

First Submitted: 31 March 2019 Accepted: 29 September 2019
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33182/ml.v17i1.801>

Cinematic Visual Representation of Refugee Journeys in Turkey in the Context of Precarious Class Dynamics

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Abstract

*In this article, I comparatively analyse the imagery of precarious class through the narration of refugee journeys in Turkey for two different films, with an emphasis on the visuality of cinematic narration. Whilst *The Guest Aleppo to Istanbul* (2017) by Andaç Haznedaroğlu and *More* by Onur Saylak certainly offer different portrayals of refugees in Turkey, both reflect on the precarious class dynamics in the context of migration and reveal the complex interplay of citizenship, meritocracy and suffering. By focusing on precarious status, these fictional representations illustrate that the incoming non-citizens provide the opportunity of self-reflexibility for the host community members and expose the fragility of the border between the citizen-self and the refugee. I contend that such distinct comparative portrayals encompassing precarity instead of humanity, as common ground between host and new arrival populations, necessarily requires drawing upon a broader literature on the human conditions for politics of justice rather than pity.*

Keywords: precarity; Turkey; representation; refugee; *The Guest (Misafir)*; *More (Daha)*; justice; pity; affection.

Introduction

The impact of arbitrary border control and dysfunctional restrictions on mobility, inevitably promotes the smuggling and human trafficking (Taran, 2015) of precarious populations, which are at the mercy of global capital, whilst not benefiting from internationalisation and “time-space compression (Harvey, 1991)”. Consequently, there exists a global precariat consisting of the unemployed, the underemployed, women, the racialised or otherwise marginalised groups, who stand in comparison to a small number of global elites, who possess the guaranteed legal and financial means of mobility. Such double standards and inequality precisely benefit global capital and sustain it in the sense that the irregular status of the precariat, whether migrant or not, has been urged unconditionally to accept cheap and flexible labour. Both films that are analysed in this article, *The Guest Aleppo to Istanbul* (2017) by Andaç Haznedaroğlu and *More* (2017) by Onur Saylak², constitute a connection between the refugee and the host community through the concept of precarity and hence, reflect the inequalities at large in the wider society. Precarity is defined as a politically induced condition in which certain populations suffer from failing social and economic networks of support and become differentially exposed to injury, violence, and death. This pertains to a condition of maximised vulnerability, exposure to arbitrary state violence as well as to other forms of aggression that are not enacted by states, but against which they do not offer adequate protection (Butler, 2009). These two films primarily depict encounters between different classes

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² I would like to thank both Andaç Haznedaroğlu and Onur Saylak for giving permission to reprint images from their work.



instead of prioritising them as the citizen versus the refugee. Thus, precarity, while already being related to the “refugee situation” it is not generally juxtaposed in order to draw attention to the shared human experience, appears here to claim solidarity with precarious citizen classes.

The roots of precarity derive from global systems and the outcomes in terms of creating differentiated types of sufferers. *The Guest Aleppo-Istanbul* narrates the journey of Lena and Meryem during their escape from the war in Syria. “Eight-year-old girl Lena who has lost her family members in the war makes her way with her little baby sister and their neighbour Meryem and other immigrants (“The Guest Aleppo to Istanbul | Malmo Arab Film Festival,” 2019)”, arriving in Istanbul in Turkey under temporary protection status. Such a “status of Syrians in Turkey is unique in that the Turkish government has granted Syrians some of the social rights available to Turkish citizens, thereby incorporating Syrians within its existing social welfare system, while at the same time, refusing to grant them status that would lead to longer-term residency or full citizenship (Baban, Ilcan, & Rygiel, 2017)”. Hence this status characterises the legal basis for the precarity of Syrians in Turkey. In the absence of their mother, Lena and her little sister are taken care of by fellow refugees, especially by Meryem. Along her journey, Lena insists on returning home to Syria and disagrees with Meryem, who aims to reach Germany where Lena’s uncle lives. In Istanbul, they face harsh challenges. They must live in an overpopulated apartment, while working as temporary workers in textile workshops. Their daily earnings do not meet the cost of living, in fact, they can hardly afford to pay for their most basic needs. In response, one of the Syrian flat mate’s children steals a neighbour’s chicken from their backyard. This crime (and not paying the rent on time) ends up in the forced removal of Meryem and Lena with their friends and flatmates from the apartment.

