BETTER STORIES OF SOLIDARITY WITH QUEER MIGRANTS: AN INQUIRY INTO MR. GAY SYRIA

by
ESMA GÜZİN YARICI

Submitted to the Graduate School of Social Sciences
in partial fullfilment of
the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts

Sabancı University
July 2023

BETTER STORIES OF SOLIDARITY WITH QUEER MIGRANTS: AN INQUIRY INTO MR. GAY SYRIA

Approved by:

Prof. Ayşe Gül Altınay . . . .
(Thesis Supervisor)

Assoc. Prof. Aslı İkizoğlu Erensu . . . .

Assoc. Prof. Doğu Durgun . . . .

Date of Approval: July 19, 2023

ABSTRACT

BETTER STORIES OF SOLIDARITY WITH QUEER MIGRANTS: AN
INQUIRY INTO MR. GAY SYRIA

ESMA GÜZİN YARICI

CULTURAL STUDIES M.A. THESIS, AUGUST 2023

Thesis Supervisor: Prof. Ayşe Gül Altınay

Keywords: refugee, vulnerability, solidarity, documentary film, activism

This thesis analyzes the film *Mr. Gay Syria* (2017, directed by Ayşe Toprak) around three conceptualizations of solidarity: affective (Hemmings 2012), reflective (Dean 1998), and intersectional (Crenshaw 1989). I argue that Mr. Gay Syria imagines, articulates and puts into action a "better story" (Georgis 2014) of solidarity, which includes bearing witness to pain and mourning, as well as to hope and (mutual) transformation. This analysis is supported by the use of Focus Group Discussion as a methodology that has the potential to create an intersectional space for reflective and affective solidarity.

ÖZET

QUEER GÖÇMENLERLE DAYANIŞMA HİKAYELERİ: MR. GAY SYRIA ÜZERİNE BİR İNCELEME

ESMA GÜZİN YARICI

PROGRAM ADI YÜKSEK LİSANS TEZİ, AĞUSTOS 2023

Tez Danışmanı: Prof. Dr. Ayşe Gül Altınay

Anahtar Kelimeler: mültecilik, kırılganlık, dayanışma, belgesel film, aktivizm

Bu tez, dayanışmanın üç kavramsallaştırması etrafında *Mr. Gay Syria* (2017, yönetmen Ayşe Toprak) filmini analiz ediyor: bu kavramlar affective (Hemmings 2012), reflective (Dean 1998) ve kesişimsellik (Crenshaw 1989). Mr. Gay Syria'nın, acı ve yasın yanı sıra umut ve (karşılıklı) dönüşüme tanıklık etmeyi de içeren "daha iyi bir dayanışma hikayesi/ a better story " (Georgis 2014) hayal ettiğini, dile getirdiğini ve eyleme geçireceğini savunuyorum. Bu analiz, Odak Grup Tartışmasının "reflective" ve "affective" dayanışma için kesişimsel bir alan yaratma potansiyeline sahip bir metodoloji olarak kullanılmasıyla desteklenmektedir.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Dedicated all the other Mr. Gay Syria stories
that remained unheard and unseen...

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1.   INTRODUCTION

After a brief moment of contemplation, Husein responds to Mahmoud's inquiry about his motivations for participating in the Mr. Gay Syria contest. He articulates, "Let's say that despair has made me courageous... When you have problems and you are desperate, you have to find a solution." Husein employs the word "khalas," an Arabic expression that carries various meanings depending on the speaker's tone and context. However, its literal translation into English conveys notions of stopping, enoughness, or being done with something. In this context, Husein's use of the expression to elucidate his reasons for contest participation highlights the arduous process of "waiting" experienced by LGBTIQ+ refugees.[1] In Turkey, designated recently as a "safe third country." This utterance encapsulates his emotional state, characterized by exhaustion and weariness stemming from prolonged periods of desperation. The word "khalas" also prompts contemplation about what it takes for someone like Husein to muster the courage to share his personal narrative through cinema, reaching thousands of people. Does it stem from despair or hope? Can both coexist within Husein's life?

