

## HOW NURSES ARE PORTRAYED IN AMERICAN AND TURKISH MOVIES

### Amerikan ve Türk Filmlerinde Hemşireler Nasıl Tasvir Edilmektedir?

Rukiye PINAR BÖLÜKTAŞ<sup>1</sup>

#### ABSTRACT

**Purpose:** The purpose of the study was to describe how nursing and nurses are portrayed in American and Turkish movies.

**Methods:** First of all, we examined the films with the keywords nurse and nursing. The majority of the films were produced in the United States. Turkish film industry produced only six films between 1968 and 2020. Three movies from the United States (English Patient, Nurse Betty, Meet the Parents) and three movies from Turkey (Beautiful Coffee Server, Imperator, Brought by the Sea) with at least one nurse character with a significant part were covered. Thematic qualitative method was used to analyze the movies' content.

**Results:** All nurses, except one, were female, white, young, single, and childless. In *“English Patient”*, the nurse is portrayed mainly as a self-sacrificing character. In *“Nurse Betty”*, nursing is seen as a profession that can be done without education. *“Meet the Parents”* draws attention to common stereotypes about male nurses. In *“Beautiful Coffee Server”*, the nurse character is typically reduced to a supporting role, enforcing the message to the viewer that nurses were not really needed in healthcare. *“Imperator”* emphasizes the nurse's sexual attractiveness and behavior rather than her professional work. And finally, in *“Brought by the Sea”*, portrayal of nurse creates a potent favorable image of nursing.

**Conclusion:** Study findings show that movies, except *“Brought by the Sea”*, do not represent the reality. Nurses should be aware of the way they are portrayed in movies and team up with the media to effectively create a down to earth and accurate image of nursing.

**Keywords:** Communications media, media, films, movies, nurses, nursing, stereotyping

#### ÖZET

**Amaç:** Bu çalışmanın amacı Amerikan ve Türk filmlerinde hemşire ve hemşirelik olgusunun ele alınış biçimini incelemektir.

**Yöntem:** Öncelikle hemşire ve hemşirelik anahtar kelimeleri ile film taraması yapıldı, birçok filmin Amerika'da çekildiği, Türkiye'de ise 1968-2020 yılları arasında yalnızca 6 filmin çekildiği görüldü. Hemşirenin baş karakter olduğu 3 Amerikan filmi (İngiliz Hasta, Hemşire Betty, Aile ile Tanışma) ve 3 Türk filmi (Kahveci Güzeli, İmparator, Denizden Gelen) incelemeye alındı. Film içerikleri tematik niteliksel yöntem kullanılarak analiz edildi.

**Bulgular:** İncelenen filmlerin, biri hariç, tümünde hemşire kadın, genç, bekar ve çocuksuz olup beyaz ırka mensup idi. *“İngiliz Hasta”* filminde hemşire, esas olarak, kendini feda eden karakter olarak tasvir edilmektedir. *“Hemşire Betty”*de, hemşirelik, eğitim almadan da yapılabilecek bir meslek olarak görülmekte; *“Aile ile Tanışma”* filminde ise erkek hemşireler ile ilgili yaygın klişelere dikkat çekilmektedir. *“Kahveci Güzeli”* filminde, hemşire karakteri, seyirciye hemşirelerin sağlık hizmetlerinde gerekli olmadığı mesajını güçlü şekilde ileten, destekleyici rol üstlenmektedir. *“İmparator”* filmi profesyonel çalışmasından ziyade, hemşirenin cinsel cazibesi ve davranışlarını öne çıkarmakta; son olarak *“Denizden Gelen”* filminde hemşire güçlü bir imajla tasvir edilmektedir.

**Sonuç:** Çalışma bulguları, *“Denizden Gelen”* hariç, filmlerin gerçeği temsil etmediğini göstermektedir. Hemşirelerin filmlerde nasıl tasvir edildiklerinin farkında olmaları ve gerçekçi ve doğru bir hemşirelik imajı oluşturmak için medyayla etkili bir şekilde çalışmalarını gerektiği kanaatine varılmıştır.

**Anahtar kelimeler:** İletişim medyası, medya, filmler, hemşireler, hemşirelik, klişeler

<sup>1</sup> Professor, Istanbul Sabahattin Zaim University, Faculty of Health Sciences, Department of Nursing, Istanbul, Turkey, email: rukiye.boluktas@izu.edu.tr, Orcid: 0000-0002-1281-0276



## INTRODUCTION

As technology advanced, leaders in politics and economy used cinema for their own benefit or for the benefit of their people to change and shape people's perspectives. For example, how Adolf Hitler used movies as a means of propaganda during World War II illustrate the pure power of the movies (Elezaj, 2019).

