

Turkish Arabesk Music and the Changing Perceptions of Melancholy in Turkish Society

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In this article, I look at the popular Turkish music genre known as Arabesk. Arabesk is a musical synthesis of Turkish Classical Music, folk music, Western popular music and Egyptian bellydance music (Stokes, 1994: 23), and articulates a collective mode of melancholy. This music was traditionally associated with working class Turks and often derided by middle class intellectual elites as representing an affront to the ideals of a modernised and westernised Kemalist Turkish Republic. Initially composed and/or performed by artists such as Orhan Gencebay and Müslüm Gürses, the most classic Arabesk songs encompass an ever-present feeling of melancholy, loss and displacement, of nostalgia for family, for the beloved, and a lack of any prospect for a better future.

This paper focuses on more traditional examples of Arabesk produced during the 1970s, particularly Orhan Gencebay's¹ and Müslüm Gürses'² music, rather than relatively new music forms exemplified by Ibrahim Tatlıses³ and Küçük Emrah⁴ in the 1980s and Mahsun Kırmızıgül⁵ and Özcan Deniz⁶ in the 1990s. The reason for this limitation is, first of all, that Arabesk music has evolved and assumed too numerous facets to handle within the scope of a single article. Secondly, as several critics have pointed out, in the 1990s Arabesk became closer to pop music, and lost, to some extent, the characteristics that made it melancholic. For the purposes of this article, first, I provide some brief definitions of melancholy from the Western tradition and compare these with recent definitions of collective melancholy in Turkish culture. I then describe Arabesk music's relationship to melancholy and how this relationship was in conflict with the Kemalist ideology, which was shaped by progressivism, optimism and the ideal of Westernization. Finally, I briefly discuss how the reactions to Arabesk by the upper and middle class educated Turkish elite have changed through the decades from derision to 'kitsch' celebration and analyse some of the reasons behind it.

Western Melancholy versus Turkish Hüzün

The concept of melancholy varies greatly in its definitions, some of which even contradict each other. Jennifer Radden, in her introduction to *The Nature of Melancholy*, identifies four different themes in writing on melancholy. First, she says this concept may take multiple forms. In the past, it was associated with the rise of the black bile in the body, or characterised as an obsessive madness, or a gloomy and pensive mood that was linked to astrological and other causes. Second, melancholy was sometimes described as fear and sadness without a cause. Third, it is seen as constituting a link between genius and creative energy, a recurrent theme since the time of Aristotle. Fourth, melancholy is associated with idleness, and action and labour are suggested as a possible cure for it. This idleness is particularly identified with an aristocratic sort of boredom (Radden, 2000: 5-19).

According to Radden, Freud's account of melancholy, in his article "Mourning and Melancholia", constitutes a milestone within this field of study. What separates Freud's discussion of melancholy from its predecessors is the emphasis he puts on "the theme of loss, self accusation and self-loathing in melancholic subjectivity, and the elaborate theory of narcissism, identification and introjection" (Radden, 2000: 282). Freud differentiates mourning from melancholy, the former being a normal reaction to the loss of a loved one or an abstraction, the latter a pathological one (Freud: 1964: 243). According to him,

[t]he distinguishing mental features of melancholia are a profoundly painful dejection, cessation of interest in the outside world, loss of the capacity to love, inhibition of all activity, and a lowering of the self-regarding feelings to a degree that finds utterance in self-reproaches and self-revilings, and culminates in a delusional expectation of punishment (Freud, 1964: 244).

Other thinkers have built upon Freud's definition. Julia Kristeva's *Black Sun*, in which she identifies melancholy with the loss of the (m)other as well as the loss of self, is one such example (Kristeva, 1989: 28). What relates Freud's and Kristeva's writings to some of the previous literature on melancholy is the way they link it to brilliance, creativity and literary and artistic expression. Freud asserts that "[the melancholic] has a keener eye for the truth than others who are not melancholic" (Freud, 1964: 246) and Kristeva emphasises the importance of literary and artistic expression in approaching the lost object of the melancholic which she characterises as "an unsymbolized aspect of psychic life" (Radden, 2000:335).