In contrast, the movie *More* follows the story of smugglers, Gaza, a 14-year-old boy, the son of Ahlat a smuggler who lives on the Aegean coast of Turkey. Together with his domineering father, he helps to smuggle refugees from war-torn countries into Europe, giving them temporary lodgings and scant food until they attempt the crossing (Saylak, n.d.). Gaza dreams of having an education and migrating to Istanbul, thus escaping this life with his father. As Yamaç Okur puts it, the character Gaza can’t help being drawn into a dark world of immorality, exploitation and human suffering (Okur, 2017). Indeed, *More* does not touch upon the possibility of a more favourable balance of power, that ethnographic studies have documented between the smuggler and the “migrants who have two leverage points, as the amount that they can pay; the second is their capacity to enhance or damage the smuggler’s reputation” (Tinti & Reitano, 2018, p. 46). In that sense, *More* can be said to follow a somewhat mythical reality that obfuscates the mechanics of relatively complex operations.

In addition to this specific focus on precarious class dynamics, both movies stand out from other screenplays with their focus on the fictional plots instead of a documentary type of refugee journeys in Turkey, as the transit host country on the road to Western European destination countries. In *The Guest Aleppo-Istanbul*, Rawan Iskeif plays Lena and other Syrian characters are played by refugees themselves, except for some characters, such as the Jordanian actress, Saba Mubarek (Meryem) and Turkish actress Şebnem Dönmez (the bourgeois benefactor) in the film (Gezici, 2017). One of its distinguishing qualities is that its original language is Arabic and hence, in order to understand what the refugees talk about the non-Arabic viewer needs to read the subtitles. In essence, *The Guest Aleppo-Istanbul* places the refugees and their subjectivity at the centre of the story. In contrast, *More* does not foreground telling the journey of refugees, but rather, is focused a smuggler father and son. Saylak, the director, stated in his speech at Bahçeşehir University that, he wanted to narrate the story of smugglers because he did not know what it is to be like a refugee and



so, he focused on the host community side. *More* is Saylak's debut feature as director, adapted from the award-winning novel of the same title by Hakan Günday, one of the first to document the refugee crisis in Europe (Okur, 2017). *The Guest* prefers the refugee to be the subject and hence, the legitimate narrator of his own story, as *More* through indirectly following the refugee theme and putting emphasis on Gaza, the smuggler's son and assistant, and his story of growing up in the middle of the reign of injustice.

Throughout this article, I aim to explore how these two movies deal with the question of whether there can be an outside chance of affection among the precariat. For sure, the possibility and degree of exercising agency as well as freedom of choice for the oppressed precariat are scarce when socio-economic power is converted into patriarchal power, ethnic inequality and labour exploitation. Thus, affection becomes a luxury, because precarity refers to "being unable to plan one's time, being a worker on call where your life and time is determined by external forces" (Foti, 2004). The precarious protagonists risk giving up on affective flourishing in different parts of the films. Regarding which, *More* puts a special emphasis on the parallelism between the marginalised class in Turkey and the refugees in terms of the potentiality of affection, whilst *the Guest* blurs the boundary between the bourgeois and precarious way of affective being. Incoming refugees, who do not have even an official refugee status in Turkey, represent, in Agamben's terms, the banalisation of life through stripping away of a political community, namely "bare life", a life beyond political and legal representation (Agamben, 1998). The usual relation of the citizen with the refugee has been traced to conveying the necessity of helping the other; the distinct refugee who is unfortunate in contrast with the citizen. Yet, in *More* and *the Guest*, portrayals of refugee encounters with various segments of the host community have not been characterised through dramatic demarcation of differences. In Arendthian terms, humanitarian 'politics of pity' are distinguished from 'politics of justice' based directly on action, on the order of merit and hence, the former merely consists of the observation of the unfortunate by those who do not share their suffering (Arendt, 2006, pp. 59–114). To arouse pity, suffering and wretched bodies must be conveyed in such a way as to affect the sensibility of those who are more fortunate, such that the abjection authorises the otherisation to secure the subjecthood of the fortunate. Kristeva defines abject as a category of (non)-being (Kristeva, 1982) and what a subject must get rid of to become one at all. Consequently, the abject as impure is constructed as deviating from an essential state of originary homogeneity (Duschinsky, 2013, p. 711) Contrasting what abjection demands, these films' construction of 'refugee subjectivity' invokes the graduation of status differentiation between the citizen and the non-citizen, instead of the clear-cut opposition to be remedied by the common humanity paradigm of a humanitarian approach based on pity. In this article, I analyse how *More* and *The Guest* contribute to the literature on the human condition for free choice and for genuine politics through visualising the frame of refugee subjectivity in its distinct way, thereby contributing to broader questions on human interactions under late capitalism.