The movies affect society and the modern world, in a positive or negative way, by inspiring people, creating awareness on multiple aspects of life, mirroring and shaping culture, teaching history, and desensitizing the feelings of sympathy (Elezaj, 2019; Fingerhut & Heimann, 2017; Guida, 2015; Verma, 2020).

Movies give inspiration to the viewers in several ways. For example, romantic movies like *Love Story* (1970) make us remember why love matters and why it's worth fighting for it. The movies of this type also make us cry, laugh, and understand who and what is valuable in life and what our priorities are (Elezaj, 2019; Fingerhut & Heimann, 2017).

Movies can raise awareness about many aspects of life. There are many films like the *Bucket List* (2007) that encourage us to overcome personal pains and to strive to make the world better for all. Besides, movies such as *Requiem for a Dream* (2000) and *Traffic* (2000) help us understand the negative impacts of drugs, alcohol, and substance abuse. *Ayla* (2017, a Turkish movie) shows the effects of war on children and create empathy in people who have never experienced war. This is the awareness that has paved the way for many charities and trust funds to flourish (Fingerhut & Heimann, 2017; Verma, 2020).

Movies reflect culture because every movie takes place in a specific culture. Through films, we can appreciate the cultures of distant communities and respect differences.

In addition to reflecting our different cultures, movies have long shaped our beliefs and values. A good example is when people copy fashion trends from movie stars or singers.

Movies like *Spartacus* (1960), *Gallipoli* (1981), *Schindler's List* (1993), and *Letters from Iwo Jima* (2006) teach us history for better or worse.

Movies may also have negative effects by desensitizing sympathetic feelings creating, the false perception that violence and other people's suffering is acceptable. Especially in urban areas, the tendency to passively watch and not help the victim while people injure and kill each other has increased as a result of the media's desensitization of feelings of empathy (Elezaj, 2019; Fingerhut & Heimann, 2017; Guida, 2015; Verma, 2020).

Nurses have the highest proportion in health labor force; 50% of the health workforce in the United States (American Association of Colleges of Nursing [AACN], 2019a; World Health Organization, 2018) and 20% in Turkey are nurses (Kaanlar, 2018). Nurses' contribution to the healthcare industry is undeniable. According to a recent national poll, the nursing profession was ranked first among the most reliable professions in the America for the last 20 years

(Reinhart, 2020). However, the advancement of nursing in the health system, and the resulting increased trust, has unfortunately not turned into an updated nursing perception in the minds of the public. Despite their dignity, holistic approach philosophy and academic / professional qualifications, nurses are still not understood as the main contributor to the health system (Prybil et al., 2019). Portrayals in the media is an important factor contributing to nursing's inconsistent image (Godsey et al., 2020)

The film industry is extremely crucial since images of nurses and nursing in movies strongly affect the public perception regarding the professional role of nurses and the expected behavior of the members of the nursing profession. Film industry has also an impact on how nurses and potential nurses perceive themselves. Nurses around the world have struggled with a poor image in the general social context. In addition, it is also an unfortunate fact that public opinions about the importance of nursing are shaped by the images people see. This will have an impact on nurses' salaries, working conditions, relationships with other members of the healthcare team and on their ability to deliver high-quality nursing care. Nursing needs to be seen as worthwhile, challenging, and dynamic career, especially since the nursing shortage is now a global public health crisis in both the USA and Turkey (Godsey et al., 2020).

Before taking the necessary steps to improve the image of the nurses, first of all it is necessary to know how the nurses are portrayed in movies. There has been no previous study on this subject. The aim of the study was to describe how nursing and nurses are portrayed in American and Turkish movies in the light of the current reality of professional nursing.

## METHOD

First of all, we examined the films with the keywords nurse and nursing. The majority of the films were produced in the United States. Turkish film industry produced only six related films between 1968 and 2020. Three movies from the United States (*English Patient*, *Nurse Betty*, *Meet the Parents*) and three movies from Turkey (*Beautiful Coffee Server*, *Imperator*, *Brought by the Sea*) with at least one nurse character with a significant part were covered. Because of their limited appeal and distribution, pornography was excluded. Thematic qualitative method was used to analyze movies' content. There were no ethical issues relevant to this research.

## RESULTS

### English Patient

The *English Patient*, directed by Anthony Minghella, is a British-American co-production epic romantic war drama film shot in 1996. The film narrates the story of three people who find themselves in an abandoned villa in northern Italy during the last months of World War II. The nameless protagonist, a man who was unrecognizably burnt and speaks



with a British accent, tells his story to the young nurse who cares for him in a series of flashbacks that reveals his true identity (Minghella, 1996).