One striking characteristic that encompasses these themes is their emphasis on subjectivity and their relation to 'extraordinary' people, i.e., creative geniuses or idle aristocrats. In recent Turkish cultural studies and literature, on the other hand, melancholy is more and more characterised as a collective state that 'ordinary' people can experience en masse. For instance, in *Istanbul: Memories and the City*, the Nobel-prize winner Orhan Pamuk's autobiographical book, *hüzün* – the Turkish word for melancholy – becomes the central element to define both the author's general state of mind as well as all his fellow Istanbulites. Pamuk asserts that Istanbul bears a common *hüzün*, which is not "the melancholy of a solitary person but the black mood shared by millions of people together" (Pamuk, 2006: 92). Pamuk believes that this shared *hüzün* is a result of the break from the city's imperial and multicultural heritage, due to the efforts made to form a new nation-state. In Pamuk's text, the imaginary Istanbul is marked with feelings of defeat and loss, poverty and the unattended remains of architecture from the city's past, which in turn evoke a haunting but embraced collective melancholy (Pamuk:2006:6).

Orhan Pamuk's book, albeit a literary autobiography, displays an effort to support the writer's ideas concerning *hüzün* and Istanbul, with references to the works of several Turkish and French writers, such as Yahya Kemal Beyatlı, Ahmet Hamdi Tanpınar, Gerard de Nerval, Theophile Gautier, Gustave Flaubert among others. As a result, what

he comes up with is a highly aestheticised melancholy, which does not seem to include migrants who live in squatter towns on the peripheries of the city. Rather, their poverty becomes one of the elements that evoke melancholy in the writer. Although Pamuk does not make any class distinction in his description of the melancholic Istanbulite, his definition of *hüzün* as a profound and artistic emotion, which is welcomed by the inhabitants of the city, can be regarded as failing to embrace the working classes. His *hüzün* is more of an emotion for the intellectual who has enough time on his hands to roam the streets in a *flaneur*-like fashion.⁷

On the other hand, Nurdan Gürbilek, a Turkish writer and cultural critic describes a more 'common' form of collective melancholy. She employs kitsch popular cultural products (as well as works of literature) in an attempt to analyze the immanent sadness in Turkish cultural life. Her collection of essays, *Kötü Çocuk Türk* (which can be translated as Bad Child: Turk), deals with the relationship between Turkhood and badness. It focuses on anguished heroes, impotent fathers, orphans and bad boys/girls in popular and artistic texts. She argues that Turkish society has long "picked its heroes from figures who are victimised but innocent, suffering but full of honour, and has felt itself close to orphans, losers and the helpless"(Gurbilek, 2001: 8).⁸

In one of her essays, "Acıların Çocuğu" (The Child of Sorrows) Gürbilek talks about how Turkish society identifies with the image of the crying boy in a series of posters and postcards, which were quite popular in Turkey during the late seventies and eighties. She believes that Turkish society is haunted by a sense of belatedness – a belatedness in modernisation and westernisation, which in turn makes the society feel like a wronged child, who has been drained of all strength but still standing (Gurbilek, 2001: 39). Gürbilek's argument, thus, is reminiscent of Slavoj Žižek's ideas on melancholy in his article "Melancholy and the Act", where he claims that the lost object of the melancholic has indeed never existed and that the melancholic confuses lack with loss (Žižek, 2000: 660).

A similar theme arises in Esra Akcan's article "Melancholy and the 'Other'". Akcan claims that "the non-Western other suffers from a lack of, or distance from the ideal, having perceived the "West" as the "ideal norm". She calls this "melancholy of the geographic other" (Akcan, 2005: 1). Both Gürbilek and Akcan, like others before them, put an emphasis on melancholy as a mood characterised by ambivalence. Gürbilek mentions how Turkish people simultaneously idealize and distance themselves from "the West" and Akcan mentions how the "non-West" or "the East" feels sorrowful and frustrated at some moments for not being like the idealised West, and content at other times for the very same reason, not being a part of the oppressing powers of the West.

Ambivalence towards the West in Turkish Culture

This feeling of ambivalence towards the West extends a long way back in Turkish culture. The efforts to create an East-West synthesis have been present since the *Tanzimat* reforms in 1839, which included the recognition of several minority rights within the Ottoman Empire, reorganisation of the army and the economy among other things. But

they are particularly accentuated after the Turkish Republic was founded. After the War of Independence (1919-1923), the Turkish founding elite led by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk tried to construct a nation state based on Western ideals. Their ideas concerning the new nation were shaped by the ideas of Ziya Gökalp, an influential Turkish thinker, who wrote *Türkçülüğün Esasları* (Principles of Turkism). According to Orhan Tekelioğlu,

[i]t was Ziya Gökalp who pointed to the West as the future of ‘our new civilization’, but while there was an orientation in this direction, the origin of the synthesis was not forgotten, “the traditional culture of the Turkish folk”. The West, far from being a mere geographical description, was considered the domain of modernity and was therefore taken as a model, its putative value measured against an ‘East’ which was considered as standing for backwardness itself (Tekelioğlu, 1996: 195).