After witnessing this powerful dialogue between Husein (Mr. Gay Syria contest winner) and Mahmoud and Ayman (Syrian gay activists who organized the event), I found myself asking what the film Mr. Gay Syria (2017, directed by Ayşe Toprak), can teach us about the politics of solidarity and the potential articulation of such solidarity for LGBTIQ+ Syrian refugees. This thesis analyzes the film Mr. Gay Syria around three conceptualizations of solidarity: affective (Hemmings 2012), reflective (Dean 1998), and intersectional (Crenshaw 2013). I argue that Mr. Gay Syria imagines, articulates and puts into action a "better story" (Georgis 2013*a*) of solidarity, which includes bearing witness to pain and mourning, as well as to hope and (mutual) transformation. This analysis is supported by the use of Focus Group Discussion as a methodology that has the potential to create an intersectional space

---

[1] The legal status of Syrians in Turkey is diverse, with the majority falling under temporary protection (documented/undocumented, temporarily protected, asylum seeker, migrant). Therefore, in this thesis, "refugee" is used as an overarching umbrella term to encompass this range of legal classifications.

1

for reflective and affective solidarity.

1.1 Background of the Research

Approximately 12 years have passed since the beginning of the civil war in Syria, and traces of the war can still be seen among Syrians scattered all over the world. Turkey's approach towards migration politics has changed over the past ten years (Sert and Danış 2021).

Departing from the widespread analysis of the Syrian conflict and migration flows as yet another international humanitarian crisis in the Middle East geography, Bélanger and Saraçoğlu's work inquires into the specific historical and political conditions that initiated this situation, also emphasizing "the role of Turkish foreign policy both in the exodus of Syrians from their country and their 'containment' on Turkish soil" (Saraçoğlu and Bélanger 2021). Since the outbreak of the Syrian civil war in March 2011, the Turkish State followed the "open-door" policy which adopted a humanitarian discourse and was accompanied by liberal settings concerning the admission and accommodation of the refugees (Koca 2016; Sert and Danış 2021). According to recent data from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), Turkey is still the country hosting the largest number of refugees with 3.6 million people.[2] The massive migration flow towards Turkey between the 2011-2015 period was portrayed by the government with such concepts as "guest" and "Muslim brotherhood" which emphasized the temporality of the situation based on a religious moral discourse (Sert and Danış 2021).

Syrian community's legal status in Turkey has consequently changed throughout the years. Initially, when the "open-door" policy was adopted by the government, the "guest" narrative on Syrian refugees was used to highlight the temporality of the situation and also the Turkish state politics' opaque and ambiguous migration management policy regarding Syrians. This narrative was supported by legislative measures: First, the Law on Foreigners and International Protection (Yabancılar ve Uluslararası Koruma Kanunu) went into effect in April 2013 and then the Regulation on Temporary Protection (Geçici Koruma Yönetmeliği) in October 2014. The Regulation on temporary protection stipulates that,

---

[2]https://www.unhcr.org/refugee-statistics/

> The citizens of the Syrian Arab Republic, stateless persons, and refugees who have arrived at or crossed our borders coming from [the] Syrian Arab Republic as part of a mass influx or individually for temporary protection purposes due to the events that have taken place in [the] Syrian Arab Republic since 28 April 2011 shall be covered under temporary protection, even if they have filed an application for international protection.[3]

Instead of recognizing permanent refugee protection status for Syrians, the Turkish state created a new status by referencing international protection law. Before delving into temporary protection status characteristics, it might be helpful to look into other fundamental definitions regarding human mobility under different legislative regulations. First, there is the "migrant" status, which the UNHCR defines as "an individual who has left his country of origin for better living standards and who doesn't have a fear of persecution.[4] Secondly, there is the "asylum seeker" status which identifies "an individual whose asylum application is still being processed by the Country of Asylum. Then, the most relevant to Syrians in Turkey, is the "refugee" status which 1951 Geneva Convention defines as follows,