Juliette Binoche plays Hana, a nurse aged 20, who devotes herself to the badly burned patient. The patient was saved from a plane crash, but he doesn't remember anything about who he is: after the accident, the only thing he knew was that he was British. The nurse stays with him although the patient is close to death and the villa where they were stay is unsafe due to perilous wartime circumstances. The patient rarely sleeps at nights, and the nurse reads the books she can find to him (Minghella, 1996).

After a while, a new character, a man with bandages on her hands named Caravaggio, Hana's lover, comes to the villa and begs Hana to leave because there were still unexploded bombs left underground so she can no longer stay there. Caravaggio also tells Hana that he suspects that the English patients is actually a Hungarian spy (Minghella, 1996).

Hana says the war is over and refuses to let go of her English patient. Towards end of the movie, the English patient tells Hana that he wants to die, pushing several unopened vials of morphine towards her as she gives him his regular injection to relieve pain. Hana cannot refuse the English patient's pleading for a compassionate death and gives a fatal dose of morphine injection although she feels deeply upset (Minghella, 1996).

### **Nurse Betty**

"Nurse Betty" is about one dreamer in love with her fantasies. In a small town in Kansas Betty (Renée Zellweger) lives, a waitress and housewife, who is a fan of the daily soap opera *A Reason to Love*. She doesn't know that husband earns additional income by selling drugs from the auto dealership (LaBute, 2000)

One day, Betty's husband comes home with two thugs, and Betty witnesses her husband being killed in the next room. Betty begins to suffer from post-traumatic stress syndrome and escapes the reality of the murder and takes refuge in the soap opera's comforting fantasy. In her imagination, she assumes the identity of a nurse, one of the characters of the daytime soap opera, and Dr. Ravell, her lover, proposes her marriage. She drives out to Los Angeles to meet her "ex-fiancé," Dr. Ravell (LaBute, 2000)

While trying to find a job as a nurse, Betty searches for her long-lost "ex-fiancé" in Los Angeles. She is not accepted for work because she has "forgotten" her CV and references, but she manages to find a job at the pharmacy for her help in saving the life of a victim injured in a gunfight. In Los Angeles, Betty meets George, the actor who plays the doctor role for a charity benefit. She has no understanding that the soap opera is a TV show and she relates and talks only to the character, "Dr. David Ravell". George thinks her as an over-imaginative fan at the beginning, later on he begins to think

that Betty is an actress devoted to get a part in the soap opera, so he decides to play along (LaBute, 2000)

After three hours of "acting", George begins to fall in love with her and offers her a job as a new character in the series: Nurse Betty. When Betty comes on set, she awakens from the fantasy world back to real life as seeing the inner workings of a television show makes her return to the real world. After two failed shots, she realizes that she is on a set and that the people she thinks to be real were only characters played by the actors and leaves the show. Betty then plans to actually continue nursing as a career (LaBute, 2000)

It is hard to say the film is about nursing, but Betty does find herself in a situation in which she has to save the life of a gunshot victim although she is not even licensed. In addition, despite a formal order not to touch any patients, Betty becomes popular with them and their families. In this film, Betty's dreams are projections of her own needs and idealism. The interesting thing in this movie is that nursing is portrayed as a profession that can be done without education even if Betty decides to take education to be real nurse at the end of the movie. Another interesting point is that her eagerness to be a nurse because of her fantasy lover, Dr. Ravell. This movie represents nurses in a stereotypical role as doctor lovers or hunters (LaBute, 2000).

### **Meet the Parents**

The movie *Meet the Parents* describes a series of unfortunate events that happened to a good-hearted but unfortunate male nurse while visiting his girlfriend's family. Greg Focker (acting by Ben Stiller) is a middle-class Jewish male nurse whose social and cultural position contrasts with his girlfriend Pam's upper-class white Anglo-Saxon Protestants family (Roach, 2000).

Greg Focker's character has become one of the best-known movies about a male nurse. In movie, Jack, father of Pam, is frequently seen when he openly criticizes Greg's choice of career. His perception, as an example of a negative portrayal, is that nursing is a feminine profession unsuitable for a man (Roach, 2000).

Based on common misconceptions and stereotypes about men who practice nursing, Jack often speaks about Greg's profession in negative contexts. A common stereotype is that the man who has to pursue nursing as an unfortunate secondary career option is a man who either could not become a doctor or is still trying to become one (Roach, 2000).