Through some radical reforms, Atatürk’s government tried to ‘modernize’ all areas of Turkish life, including politics, social life, and culture, refusing the Eastern-related and ‘corrupt’ heritage of Ottoman Empire. These reforms changed the way the country was governed, introducing popular sovereignty (1923) and secularism (1924), new styles of dress including the introduction of western style clothing (1925), new ways of talking and writing including an alphabet adapted from the Latin alphabet (1928) and setting up the Turkish Language Association (1931-32).⁹ However, these rapid changes were not immediately embraced by the whole population. As Robins and Aksoy observe,

[t]he elite set out its ideal image of the nation, but it was never an easy ideal for the Turks to live with. Throughout the History of the Republic, it has proved to be a source of unproductive tensions and discomforts. For one thing, there has been the difficulty of actually reconciling, first the Western and the traditional components of the national culture, and then the Turkish/Anatolian and Islamic elements within the latter. The need for ‘synthesis’ has been constantly articulated, but the conditions for fusion never seemed achievable (Robins and Aksoy, 2001: 208).

Turkey, then, has been stuck in limbo between the West and the East culturally and identity-wise, being neither truly Western nor truly Eastern, and embodying this dichotomy in the collective psyche. This ambivalence towards the ideal of ‘the West’ can be deemed one of the main factors that push the society into a state of melancholy. This mood can easily be observed during a (highly caricaturised) session of drinking *rakı* – a strong, alcoholic drink – when the conversation typically starts with questioning the future of the country and results in complaints which end in a kind of celebration of *hüzün*, mostly accompanied by the Eastern tunes of Turkish classical music and Arabesk music.

Arabesk Music, Melancholy, and Class Conflict

During the first years of the Republic, another target of Atatürk’s ideals of modernisation was Turkish music that bore Eastern elements. Turkish classical music, or *alaturka*, was

banned from the radios twice, in 1928 and 1934, on the grounds that it encouraged passivity. In addition it was not considered modern as, unlike western classical music, it was monophonic rather than polyphonic. Orhan Tekelioğlu gives an account of how Mustafa Kemal Atatürk interpreted *alaturka* in 1928, quoting Atatürk,

This music, this unsophisticated music, cannot feed the needs of the innovative Turkish soul, the Turkish sensibility in all its urge to explore new paths. We have just heard [classical] music of the civilised world [western Europe], and the [Turkish] people, who gave a rather anaemic reaction to the murmurings known as Eastern music, immediately came to life... Turks are, indeed, naturally vivacious and high-spirited, and this admirable characteristic was for a time not perceived [by the Turkish people], that was not their fault (Tekelioğlu, 1996: 204).

Arabesk music and the culture it represented, which became popular in the 1960s among the migrants in metropolitan areas, attracted a similar reaction from the Kemalist elites. As people from the rural areas migrated in great numbers to the large cities in the West during the 1950s, they started to form their own hybrid culture – intermingling the urban and the rural – in the squatter towns and slum neighbourhoods called *gecekondumahallesi*, particularly in Istanbul. According to Tahire Erman, this phenomenon aroused problems regarding the integration of the migrants into urban society as they were expected to be assimilated into the larger city culture in accordance with modernization theory. However, they were mostly considered to be unable to fulfil those expectations (Erman, 1998: 541). There occurred tensions and confrontations between these migrants and ‘locals’ of the big cities – between lower classes and middle/upper-middle classes and discourses of “degeneration and contamination of big cities”, especially Istanbul, increased. Many ‘urbanites’ felt that these new ‘rural’ migrants disrupted city life by their ‘unsophisticated’ behaviour in public and by building *gecekondus* (squatter houses) on the cities’ peripheries, causing irregular urbanisation.