Precarious Class Dynamics in *The Guest* and *More*

Precarity, at a global level, has progressively entangled a larger segment of social groups and individual actors. That, it has not only enveloped the underclass but also middle classes, including professionals, creatives and the mass intellectuality of immaterial labour (Hardt & Negri, 2001). Precarious classes are vulnerable to exploitation and abuse due to insecure or unstable living conditions (Banki, 2013) tractable worldwide by degrees. This term precarity connotes all possible forms of being unsure, with no guarantees in life, experiencing a flexible hence insecure livelihood.

It emerges as the outcome of the socially corrosive consequences of post-industrial late capitalism, where making plans for the long term is impossible (Nobil Ahmad, 2008; Sennett, 2000). When the emphasis of precarity is on labour security, it can be utilised as a concept to understand how populations manage day to day (Banki, 2013, p. 451), such as accessing legal documentation, as the presence or absence of rights and entitlements (Goldring, Berinstein, & Bernhard, 2009). However, precarity also engenders the unintentional inability of fulfilling gender norms (Fantone, 2007) and “other aspects of intersubjective life, including housing, debt, and the ability to build affective social relations” (Neilson and Rossiter, 2005). Thus, precarity, whilst usually being linked to political or economic vulnerability, impacts on other aspects of human interactions, including affection.

Precarity does not only pertain to pay or safer working conditions, but also one’s control in having a sense of the predictability necessary to build social relations and feelings of affection (Foti, 2004). In the case of the refugee status, including undocumented and documented ‘illegality’ as well as other forms of insecure and irregular migrant status, insecurity especially embodies “the precarity of place, vulnerability to removal or deportation from one’s physical location” (Banki, 2013, p.453). Indeed, the precarity of place ends up in exposure to abuse in socio-political-economic relations and hence, inability to secure affective networks. Whilst all types of migration can also be considered as a means of moving out of the precariat; it can often provoke insecurity in the life and livelihoods for migrants (Van Hear, 2014). However, the severity of initial and subsequent precariousness differs according to different types of migration. Even though migrants can possess economic and cultural capital, they can be insecure, because their competencies are not activated or benefited due to the reduced size and unavailability of social capital (Bourdieu, 1986), i.e. the lack of a network of connections in the host community.

Consequently, as Van Hear (2014) stated, the precarity of place can inevitably result in downward social mobilisation. Unsecured residential status or an unstable work environment can stem from the inability to develop relationships. Their precarity means they are lacking in the confidence and financial resources that much socialising requires (Goldring et al., 2009).

Regarding *the Guest*, the protagonists, Lena and Meryem, whilst having affective ties between them and among their fellow refugees, their engagement with the system in Turkey is insecure. Because they have very weak economic and social capital, they cannot afford secure accommodation nor secure basic needs. In Lena’s case, being only being eight years old, she cannot continue to look after her little baby sister although she manages to work as illegal child labourer. None of the Syrian migrants can communicate with host community members, because of the language barrier and hence, cannot activate their cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1993). Whilst Meryem was the owner of a hairdresser’s in Syria, now she cannot find a hairdressing job in Istanbul. Yet, Lena has an uncle in Germany, and he wants to take care of his nieces. Thus, the film narrates Lena’s struggle to reach her own family’s social capital that she lost in Syria due to the war, which she cannot rebuild in Turkey. In order to migrate to Germany, Lena needs the collaboration of fellow Syrian migrants and especially, Meryem. Other fellow migrants advise Meryem to look after Lena and her baby sister so that she can also migrate to Germany by accompanying them. Hence, Meryem’s affective ties with Lena can also provide her with the social and economic resources for her own upward mobility.