### **Beautiful Coffee Server**

The film deals with the story of Nermin (Türkan Şoray), who works as a coffee server in a famous hotel, and Ayhan (Murat Soydan), who works as a journalist. Mr Osman, owner of the hotel, sees Nermin as a good candidate for marriage for his son Ekrem (Yusuf Sezgin). Ekrem also likes Nermin and intends to marry her. One day, journalist Ayhan, who comes



to the hotel to drink coffee, distracts Nermin's attention and causes the coffee tray in her hand to tip over. The love that starts with this event flares up in a short time and they decide to get married (Arslan, 1968).

Shortly after engagement to Nermin, Ayhan is assigned by the editor-in-chief to work as a journalist in Vietnam to write about the war. The term of Ayhan's duty, normally one month, prolongs because he is wounded with a bomb that exploded next to him and is arrested by American forces. Turkish newspapers write that Ayhan is dead. Nermin, who reads the death news in the newspaper, attempts suicide. After a while, Ekrem proposes her to marry. Ayhan, who was thought to be dead in those days, returns to Istanbul. Nermin, learning that Ayhan has returned home, immediately goes to Ayhan's house to say she is still in love with him. A nurse named Yıldız (Pervin Par), hired to care for Ayhan, opens the door, and introduces herself as Ayhan's fiancée as requested by Ayhan. Ayhan tries to distance Nermin by telling her that *"immortal love exists only in novels you are so foolish, so childish, and I have forgotten you"*. The truth is that Ayhan wants to hide his blindness from Nermin, and prefers to act like a heartless man, to be a shadow in the darkness of his blind life (Arslan, 1968).

The nurse decides to make an effort to reunite the lovers. Taking advantage of Ayhan's blindness, the nurse takes Ayhan to the house where Nermin will marry, not to her aunt's house as she told him. The nurse leaves Ayhan alone in the garden. When Nermin's fiancée Ekrem sees Ayhan, he gets angry and slaps him. Nermin, unaware of what happened, agrees to sit at the wedding table. Still, Ekrem does not feel comfortable and asks Nermin, before signing the wedding book, in the middle of everyone, whether she knows that Ayhan has returned blind from the war and is in the garden at that moment. Unable to hide her astonishment, Nermin runs out to garden and hugs Ayhan (Arslan, 1968).

### Imperator

The nurse (Seda Sayan) in this movie is an attractive blonde wearing elaborate make-up and is having a love affair with her patient, who is a crime boss (Kadir İnanır). The patient receives massage on his back, legs and groin from the nurse as part of nursing duties; the nurse's roles includes blatant sexual activity in a hospital room with her patient (Gülgen, 1984).

This movie emphasizes the nurse's sexual attractiveness and behavior rather than her professional work. In those years, it was unacceptable to bed with a man before marriage in Turkey and if someone did that, people would think she was an unchaste woman, and nobody would want to marry her. But in this movie, the nurse was "lucky" because surprisingly she left nursing to marry the male character, in other words the latter "saved" her from nursing. They marry, decide to have a baby to complete the family, but they cannot have a baby because of the woman's problem (here, the problem is also the woman). So, they adopt a child. We see

a happy family on screen just before she was killed by her husband's enemies (Gülgen, 1984).

### Brought by the Sea

"Brought by the Sea" underlines the dire situation of the thousands of refugees that try to cross the borders of Turkey and Greece with hope having a better life. Halil (Onur Saylak) is an ex-cop who accidentally kills an African illegal immigrant trying to cross from beautiful coastal town of Dalyan to the Greek islands. He might be deemed innocent, but his conscience will not let go of him, and thus he quits the police force and retreats to his father's friends' fishing boat. There won't be much time for Halil to abandon himself to the inner guilt he feels for the past, since one day as he is lazing on the beach he finds the comatose body of a 5-year-old boy from Ghana. This is Jordan, only one of the thousands of immigrants who try to cross illegally from the Mediterranean coast with dinghies destined to sink. Jordan is the sole survivor of this particular group. Having lost his mother to the accident, his future remains ever more uncertain. Halil immediately takes Jordan to the hospital and is helped by a nurse, Yaren (Ahu Türkpençe), who takes a particular liking to the child and also Halil. Halil regularly visits Jordan at the hospital, and slowly but surely, he feels a certain compassion for Jordan and perhaps believes that this boy will be his salvation. Once healed, Jordan is taken to a facility by the local cops, a place where countless illegal immigrants caught on the path to Greece are detained. Halil tries to get hold of Jordan's father, he realizes early on that the man will never be able to retrieve the boy. It isn't long before Jordan escapes from the detention center with the help of Yaren, who later takes him to Halil. As Jordan takes refuge in Halil's humble abode, their relationship grows ever closer and Halil comes to love the child as if his own. We slowly understand that there is nothing that he will not do for Jordan, including smuggling him out of the country and taking him to his father. Of course, as all things go, there will be a dear price to pay when another horrifying boat trip is called for (Çölgeçen, 2009).