The inability of the migrants to fully adapt to the urban modes of living – due to both cultural and economic inequalities – found its voice in Arabesk music in the late 1960s and onwards. According to Martin Stokes,

Arabesk is a music of the city and for the city. It portrays a world of complex and turbulent emotions peopled by lovers doomed to solitude and a violent end. It describes a decaying city in which poverty-stricken migrant workers are exploited and abused, and calls on its listeners to pour another glass of *raki*, light another cigarette, and curse fate and the world (Stokes, 1992: 1).

Although an instant success with the working classes to the degree of fanaticism, Arabesk cultural products, songs as well as movies, were not appreciated as much – and even despised to some extent – by the upper and middle classes. Arabesk was criticised by a great majority of intellectuals, sociologists, the media and other opinion makers as being another “opium of the masses”, a kitsch musical genre devoid of any artistic value or

taste. Of course, this interpretation concerning ‘taste’ is highly ideologically charged. As Pierre Bourdieu points out,

[t]aste classifies, and it classifies the classifier. Social subjects, classified by their classifications, distinguish themselves by the distinctions they make, between the beautiful and ugly, the distinguished and the vulgar, in which their position in the objective classifications is expressed or betrayed (Bourdieu, 2000: 89).

In the case of Arabesk, classifying it as ugly and vulgar distinguishes the classifier as a member of the upper class intellectual elite.

The themes in Arabesk music – the intrinsic melancholy and passivity in its lyrics and musical structure – were regarded as being in opposition with the founding ideals of the new Turkish Republic, such as hard work, optimism, and progressivism. Therefore, Arabesk artists were banned from public broadcast media, which, as with other public institutions, were deeply attached to Kemalist principles. It was not until the 1990s, when private TV channels and radio stations started broadcasting, that Arabesk products had the chance to be aired without restriction.

The term Arabesk gradually started to be associated with other aspects of culture besides music. Ayşe Öncü draws a particularly striking portrait of the feelings of upper classes towards the lower class migrants and the *nouveau riche* through cartoons published in the last seventy years. She also looks at the representation of Arabesk culture in satirical magazines. According to her, the term Arabesk came to signify a vulgarism, with connotations of banality, trashiness and impurity in all segments of the society, including the new rich that rose as a result of the neoliberal economic policies of the 1980s (Öncü, 1999: 104-111). She says,

in the mid-1990s, the word *Arabesk* has become an all encompassing metaphor to describe and identify a general malaise that seems to plague every aspect of life in Turkish society – Arabesk democracy, Arabesk economy, Arabesk politicians – all suffering from a neither-nor situation of indeterminacy and degeneration (Öncü, 1999: 110).

Arabesk Music, therefore, unintentionally turned into a form of culture, analogous to what Dick Hebdige, in his *Subculture: Meaning of Style*, defines as “subculture”. There are some striking similarities between Arabesk and especially British Punk. They both undermined the discourses of the dominant ideology (Hebdige, 1991: 108) in their respective societies and offended ruling classes; they both preached a lack of hope for future (British punk band the Sex Pistols declared there was “no future!” in their song “God Save the Queen” and Orhan Gencebay articulated “unfinished sorrows and troubles ahead” in “Batsin Bu Dunya” (Damn This World); and fans of both music styles enjoyed hurting themselves physically, i.e., inflicting wounds on their bodies in a masochistic manner. However, regardless of these similarities, there were also some essential differences as well. Although they both embodied working class rage to varying extents,

British punk preferred to display theirs in overt political statements (Sex Pistols: “I wanna be anarchy/In the city” or “God save the Queen/And her fascist regime”) and expressed it in an explosion of energy whereas Arabesk preferred more implicit lyrics, mostly blaming fate rather than any particular class or politicians for the inequalities in the social system (Orhan Gencebay: “Shame on, shame on/Shame on such a fate/Everything is dark, no human kindness” – my translation) and a slower, more pensive musical style.

Arabesk music definitely spoke of melancholic themes, rather than overtly political ones. Meral Özbek emphasises the abstract quality of lyrics, which uses concepts like *gurbet* (being away from one’s hometown), *felek* (personification of fortune), death and God (Özbek, 2006: 175). Martin Stokes lists loneliness, sadness and yearning, tears, drunkenness, oppression, and fate in addition to themes Özbek identifies in Arabesk texts (Stokes, 1992: 142). Examining the lyrics of some Arabesk songs, one can notice how the key melancholic concepts, such as loss of the other and an inability to let go, indescribable emotional suffering, lack of, or distance from, the ideal, a pessimistic world view, self-reproach and a pleasure in suffering have become recurrent. For example, Orhan Gencebay: “I have already become an addict of all kinds of sorrow” (from the song “Bir Teselli Ver” - Give me some Comfort); Müslüm Gürses: “Our fortune is already blacker than black/and so are we inside” (from the song “Kullarına Kul Yapmış” – He Made Us Subject to His Own Subjects); Ümit Besen: “This hopeless (black) love will kill me” (from the song “Seni Seviyorum” – I Love You); İbrahim Tatlıses: “My God, you see me/Change my fate” (from the song “Dertli Dertli” – Troubled).