> The term "refugee" shall apply to any person who[,]. . .owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it. (1951 Geneva Convention, Article 61)[5]

Other statuses such as "secondary protection" (article 91), "conditional refugee" (article 62)," temporary protection holder" (article 63), and "irregular migrant" are part of international protection regimes. However, within the frame of the international protection system, refugee status stands out as the most frequently applied status. Therefore, "who is a refugee in Turkey?" becomes a crucial question to understand the legislative status of displaced Syrians. Due to the convention's historical context of World War II, "refugee" status in the convention is restricted to "persons who became refugees due to the events occurring in Europe" (Malkki

---

[3]https://www.goc.gov.tr/kurumlar/goc.gov.tr/Gecici-Koruma-Yonetmeligi-Ingilizce.pdf

[4]https://emergency.unhcr.org/protection/legal-framework/migrant-definition

[5]https://www.unhcr.org/media/convention-and-protocol-relating-status-refugees

1995). Even though, in 1967, an additional Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees was added by the United Nations to remove the geographic limitation on "refugee" status, Turkey kept its right to recognize this status only for people who come from the Council of Europe member-states. Recently, Turkey passed two additional legislations to define the status of the Syrian population in Turkey during the "open-door" policy period, which conclusively ended in 2016 after the EU and Turkish government "deal" (Sert and Danış 2021). Thus, refugees identified as "non-European" are permitted to stay in Turkey for a limited period, with some receiving "temporary protection" status. This precarious status brought together economic and social challenges for Syrians, and applying for third-country resettlement became crucial to be recognized under the "refugee" status. Particularly after Turkey's recognition as a "safe third country" in the 2016 convention, the appeal of "non-entrée" politics in Europe and North America enabled them to adopt "a pattern of minimalist engagement under which the formal commitment to refugee law can be proclaimed as a matter of principle without the risk that the wealthier world will actually be compelled to live up to that regime's burdens and responsibilities to any serious extent" (Gammeltoft-Hansen and Hathaway 2014)

Looking closely at the refugee status in Turkey, there are certain sources and principles necessary to consider particularly regarding international laws and legal framework on refugee protection. Within all these legal frameworks there are two fundamental principles that led to Syrians' ensured security in the international sphere as the result of International Protection in Turkey as per LFIP (Law No.6458). First, according to the 1951 Geneva Convention's article 33, the principle of non-refoulment. No one under this law may be sent to a place where he will be subjected to persecution, or where his life or freedom will be threatened because of his/her race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion.[6] The other principle is non-penalization for irregular entry, which according to the 31(1) article of the 1951 Geneva Convention ensures the displaced people's legal security in the "host" country,

> The Contracting States shall not impose penalties, on account of their illegal entry or presence, on refugees who, coming directly from a territory where their life or freedom was threatened in the sense of article 1, enter or are present in their territory without authorization, provided they present themselves without delay to the authorities and show good cause for their illegal entry or presence (1951 Geneva Convention Article 31)

---

[6] https://www.unhcr.org/media/convention-and-protocol-relating-status-refugees

These principles, while preventing Syrians' involuntary return to the country of origin, also differentiate them from other "foreign" populations in Turkey. This is mainly due to the mass influx factor that forced Turkey to provide urgent and "temporary protection" to Syrians who escaped from the war in great numbers. Temporary protection is an exclusive legal status in Turkey that is supported by the principles of international refugee law. Moreover, this temporary protection has resulted in what Danış and Sert identify as a state of "permanent temporariness" (Sert and Danış 2021).