### DISCUSSION

Media images on different professions strongly affect public perception of the professional role and expected behaviors of members of that profession. In other words, public perceptions on different professions are strongly influenced by the media (Godsey et al., 2020; Prybil et al., 2019).

In this study, we investigated the contents of six movies by using the thematic qualitative method. All nurses in the movies, except one, were female, white, young, single, and childless.

In the *English Patient*, we observed that the nurse character Hana has the selflessness of Florence Nightingale without the rigid military discipline. In this movie, the nurse was portrayed as mainly self-sacrificing/caring character.



However, Hana applies morphine to the patient, even though she should not be using initiative.

In the *Nurse Betty*, nursing was imposed as a profession that can be done without education. This movie also represents nurses in a stereotypical role as doctor lovers or hunters.

In movie, *Meet the Parents*, we witness critics on nursing that it is a feminine profession not suitable for a man. A common stereotype is that the man who has to pursue nursing as an unfortunate secondary career option is a man who either could not become a doctor or is still trying to become one. This kind of stereotype stems from the assumption that a man would normally choose to be a doctor, but he cannot become one due to his lack of intelligence or because of his non-masculine characteristics.

Nurse's appearance with her uniform, cap and make-up are all satisfied and idealized in *Beautiful Coffee Server*. However, the nurse character is typically reduced to supporting roles that strongly convey a somewhat subtle but clear message to the audience that nurses are not really necessary or important in healthcare. In other words, the nurse is shown as a media sample who opens the door in the background, carries a tray or pushes the wheelchair for a very brief screen time. In addition, nurse's helpfulness to get together lovers is more apparent than nursing activities.

*The Emperor* is the most disturbing Turkish movie even if it is not a pornographic movie. The movie emphasizes nurse's sexual attractiveness and behaviors rather than professional aspects. The nurse character left nursing career for marriage, and she was killed by her husband's enemies in the final scene. This final was not surprising since throughout the movie, main characters, male and female, exhibited a strong value for home and family life, and a low value for nurse's work and they fit the traditional female stereotype that women are submissive, vulnerable, devoted, nurturant and feminine.

In the final movie, *Brought by the Sea*, the nurse character evidenced a firmer commitment to her profession, gave evidence of leadership qualities and power. In terms of nursing activities, only this movie showed some point for appearance of nurses providing emotional support to victim, acting as a professional resource, providing physical comfort to victim, taking central role to establish healthy commitment between policeman and child, and taking role as patient advocacy. Among Turkish movies, in *Brought by the Sea*, nurse is portrayed as knowledgeable, compassionate, powerful, caring and emphatic character who offer a broader, deeper and authentic representation of modern nurses and nursing. In summary, nurse characters in both American and Turkish movies were commonly portrayed more in the personal activity as opposed to being engaged in professional role. When nurse characters pursued personal activities, they were engaged primarily in dating. In *English Patient*, nurse is portrayed as mainly self-sacrificing character. Nursing is seen as a profession that can be done without education in *Nurse Betty*. *Meet the Parents* takes attention on common stereotypes about male

nurses. In *Beautiful Coffee Server*, nurse character is typically reduced to supporting roles that strongly convey a message to the viewer that nurses are not really necessary or important in healthcare. The *Emperor* emphasizes nurse's sexual attractiveness and behavior rather than her professional work. And finally, in *Brought by the Sea* portrayal of nurse creates a potent favorable image of nursing.

## CONCLUSIONS

We see that movies that we investigated do not represent nursing reality, except *Brought by the Sea*. Nurses should be aware of the way they are portrayed in movies and team up with the media to effectively create a down to earth and accurate image of nursing. If nurses do not like the images presented, they are obliged to clarify their criticism and provide alternative explanations for their own work that goes beyond the stereotypes we have examined. Nursing should be seen as a valuable, challenging and dynamic career. If the public does not understand how nurses have importance on health, they will not be able to fight for the social and financial resources that allow nurses to do their job. When the power of media on the society is considered, it is concluded that attempts of the members of the profession toward having the media display affirmative news about nursing will be beneficial.

**Conflict of Interest:** The author has no conflicts of interest to declare.

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