However, a majority of its critics have not used the label ‘melancholic’ to define Arabesk. I believe that this is due to a class distinction and has got something to do with the idea that melancholy is related to artistic creation and the belief that Arabesk music is not an art form. Arabesk music communicates a feeling of idleness, passivity and infinite sadness but it is not of the aristocratic kind that Radden mentions nor the intellectual type that Pamuk talks of in his text. Arabesk music demands that a ‘provincial’ or ‘peripheral’ (as opposed to ‘central’) kind of melancholy be culturally recognised. It was this aspect of provincialism that led to the middle and upper classes’ original disassociation with and disdain for Arabesk music.

The Rising Popularity of Arabesk Music among the New Middle Classes

Arabesk music was inevitably influenced by the political and social changes during the 1980s. On September 12, 1980, the army, led by Kenan Evren, took power, dissolved the Government and all the parties, arrested party leaders, dismissed members of parliament and local mayors and governments on the grounds of political, social and economic disorder in the country. Kenan Evren was declared the head of state and all political power was claimed by the army and the National Security Council. In 1982, a new constitution was established and Kenan Evren was elected the president. In the following year, the Motherland Party led by Turgut Özal became the single party in the Parliament.

Turgut Özal adopted a new right policy, in the vein of Thatcherism in the UK and Reaganism in the USA, with an emphasis on liberal economics and traditional conservatism. The new Government adopted a free market economy like the British and American Governments of the period. Çağlar Keyder states that liberalism, which bureaucracy had previously approached in an adverse manner, was presented by the state as a solution to overcome the economic problems of the country. This new tendency was supported not only by the big bourgeoisie but also small producers (Keyder, 1993: 297). The results of these neo-liberalist policies in the society were increasing individualism, consumption, and self-interest.

Meral Özbek talks about how Orhan Gencebay's music changed during the 1980s in terms of both structure and themes. His music increasingly acquired a cheerful and lively character while the lyrics started to focus dominantly on love, leaving the themes of "oppression", 'life struggle', poverty', 'lack', 'the dysfunctional order', 'being subject to God's subjects', 'injustice'" in the 1970s to a great extent (Özbek, 2006: 204). According to Özbek, this signifies a turn towards the individualistic from the social aspects of Orhan Gencebay's music. Nurdan Gürbilek's comparison of the 1970s and 1980s through two Arabesk songs by Orhan Gencebay and İbrahim Tatlıses supports this view. Gürbilek associates the 1970s with a line from Orhan Gencebay's song "Eyvallah" (So be it): "İstemem namertten bir yudum çare"(I don't want any remedies from dishonoured people), a statement which connotes altruism. She, then, employs İbrahim Tatlıses' song "Ben de İsterem" (I want it, too) to define the consumerist tendencies of the 1980s, with particular emphasis to unbound desires (Gürbilek, 2001: 7).

The reactions of the general public took a favourable turn towards Arabesk music in the 1980s. Martin Stokes states, "[a]ccording to research carried out in 1988, some 200 million cassettes are produced in Turkey, of which 150 million are Arabesk. Consumption of this huge output could not conceivably be confined to the *gecekondu*" (Stokes, 1992: 126). The official ban on Arabesk was gradually withdrawn in the 1980s, with the transition to liberal and free market policies of the New Right. Turgut Özal, the leader of the Motherland Party and prime minister between 1983 and 1989, used Arabesk songs such as "Seni Sevmeyen Olsun" (Whoever loves you not, should die) by İbrahim Tatlıses in his election campaigns. According to Tekelioğlu, "Arabesk singers like İbrahim Tatlıses have gained acceptance at the highest level of government, sometimes being invited to perform at presidential receptions" (Tekelioğlu, 1996: 212). However, this acceptance was not shared by middle and upper-middle class intellectuals immediately. Murat Belge writes, in 1982, "We have not been able to form our own urban music in Turkey yet. That is why the 'urban-rural' Arabesk emerged as 'popular music' with no competition. So we must have deserved it" (Belge, 2004: 303).¹⁰