While it is important to analyze the "refugee status" in its legislative context, it is also worth exploring the critiques regarding the emergence of the "refugee" status and "refugee studies" in the first place (Malkki 1995). As anthropologist Liisa Malkki shows, with the gradual internalization of "refugee law" with its Eurocentric structure, particularly after the rapid decolonization period following World War II, "refugees" started to be seen as a "third country problem" (Malkki 1995). In this context, we can argue that refugee status in the international law system (which is mainly Eurocentric) is addressed as an international security problem and, often, in the framework of "humanitarian crisis" in "third-world" countries. From this point forth, UN entities, particularly UNHCR have become the key global institution to work with refugees. As Malkii points out, UN institutions (together with other national and international aid and relief agencies, nongovernmental organizations, charity groups, development agencies, etc.) have played a fundamental role in consolidating "the international refugee system" (Malkki 1995). Recognizing national and international "refugee" regimes in the context of power relations with their colonial roots fostering ongoing political and economic inequalities; this thesis inquiries into the specific positionality of LGBTIQ+ refugees in Turkey, and ask such questions as: How does Turkey's unique positionality in relation to the Syrian war and the "international refugee system," impact the predicament of queer Syrian refugees based in Turkey? What questions and insights are offered by the film *Mr. Gay Syria* with regard to the politics of queerness and refugeeness today?

1.2 Status of LGBTIQ+ Refugees in Turkey

Beginning with the 90s, gender and sexuality came to be recognized as significant parameters in migration studies globally. In response to this, queer migration scholarship started to bring forward critique regarding the heteronormative structure of migration studies and migration laws (Koçak 2020). Eithne Luibhéid was one of the

first scholars criticizing migration studies for (falsely) assuming all migrants to be heterosexual individuals (Koçak 2020; Luibhéid 2008). Since the beginning of the 2000s, an increasing number of studies explored the multiple conjunctions between gender, sexuality and migration, from an interdisciplinary perspective, bringing together feminist, racial, ethnic, postcolonial, public health, and globalization studies, among other fields (Luibhéid 2008).

Turkey's "transit country" position for refugees came along with an unpredictable legal status and an undetermined time span. This situation forced refugees to pursue and legitimize their asylum claims with UNHCR, the official Turkish migration authorities, and the third countries' embassies and resettlement agencies. In the process of application for third-country resettlement, Refugee Status Determination (RSD) interviews that UNHCR and Provincial Directorates of Migration Management (PDMM) hold created a fundamental paradigm of who "deserves" resettlement (Koçak 2020; Sarı 2021; Shakhsari 2014; Ticktin 2014). Regarding the LGBTIQ+ refugees' protection in the legislative scheme in Turkey, the state relies upon certain fundamental principles in the area of international human rights law and conventions. In evaluating the international protection status of LGBTIQ+ Syrians in Turkey, the main international legal text taken into account was the Istanbul Convention, which was signed and ratified by Turkey in 2011. According to the convention, parties should take the necessary legislative or other measures to ensure that gender-based violence against women may be recognized as a form of persecution within the meaning of the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and as a form of serious harm giving rise to complementary/subsidiary protection (Hooper 2019).

Istanbul Convention provided a framework (although not mandatory) for incorporating a gender-sensitive interpretation of persecution reasons defined in the 1951 Refugee Convention to include gay, lesbian, bisexual, and trans* individuals (Freedman, Kivilcim, and Baklacıoğlu 2017). However, Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan announced the withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention on March 20, 2021, becoming the first country to do so. It is possible to say that the convention's significance for the gendered awareness of international protection regimes resulted in a serious backlash in Turkey.

In this group, LGBTIQ+ Syrians stand out as an eligible "vulnerable" group according to UNHCR's resettlement procedures, mainly to U.S., Canada, or Australia (Freedman, Kivilcim, and Baklacıoğlu 2017). Although UNHCR and other humanitarian agencies give priority to LGBTIQ+ Syrians to apply for third-country resettlement, processes for LGBTIQ+ Syrians remain challenging due to the limited

quota offered by these third-countries and their precarious status in Turkey. More-over, according to NGO report, there is a problem accessing information about their right to apply for third-country settlement.[7] It is also the case that some of them are afraid to apply due to security concerns about revealing their queer identity. The process of eligibility for third-country resettlement seems to be unclear even for UNHCR workers, which is usually evaluated according to the case's specific char-acteristics (Freedman, Kivilcim, and Baklacıoğlu 2017). In order to be recognized in Turkey for "temporary protection status," Syrians must first register with the Turkish government's Disaster and Emergency Management Agency (AFAD) and in the city in which they are living, then they receive an identity card or *kimlik* (identity card in Turkish) to access social services.