The Guest precisely accentuates the correspondence between the bourgeois class and Lena. Indeed, economic capital secures one the resources to move if he/she wants or needs to, “while the less endowed have no choice but to stay put because they have insufficient resources to move across



borders except in non-formal ways” (Van Hear, 2014). As Hyndman pointed out “those who are uprooted from their homes and forced to flee their country with few resources experience migration in a very different way”. Thus, *the Guest* declares that it is not only the language barrier causing the miscommunication of Lena and her fellow migrants in the host country Turkey. This is starkly seen in Lena’s encounter with the bourgeois tourist shoppers of Arab origin at Kanyon shopping centre, which arouses poor social recognition of her case. Lena attempts to explain her problem of misorientation in the city, expecting the shopper to be able to respond, because she is speaking Arabic with her companions. However, the shopper does not identify with her Syrian refugee misfortune and otherises Lena. The refugee imagery as abject incites fear and loathing because it exposes the border between self and the other as a construction and hence it is fragile, thereby threatening to dissolve the subject by dissolving the border (Young, 2011, p. 144). Hence, the shopper prefers to offer charity instead of seeking to understand Lena’s specific issue different to what a refugee is assumed to be seeking. For, the shopper and her companions of Arab origin are tourists moving across countries enjoying their class advantages, while Lena is under temporary protection³. Consequently, it is not a common ethnic identity that unites populations, but rather what matters is the precarity in common that Lena shares with the Eastern European migrant housekeeper, who works in the host family home, where she was offered a place to stay one night. However, the otherisation of the refugee Lena by the bourgeois Arab tourist does not become embedded as being legitimate, because Lena exposes higher virtues, such as pride and bravery, associated with fortunate classes, rather than the abjecthood of the unfortunate refugee. Kristeva claimed that the operation “to abject” is fundamental to the maintenance of the subject and society, while the

³ Temporary protection status of Syrians in Turkey offers access to basic services similar to refugee rights; however, it does not pave the way for citizenship in Turkey

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condition of “to be abject” is subversive of both formations (Kristeva, 1982). Yet, Lena is subject although she is stripped away from political community, hence her life, with emphasis on Agamben⁴, is not banal at all.

As aforementioned, the film *More* puts emphasis on the parallelism between the marginalised class in Turkey and the refugees. Not only the latter but also the marginalised segments of the host community do not possess the resources whether economic, social or cultural capital necessary to have the privilege to move. Ahlat, the father and Gaza his son, are supposedly low-waged temporary workers and thus, have precarious work, which designates them rather than being unemployed, as constantly living under the looming threat of losing sufficient income for means of subsistence. As such, the refugees are stripped away from the political community and have a “bare life” (Agamben, 1998). To counter this, smuggler’s apprentice son Gaza both assists and exploits posing as a mirror image for him. Gaza’s insecure life, with his nearly non-existent agency in decision making, property and socio-cultural prosperity, bring him closer to a bare life. Gaza has the right to be a student in one of the highest ranked high schools as result of passing the entry exam. However, despite possessing the qualities, namely the cultural capital, he cannot enter into the system. Hence, he has been pushed towards the marginalised segments of the society and excluded from formal socioeconomic relations. In other words, Gaza is not a free agent in his fight for upward social mobility that would supposedly be granted through education. The gendarmerie in collaboration with smugglers arrests him as he is attempting to migrate to Istanbul and bring him back to his father, who has been exploiting him. Global capital with its maintaining system is so corrupted that it permits the circulation of money, while the circulation of people whose labour is exploited is