The 1990s were a decade in which new modes of associating with Arabesk music and other 'kitsch' cultural products emerged. According to writers such as Can Kozanoğlu and Ali Şimşek, it was the period when a new middle class was on the rise in Turkey, a generation that had matured during the New Right policies of the 1980s. Ali Şimşek, in his book *Yeni Orta Sınıf* (The New Middle Class), argues that the new middle class adopted a language composed of "naming strategies", encoding and labelling the world

around them, which created a distancing effect. Their language is full of sarcasm and irony and is mostly turned towards the lower classes and the stereotypical “Turk” (Şimşek, 2005: 110). This ironical and sarcastic view of the world also targeted the eastern flavoured melancholy reflected in Arabesk songs and movies, melodramas, popular novels, et cetera.

Interestingly, the same attitude, this same critical distance, also allowed them to enjoy Arabesk music to an extent. Sinan Kadir Çelik argues that the new middle classes have appropriated a ‘digging culture’ (takılma kültürü), in the sense that they ‘dig’ all kinds of music, books, films et cetera without being truly absorbed in them aesthetically or ethically, without taking them very seriously (Çelik, 2005: 41). At some point, they started to ‘dig’ Arabesk music, too. This can be seen as extension of the celebration of everything kitsch in popular culture, such as recrowning old B-type movies as ‘cult’.

İren Özgür, in her article “Arabesk Music in Turkey in the 1990s and Changes in National Demography, Politics, and Identity”, argues that Arabesk started to be acknowledged by larger segments of society during the 1990s; “[i]t has transcended class barriers and won approval from a broad section of Turkey, including the Westernized elite” (Özgür, 2006: 181). According to Özgür, the factors that led to this recent appreciation are various. One reason both Özgür and Tekelioğlu mention is the assimilation of elements from Turkish pop music into Arabesk music and efforts of the younger generation of Arabesk singers, such as Emrah and Özcan Deniz, to acquire a more ‘modern’ and popular image through both their looks and music (Özgür, 2006: 182-183; Tekelioğlu, 1996: 212). Another reason, Özgür claims, is the disappearance of the divide between the peripheries and the centre of the city and integration of migrants into the city life. Ultimately, Özgür believes that the general population in Turkey, who once renounced their Eastern heritage, no longer feel detached from it (Özgür, 2006: 184-186).

Another reason why the larger segments of society are being drawn towards Eastern modes of culture can be sought in an account of Orientalism. It is as if the westernised Turks perceive the East in the same way the westerners do. Edward Said describes this perception in *Orientalism* as follows: “The Orient was a European invention, and had been since antiquity, a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences” (Said, 2003: 1). The results of a questionnaire concerning the recent popularity of Arabesk, which İren Özgür applied to a group of Turks from different backgrounds, give some evidence about how the East is interpreted by Turkish people. The answers suggest that there is a connection between being Eastern and being fatalistic, emotional and irrational, with an implication that these are desired qualities against the assumed ‘cold’ rationality of the West (Özgür, 2006: 185). The results also show that, with the growing reactions against the European Union, which does not seem to be willing to accept Turkey as one of its member countries, most people feel drawn to an Eastern identity rather than a Western one (Özgür, 2006: 186).

I believe the early-to-mid-2000s, rather than the 1990s, have been the years when the more eastern and peripheral modes of melancholy are given their due by the new middle classes. As Özgür and Tekelioğlu mention, the growing popularity of Arabesk music was

mostly due to a change in the structures of Arabesk music, which attenuated the heavy melancholic elements and replaced them with more digestible, pop elements. Arabesk singers such as Orhan Gencebay and Müslüm Gürses, who have been performing for decades, have recently started to be appreciated by new rock bands, who cover their most popular songs one after the other. This probably started for the sake of parody, something the fans would enjoy in a tongue-in-cheek manner. However, more and more, Turkish rock bands have begun to incorporate Arabesk elements to their music, such as singing techniques and themes. Duman (Smoke), a band that released its first record in 1999, is one of the first bands that composed songs in a grunge-Arabesk style. Their song structures bear characteristics of grunge music, a fact which is usually linked to the time their guitarist and vocalist Kaan Tangöze spent in Seattle. However, they use an Arabesk vocal style, defined as *yanık* (literally ‘burnt’ or ‘scorched’) “a vocal quality, representing feelings of grief, sadness, sorrow, and passion” (Ayhan, 2007: 86). Their lyrics are also reminiscent of Arabesk song lyrics, such as “we overcame walls and mountains/away from the beloved, we plunged into the world/oh! oh! we were rendered helpless” (from the song “Halimiz Duman” – literally “We are in a Smoky State”, meaning a “wretched state”).