An added challenge is that the resettlement scheme has had eligibility criteria that require convincing UNHCR officials to share every detail of their experience of be-ing LGBTIQ+ Syrian in Turkey and in their "home" country (Freedman, Kivilcim, and Baklacıoğlu 2017; Koçak 2020). However, this resettlement scheme was mod-ified in 2014, one year after the Law on Foreigners and International Protection enforcements. According to the modified regulations, the Provincial Directorate of Migration Management (T.C. İl Göç İdaresi Müdürlüğü) became operational and took over the resettlement applications of Syrian refugees from Turkey which previ-ously had been carried out by UNCHR (Freedman, Kivilcim, and Baklacıoğlu 2017). This change made applicants more precarious during the application process due to the lack of gender-sensitive application procedures in PDMM, and even worse, ho-mophobic and transphobic attitudes mentioned by LGBTIQ+ Syrians from both professionals at PDMM and also other Syrians.[8] EU and Turkey agreement in 2016, announced to the local media by the AKP government as a move to revive Turkey's European Union progress, which is seen by scholars as endorsing Turkey's role as a buffer zone. Furthermore, this agreement, labeling Turkey as a "safe third country," led to various international organizations, particularly UNHCR, raising apprehen-sions about its implications. In addition, Turkish government promised to take every necessary measure to prevent irregular migration flux towards Europe. Thus, the UNHCR became the most prominent humanitarian agency for LGBTIQ+ Syrians to apply for third-country resettlement. With this latest regulation, LGBTIQ+ Syr-ians who have applied for third-country settlement bear a long process of waiting while trying to survive the precariousness and discrimination they face in Turkey (Sarı 2021). Moreover, to convince the asylum officers, applicants have to repeat traumatizing stories that are expected to demonize the "home-country" Syria, as

---

[7]Available at: https://kaosgldernegi.org/images/library/2019lgbti-multeciler-ile-imtihani-web.pdf

[8]Available at: https://ayrintidergi.com.tr/turkiyedeki-siginma-sistemi-lgbti-multeciler/

well as the host-country, Turkey, reproducing the "Third World backwardness" vs. "First World freedom narratives" (Shakhsari 2014).

The collaborative procedure for third-country resettlement of LGBTIQ+ refugees between UNHCR and PDMM does not recognize their cases under the emergency category for "groups with specific needs." Consequently, this "hands-off" attitude of European and North American countries towards LGBTIQ+ refugees causes Syrian gays to remain in a state of limbo in Turkey. Within the Turkish asylum system, the evaluation of asylum applications based on sexual orientation, gender identity, and intersex status falls under the criteria of "membership of a certain social group," as accepted in international law. Yet, for applications that fall under more than one criterion, there is a lack of clarity regarding which criteria will be applied during the assessment. The Act on Foreigners and International Protection (YUKK) and the Regulation on the Implementation of the Act on Foreigners and International Protection (YUKK Implementation Regulation), published in the Official Gazette on March 17, 2016, fail to provide any specific guidance on the evaluation process.