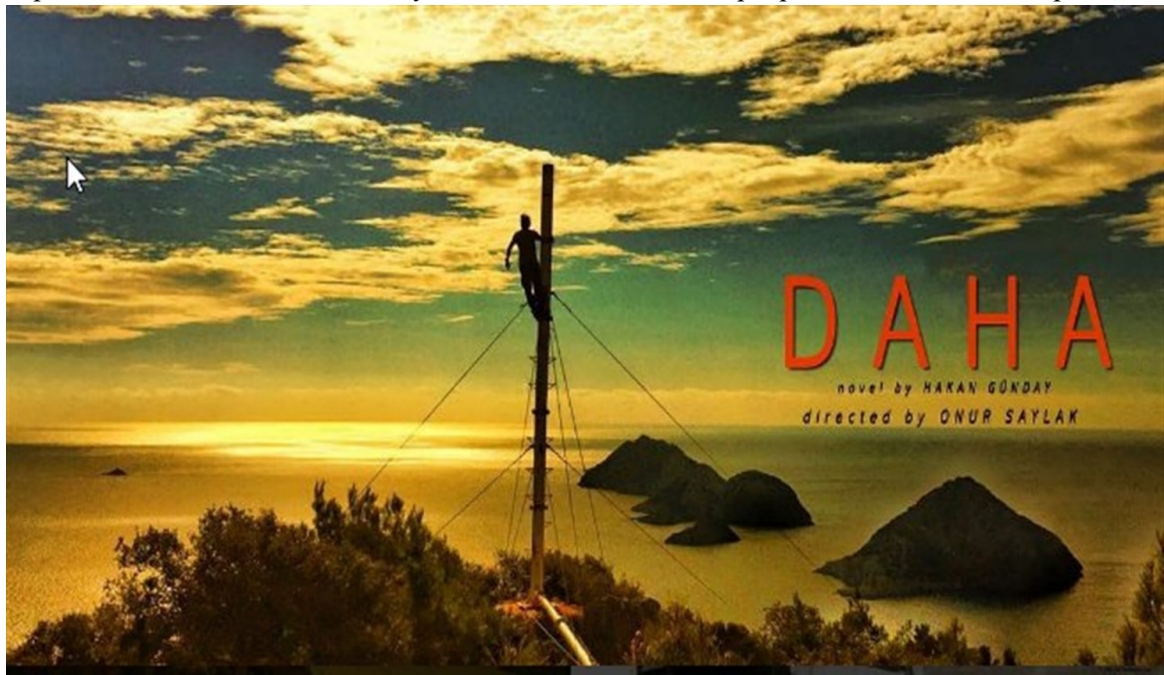


Figure 1 One of 'More'(Daha, 2017) posters

under the control of the border regime preventing not only crossers between nation-states, people’s

⁴ Please see the introduction section for the reference to Giorgio Agamben’s *Homo Sacer*.



mobility but also blocking attempts of social mobility. In Gaza's case, he possesses Turkish citizenship, but he does not have freedom of mobility from his local town to Istanbul within Turkey, where he could receive a highly-rated education to fulfil his potentiality. Thus, as a smuggler, Gaza can only cheat the system and secure his survival in this reign of exploitation network, if he approves its working guideline of injustice. In sum, *More* emphasises that power inequality does not permit justice based on meritocracy being applied in Gaza's case as is also the case for Syrians fleeing from their country.

The parallelism between the host community member and the refugee in *the Guest* is constructed between the bourgeois benefactor, the character of Şebnem Dönmez and Lena. Their encounter does not follow the line of the Arab tourist shoppers and Lena with her baby sister stay for one night with the benefactor's family instead of spending the night outside in the heavy rain. The refugee imagery as abject disturbs boundaries (Kristeva, 1982), for instance, between the living and the dead, human and animal, human and alien, male and female, while the migrant assumed to be abject breaks the frontiers of citizen and non-citizen. Accordingly, Lena's guest night in a privileged host family makes the host question her privilege. The fact that the host's children play computer war games, whilst Lena has experienced a real war, does not sit well with the meritocracy and this inequality cannot be solved through charity. Thus, "locking oneself up allows one to prove one's own existence as well as the fact that his/her community can last along" (Szary, 2012, p. 219), while migrants transgress the membrane of the host society's way of being. Hence, Lena insists on not accepting charity, but instead, continuously searches for genuine human relations that considered luxurious for her precarious life conditions. Such dissolution of the boundary between the citizen and the refugee despite class differences provokes the bourgeois mother to contemplate

her seemingly secure privileged position in the social relations. This is why she asks to her partner what he would do on the last day before some war breaks out here in Turkey.



Figure 2 The scene from the *Guest* (*Misafir*, 2017): Lena searches for help in heavy rain for her sick baby sister, while the bourgeois benefactor notices them and decides to help them

Late Capitalism Haunting Humanity

International migration, therefore, requires the accumulation or possession of sufficient amounts of economic, social, cultural, and other forms of capital in various combinations. Indeed, both films focus on the fact that access of the precariat at the global level to more prosperous and desirable destinations is limited to better resourced migrants. *The Guest* highlights the affinity between the refugee and bourgeois class, whereas *More* points out the similarity of the marginalised populations in Turkey with refugees. So, what kind of solutions or resolutions do these two movies suggest? How can we conclude the fact that audience commenting on *More* certainly state that the film was so violent (Saylak, 2019) and criticises *The Guest* as a feelgood movie? There is a scene in which the protagonists are looking from above down onto their present location. In *the Guest*, Lena's friend dreams of being enough rich to go back to the war in Syria to save the country, whilst they are sitting on a hill looking down on Istanbul. As Lena explains to her friend that she does not dream of the future, she realises that she misses her companion Meryem, who she quit from several days ago. Both children feel relieved that there can be somehow a Godlike someone more powerful watching them and that merit and justice can be reimbursed somehow hence redemption exists. On the other hand, a parallel scene in *More* movie with a hilltop view portrays the son becoming like his father. Their exploitive relation and reproduction of one the next generation in that way illustrate how social relations work through the unequal distribution of power worldwide. As such, the movie *More* claims that the hierarchic system based on injustice cannot be remedied, because it is based on human nature.