Other singers and bands followed Duman’s lead in 2000s. Nev, Altıncı Cadde (Sixth Street), Göksel, Redd, Hayko Cepkin, Efsun, and Emre Aydın were among many rock artists who integrated some Eastern tunes in their music and used a *yanık* vocal style. The popular press also got caught up with this phenomenon and published interviews and articles that talk about the similarities between this new trend in rock and Arabesk music. In a popular daily newspaper, *Radikal*, Merve Erol analyses the recent popularity of Emre Aydın¹¹, a young rock singer. Erol argues that Emre Aydın’s music is actually a kind of Arabesk that appeals to young, urban, university graduate women (Erol, 2006: 1).¹² In their attempts to discover their musical roots, young rock musicians started to look back to early Turkish rock musicians, particularly Erkin Koray. They discovered that he collaborated with Orhan Gencebay to form musical synthesis of the East and the West. While Erkin Koray’s musical experiments were labelled as Anatolian Pop, he also made Arabesk music at some point in his musical career. The initial parody of Arabesk by young rock musicians, therefore, turned into an appreciation of traditional Arabesk.

It did not take Arabesk singers, especially Müslüm Gürses, long to make covers of rock songs. Gürses performed Teoman’s song “Paramparça” (Shattered), which is a rock song about Teoman’s reaching the same age as his father had when he died, and the way the lives of the people he knows are marred by melancholy caused by such events as the loss of loved ones. However, Gürses’ decision to make covers took place to the dismay of some of his fans. Sinan Kadir Çelik quotes from a Müslüm Gürses fan forum (www.muslumcu.net), to show that fans evaluate Gürses’ new style as a betrayal of his roots and turning towards ‘high society’.

Conclusion

This recent phenomenon – the way Arabesk and rock musicians use each other’s songs and incorporate each other’s styles - proved to be so successful with the audiences that the culture industries have started to encourage more and more similar material. Now it has become an unwritten rule that all Turkish rock bands should include a cover of old Arabesk or pop songs in their albums. Müslüm Gürses continued to perform songs by other respectable rock or pop singers and bands, and he even released an album comprised of Turkish versions of English language pop and rock songs by such musicians as Garbage, Björk, Leonard Cohen, and Bob Dylan which enjoyed a broad coverage in mainstream media in Turkey. This album was promoted as a collaboration with the famous poet Murathan Mungan, who wrote some of the Turkish lyrics for the songs.

What should be questioned here is whether this fusion of new styles can still be considered Arabesk. I believe they still bear an element of melancholy in them even though the culture industries and the mainstream media demand the provincial or peripheral aspects be decreased or eliminated altogether. There is a process of appropriation at work. Arabesk music is gaining respectability through a relationship with musicians and literary figures who are adored by the upper and middle classes. They are justifying their recent appreciation of Arabesk musicians by drawing a correlation between, for example, Leonard Cohen and Müslüm Gürses (Değirmenci, 2006: 1). Orhan Gencebay’s status as a creative musician is also being restored. He is now accepted as an artist who, from early on, worked on a synthesis between Eastern and Western music and developed his own style of playing the *baglama*. There are other examples like this. Recently, some pop-Arabesk singers such as Özcan Deniz and Hande Yener, have also started to be appreciated by the upper and middle classes who say these singers have greatly ‘improved’. Improvement, in this case, means the cultivation of a more modern look, both in gestures/appearance and musical style.

In conclusion, I believe the new middle and upper classes’ relationship to Arabesk is an indirect one and does not necessarily mean they are getting involved in the fatalism and desperation that traditional Arabesk music communicates. Rather than being drawn closer to an Eastern identity like Özgür argues, these classes are looking at the East through Western eyes. This is a form of orientalism because their admiration for examples of Eastern culture, in this case Arabesk music, seems to stem from Western sentiments towards the East, the qualities the Western gaze impose upon the East. Arabesk music is either being assimilated in Western modes of cultural production, such as rock music, or associated with high culture (Gürses’ collaboration with poets) and acquires a ‘distinctive’ position in the cultural arena in exchange for renouncing its peripheral characteristics.