Furthermore, uncertainty surrounds the training of professionals conducting status-determination interviews under international refugee law. The collaboration between the Directorate General for Migration Management of Turkey (DGMM) and UNHCR in training migration specialists lacks transparency, and there is no clear information on the frequency or nature of these training sessions. Additionally, the absence of guidelines on evaluation according to the country of origin and the non-inclusion of LGBTIQ+ applicants among those with special needs in Article 67 of the YUKK leaves LGBTIQ+ refugees vulnerable to administrative arbitrariness. The lack of clarity and the vagueness of concepts in the legislation regarding asylum procedures in Turkey contribute to an insecure environment for refugees. Decree Law No. 656 has paved the way for arbitrary deportations without proper oversight, further exacerbating the uncertainty surrounding the evaluation of asylum applications for LGBTIQ+ refugees. This precarious situation creates a "threat mechanism" that hinders LGBTIQ+ refugees' access to basic needs and fundamental rights. The use of ambiguous concepts in enabling interference with fundamental rights lays the groundwork for potential rights violations against "marginalized" groups. Consequently, the current asylum and refugee protection regime fails to adequately protect LGBTIQ+ refugees by excluding them from being considered part of special groups. Instead, they are viewed as both vulnerable and threatening subjects (Kara and Çalık 2016).

1.3 Significance of *Mr. Gay Syria*

Despite the implementation of various local and global legal regulations, the flow of migrants from the MENA region to West Europe and North America continues unabated. Although Turkey signed an agreement with Europe in 2016, negotiations concerning the rights and lives of refugees remain a prominent issue on the political agenda. Against this backdrop, the film *Mr. Gay Syria* presents a multi-layered story that resonates with ongoing academic and political conversations on gender, sexuality, migration and solidarity. Not only does the film offer profound insights on the lives and predicaments of gay Syrian refugees, but it also provides a space to reflect on the intersectionality and inclusiveness of the feminist and queer movement in Turkey and beyond.

The director of the film, Ayşe Toprak, talks about laying the foundation for *Mr. Gay Syria* project during her visit to the Turkish-Syrian border in 2011, where she initially focused on documenting the schooling problems faced by refugee children (Toprak 2018). It was during this time that she met Mahmoud Hassino, who was working at Al Jazeera. Hassino, an established activist known for his work both internationally and locally in raising awareness about the Syrian gay community, later organized the Mr. Gay Syria contest in Istanbul. Through their collaboration on Toprak's initial project, a friendship developed between Toprak and Hassino, leading to the inception of the film *Mr. Gay Syria* . Over time, Toprak became more acquainted with Hassino's activism through his blog and magazine writings, which shed light on his experiences as an LGBTIQ+ activist from Syria (Toprak 2018).

Initially, Toprak and Hassino embarked on shooting the film with a storyline centered around the Mr. Gay World contest, specifically focusing on the local contest, Mr. Gay Syria, held in Istanbul. However, during the documentary's production, one character's story began to take center stage. This character was Husein, a twenty-three-year-old Syrian barber who had fled Syria in 2013. Husein led a double life in Istanbul, balancing his role as a young father on the outskirts of the city and his identity as a gay man in the city center.

The film introduces us to the characters through interviews conducted by Mahmoud Hassino and Ayman Menem during the selection process for the Mr. Gay Syria contest in Istanbul. These initial interviews serve as our first encounter with the characters. However, it is Husein's participation in the contest and the details of his personal story that ultimately transform the documentary's narrative, making him

the film's protagonist (Toprak 2018). Following his poignant performance, Husein goes on to win the title of Mr. Gay Syria, granting him the opportunity to represent Syria in the 2016 Mr. Gay World competition held in Malta. After the completion of the film in 2016, its release was delayed until Husein received acceptance from the United Nations to settle in France. However, due to bureaucratic delays, Husein was still in Istanbul when the film was first screened at an independent film festival there. Ayşe Toprak, the director, reveals that Husein became emotional and shed tears when he watched the film for the first time.[9] Once the film was finally released, it garnered success on the international stage. Toprak describes the public reaction to the film as follows,

> So far *Mr. Gay Syria* was screened at nearly 50 festivals and won a total of 11 awards, including human rights or freedom-themed awards. Beyond the festivals, many non-governmental organizations and educational institutions wanted to contact us and show the film. More than anything, we were delighted to be able to form a community around the film, to create a solidarity that would support the thoughts behind the film and the dreams of my characters. Because for us, this process was not just making a movie, but also touching the lives of our characters in some way. Those who watch this movie may not be able to change the country's policies, but they can individually raise awareness about the problems faced by Syrian LGBTIs and refugees (Bantmag interview, 2017)

The success of *Mr. Gay Syria* is acknowledged particularly in Europe and North American film festivals, and the feminist and queer activism scene, as the inspiring queer story about LGBTIQ+ refugees in Istanbul. As Toprak mentions, this film particularly influenced the humanitarian field and the queer transnational community by giving a chance to witness closely the stories of gay Syrian refugees.

