple's problems to "bad luck" or "evil people" as most singer films are prone to do. Interestingly, they both have scenes that mirror each other. For instances, in both films, the male leads get drunk on an important day of their loved ones: In *Minik Serçe* when Hülya is receiving the best female singer award of the year, he arrives drunk and makes a scene (Fig.2) and in *Yansın Bu Dünya*, Esen sees Adnan on the road on her wedding night, and rushes over to help him (Fig.3). Both Hülya and Esen watch the man they love die in their arms (Fig.4 and 5) and both have car crash scenes.



Figure 2: Orhan crashes the award ceremony while drunk



Figure 3: Esen finds a drunk Adnan in the streets on her wedding night



Figure 4: Adnan's death scene



Figure 5: Orhan's death scene

Conclusion

Singer films in Yeşilçam are a mixture between Hollywood influence and the Yeşilçam production. They are also intertwined with the *Arabesk* culture as many of the *Arabesk* films are

by default, singer films. *Minik Serçe* remains one of the singer films which was ahead of its time in regard to realistic characters, acting, and storytelling. Although the storyline has melodramatic elements, compared to an *Arabesk* drama *Yansın Bu Dünya*, it is devoid of the *Arabesk* and melodrama clichés. The tragic element in the story comes from the original story which the film is adapted from. The director Atıf Yılmaz tells an emotional story without exaggeration, heavy melodrama, and agitation. He paints a picture of realistic and flawed characters while making the viewer ponder over the price of fame.

Despite their differences, *Yansın Bu Dünya* and *Minik Serçe* share a lot of similarities as well. In both female characters' stories art imitates life, or at least it foreshadows it. Whether it be Esengül dying in a car crash, or Sezen Aksu's fame reaching enormous heights as she also had to watch her lover/collaborators pass away. However, *Minik Serçe* stands out as a more progressive and modern way of storytelling, perhaps more suited to the New Turkish Cinema that would arrive at the wake of the demise of Yeşilçam and a precursor of the woman films of its director Atıf Yılmaz. It also leaves a mark on the singer films of 1970s which predominantly ruled by male or *Arabesk* singers, by being the only film of the Queen of Pop³.

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ENDNOTES:

¹ The word "Gazino" can be translated as a music hall or nightclub.

² Bengi (2017) writes that in the 1960s, when Ajda Pekkan had a lively film career, film critic Agah Özgüç had criticized her choice to appear naked in films because she had lost her chance to become the main character, as women who took their clothes off in films were relegated to secondary roles (p.14)

³ There are however films that use Sezen Aksu's music in the background to drive the narrative such as *Propaganda* (1999) by Sinan Çetin and *O Kadın/That Woman* by Korhan Bozkurt (2007).