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¹ Orhan Gencebay is an Arabesk singer and composer who released his first single “Bir Teselli Ver” (Give me some Comfort) in 1968. He is commonly referred to as the inventor of Arabesk music. He also starred in a number of films, which bore the same names as some of his songs. He is still very active in Turkey’s music scene, composing songs, releasing albums and working as a judge in a musical talent show called *Popstar Alaturka* in Star TV since 2006

² Müslüm Gürses is an Arabesk singer who released his first singles in 1968. Like Orhan Gencebay, he starred in a number of films based on some of his songs. He is still active in Turkey’s music scene and appeared in a series of advertisements for different brands, including Coca Cola in 2007.

³ İbrahim Tathises, or affectionately called by his fans as İbo, is an Arabesk singer of Kurdish and Arabic origin. He released his first record *Ayağında Kundura* (Shoes on his feet) in 1977. His style can be labelled as Folk Arabesk as he usually derives his songs from the folk music tradition. He contributed to a number of films as actor, writer, producer and director during the 1980s and to a TV series called *Fırat* in 1997. He is still active in the Turkish music scene.

⁴ Emrah Erdoğan İpek, better known by his stage name “Küçük Emrah” (Little Emrah), was among the first child Arabesk singers in Turkey. He released his first album *Agam Agam* (Brother, Brother) in 1984 at the age of 13. He starred in several films during the 1980s. In the 1990s he dropped the “Little” in his stage

name and adopted a pop sound. He also starred in some television series during this period. He is still active in the Turkish music scene.

⁵ Mahsun Kırmızıgül is an Arabesk singer and producer of Zazaish origin. He released his first professional album *Alem Buysa Kral Sensin* (If this is the world, you're the king) in 1993. He starred in a number of television series during the 90s and 2000s. The film *Beyaz Melek* (The White Angel), which he wrote, directed and starred in, was one of the highest grossing films of 2007 in Turkey. He is still active in the Turkish music scene.

⁶ Özcan Deniz is an Arabesk-pop singer who released his first album *Yine Ağlattın Beni* (You made me cry again) in 1992. He starred in a number of TV series and films during the 90s and 2000s. He is still active in the music scene.

⁷ In cinematic form, it can be glimpsed in the films of Turkish director Nuri Bilge Ceylan – particularly his award winning film *Uzak* (Distant), which depicts a flaneur-like protagonist, Mahmut, a middle-aged photographer from the countryside made good in Istanbul, walking through photographic, almost still, melancholic Istanbul scenes with dark skies and heavy snow.

⁸ (My translation) “Uzun yıllar kahramanlarını mağdur ama masum, çileli ama onurlu figürlerden seçen, kendini boynubüküklüğe, yetimliğe ve tutunamayanlara yakın hissetmiş”

⁹ For more information on this see Zürcher, Jan Erik (1996), *Modernleşen Türkiye'nin Tarihi* (Turkey, A Modern History), Istanbul: İletisim.

¹⁰ (My translation). Biz Türkiye’de kendi kent müziğimizi oluşturmayı başaramadık daha. O zaman “kentsel-kırsal” arabesk rakipsiz “popüler müzik” olarak çıktı ortaya. Demek ki onu hak etmişiz.”

¹¹ Emre Aydın is a singer-songwriter who released his first album with his band 6. Cadde (The Sixth Street) in 2003. That album featured the cover version of an İbrahim Tatlıses song called “Sabuha”. Afterwards, he started working as a solo artist and released an album called *Afili Yalnızlık* (Ostentatious Loneliness) in 2006 to great acclaim in Turkey. His music can be defined as pop-rock and his lyrics mostly dwell on themes of broken hearts, loneliness and depression.

¹² In a Q&A session at Middle East Technical University in December 2006, I asked Emre Aydın what he thought about this comment. He said Arabesk singers usually talk about how much they suffer, and how they are helpless against the beloved, whereas his songs are about being strong in the face of great emotional pain. This generalisation does not ring true considering the fact that there are many Arabesk songs that talk about confronting difficulties, such as Mahsun Kırmızıgül’s “Yıkılmadım Ayaktayım” (I’m still standing tall)