Toprak eloquently captures the political power of *Mr. Gay Syria* in raising awareness about the rights and challenges faced by Syrian gay refugees in Turkey (Toprak 2018). Amidst the highly regulated and bureaucratically normative processes of migration policies, the film stands out with the personal and affective stories that lie behind the numbers. It goes beyond the statistics and brings the audience face-to-face with the first-hand experiences of Syrian gay refugees. Through the medium of film, "Syrian gay refugees" are given a tangible presence, their stories and struggles brought to life. *Mr. Gay Syria* not only humanizes the experiences of its subjects

---

[9]You can read the interview from here: https://magazine.bantmag.com/issue/post/63/1073

but, with its intersectional lens, goes beyond the surface to delve into the multidimensional complexities of their lives. The film's power lies not only in its portrayal of singular life-stories but also in its ability to weave together multiple perspectives through an intersectional lens. Through the director's vision and the collective efforts of the production team, *Mr. Gay Syria* becomes a rich tapestry of intersecting stories, shedding light on the diverse experiences and challenges faced by Syrian gay refugees. It is through this collaborative storytelling that the film emerges as a powerful testament to the resilience, courage, and humanity of its subjects, challenging preconceived notions and generating empathy and understanding among its viewers. Moreover, as the director Ayşe Toprak underlines in her reflections, the film is conceived as an act of "solidarity" in every stage of its production and dissemination. The filmmakers express "delight" at the creation of community and solidarity around the film, once it begins to be shown worldwide. This thesis aims to analyze the ways in which *Mr. Gay Syria* enacts affective, reflective and intersectional solidarity, and to inquire into the doors it opens for feminist solidarity (see Chapter 3).

1.4 Theoretical Reflections

This thesis argues that *Mr. Gay Syria* propels queer studies and migration studies towards new directions. It accentuates the significance and potential of affect and solidarity discussions from a post-colonial standpoint, by examining the interplay of sexuality and migration regimes in Turkey. Over the past decade, both queer and migration literature have effectively illuminated Turkey's intermediary position concerning Syrians and, more specifically, LGBTIQ+ refugees.

Within this context, where LGBTIQ+ refugees are discussed through the concept of vulnerability, the central query of this thesis revolves around how we can perceive their agency and potential to catalyze solidarity, particularly given the backdrop of Turkey's rising authoritarian regime, coupled with its xenophobic and homophobic rhetoric. This prompts a challenge to the capacity of queer and feminist politics to remain inclusive and act in solidarity under a policing regime that acts within an international refugee system policing refugees and migration flows.

Throughout my analysis of *Mr. Gay Syria* as a film, my core argument revolves around how it nurtures solidarity and enacts the potential to influence populations and political landscapes through a better story of solidarity. Within this framework, Butler's and Sedgwick's conceptualizations of performativity and affective theories

provide valuable insights into mobilizing solidarity by acknowledging emotions ranging from pain, grief, and shame to joy, pride, and hope. Dina Georgis' approach further assists in unpacking these aspects through the narrative of *Mr. Gay Syria.*

In conducting this analysis, a pivotal factor was to situate this case within the broader context of Turkey's position within the international refugee system, as highlighted by notable scholars such as Elif Sarı (2021) and Mert Koçak (2020). Moreover, the analysis of *Mr. Gay Syria* draws from José Esteban Muñoz's ideas on "queer futurity" and Ayşe Parla's exploration of migrants' legally constrained interpretation of "hope." Sima Shakhsari's work particularly serves as a foundational framework for discussing the impact of local and global refugee regimes on Syrian gay refugees in Turkey. Her insights into legal and policy frameworks in Turkey, particularly the concept of "third country asylum," provide the theoretical basis for understanding the representation of the Syrian gay refugee community within *Mr. Gay Syria* in diverse temporal and spatial contexts. Additionally, these insights shed light on the responses of European and Turkish queer and feminist policies to the narrative of the film and its construction.