Figure 4 Ahlat the father and Gaza the son with hilltop view



Figure 3 Lena and baby sister with their friend looking down to Istanbul city

Certainly, *More* is violent, because of its portrayal of potentiality for human agency and possibility for a politics of justice based on merit is highly fatalistic and despairing. The film reflects the ultimate futility of a dream for a hopeful revolutionary vision for the global regime of borders and exploitation. That is, the inner voice, Gaza's voice, states that we are alive today, because we are the offspring of corrupted ones, who managed to survive from the beginning of world history. With this perspective, social ills cannot be rectified and salvation is an illusion. Hence, *More* does not distinguish the neoliberal order of contemporary capitalism from earlier human systems of

production. Hence, the paintings that the refugees draw on the wall of the cellar look like cave illustrations from humanity's start. Evil can never be defeated, because it is so deeply ingrained into our very being, such that members of our species find it easier to embrace it, rather than opposing the exploitive system, which is what Gaza has to do in the end to secure his survival through the reproduction of the system. In the movie, Gaza can save neither the refugee boy, that he befriended, from being killed, nor his beloved Ahra, a refugee girl⁵, from being sexually exploited. Finally, Ahra gets into the insecure smuggler boat equipped with fake life jackets and the audience knows that she does not know how to swim. Thus, any effort to build affective ties in the middle of the reign of injustice is blocked by the irreducibility of reality to the principles of meritocracy and belief in human ability. This is why Gaza also gives up on his love of science and dreaming of space voyage to see beyond the earth.

On the other hand, Lena in *the Guest* begins the final difficult step on her way to her uncle in Germany when she succeeds in starting her travel on a smuggler boat. Here, Meryem gives up on her own salvation in exchange of Lena's, because the money that the latter's uncle sent can only cover one traveller. Meryem could have used the money paid for Lena for her own passage to Europe and left her little entrusted companions in Turkey alone. But *the Guest* precisely holds a belief in human relations and the human ability to build genuine affective ties even in the most precarious conditions. Through this, justice has been reassured, because the film optimistically contends that the political community stripped away from the precarious class cannot remove its human values based on the ability of affection and thus, there is the human potentiality for progress.

Conclusion: Justice for all the Precariat

The human prospect for politics relying on the exercise of agency and freedom of choice has been discussed since antiquity. Related, but different to Agamben's emphasis on the Aristotelian definition of the polis as the opposition between 'life' as bare life and 'good life' as the political (Agamben, 1998, pp. 2–3), Aristotle declared in the *Nicomachean Ethics* that it is impossible to do what is noble, if one has no resources, for many actions are performed by means of money, political power and friends (Aristotle, 1999, Chapter 10). For Aristotle, one may still have virtue without external goods, but its exercise will be in a limited sphere. Certainly, the growing precariat in late capitalism, with minimum opportunities to build social relations, actually faces more than "alienation in the old sense, but indifference as a sense of not mattering as a person or being necessary to other" (Nobil Ahmad, 2008, p. 302). Thus, the precarious protagonists in these two films, under insecurity and instability of livelihood, have had to give up on affective flourishing in different parts of the films. That is, Lena's best friend in the movie *Guest* had to marry a member of the Turkish host community owing to familial pressure, whilst *Gaza More* indirectly causes the death of a refugee child, with whom he developed a friendship. However, both films do not distinguish refugees from the citizens as fortunate and non-fortunate, because the precarity is common. That is, both citizen and the refugee are vulnerable to the workings of the international political and economic system. Thus, both *Guest* and *More* do not follow humanitarian politics that employs a *politics of pity* holding that the boundary is between the fortunate and unfortunate. Neither *The Guest* nor *More* privilege the spectacle of an assumed fortunate class of citizens, who are able to observe, either directly or indirectly, the misery of the 'unfortunate' refugees. This is because compassion resolving otherisation necessitates a *politics of justice* that demands action, with reference to communal merit, instead of chance and coincidence. As a matter of fact, both the

⁵ Ahra is played by Tuba Büyüküstün in the film *More*



films bring the conceptualisation of refugee subjectivity into the dialogue with broader literatures on class dynamics in connection with affection. Whilst *More* is pessimist about human ability to build a merit-based system and hence, laments the absence of justice, *The Guest* believes in redemption for those who are living under precarious conditions.

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