Another theoretical facet of this research is intertwined with the methodology employed in the field, which sought to bring together Syrian and Turkish activists through a screening event.[10] During this event, following the screening of *Mr. Gay Syria*, the primary emphasis was placed on fostering solidarity. The barriers between communities were deliberated upon, employing the notion of "affective solidarity" as articulated by Hemmings, and the concept of "reflective solidarity" as expounded by (Dean 1998). Clare Hemmings' deliberations on affective solidarity shed light on the significance of emotions and affect in feminist politics for political transformations. On the other hand, Jodi Dean's notion of "reflective solidarity" emphasized the materialist aspects of solidarity practices (Dean 1998). Both approaches provide significant tools to deepen our analysis of *Mr. Gay Syria*'s potential for political impact. Crenshaw's seminal notion of intersectionality (Crenshaw 2013) was helpful in highlighting how various aspects of a person's identity—such as race, gender, class, sexual orientation, disability, and more—intersect and interact to shape their experiences, opportunities, and challenges. Thus, when we delve into *Mr. Gay Syria* impact on solidarity and identity politics, arguing its articulation with different positionalities' impact on identity politics, and solidarity practices is going to be a fundamental theoretical axis of this research. Eventually, the tensions and commonalities observed among communities are explained in this analysis, aiding in a more comprehensive understanding of the diverse affective responses and actions

---

[10]Although we use Turkish and Syrian words, it is an umbrella term that we preferred to make the language less complex. It is important for this research to recognize the ethnic and religious richness of each country

towards a solidarity that is more inclusive and intersectional.

Finally, this research aims to harness all the theoretical discussions with Dina Georgis' exploration of queer affects within the context of the "better story." This facet raises pivotal inquiries regarding the comprehension of aesthetics and its interplay with collective trauma experiences, all with the overarching goal of cultivating resilience. Georgis defines the "better story" as a theoretical endeavor aimed at exploring how histories are haunted by trauma and lost memory (Georgis 2013a). According to Georgis, the aesthetic accounts of history and collective narratives are transmitted across generations, with the human voice metaphorically "crying out from the wound" (Caruth 1996, 3, quoted (Georgis 2013a). Thus, in her psychoanalytic theoretical framework, the notion of "better stories" emerges from the principle of creation and survival in the face of adversity, encompassing the collective sharing of stories (particularly of pain and mourning) as a means to enhance resilience (Georgis 2013a).

I would like to add a note on terminology regarding the usage of feminist+ and LGBTIQ+ in the thesis: Although the film focuses on Syrian cis gay men, I often use "LGBTIQ+" (lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans*, intersex, queer, and plus referring to other terms of identification) to emphasize the diversity within the (gender and sexuality wise) non-normative Syrian community. The rights movement in Turkey uses LGBTIQ+ or LGBTI+ to identify its scope. To be more inclusive, I use LGBTIQ+ throughout the thesis to indicate the diversity of individuals' experiences when we talk about queer politics in Turkey and elsewhere.

The usage of the term "feminist+" is embraced from time to time within this thesis to highlight both intersectionality and the effort for inclusiveness of the movement. This approach remains vigilant in recognizing feminism's interconnectedness with other political agendas, encompassing anti-slavery, anti-colonial, anti-war, anti-capitalist, human rights, minority rights, economic justice, and racial justice movements that have accompanied feminisms at the local, as well as the global scale (Altınay and Peto 2022).

Hence, this research endeavors to investigate the transformative trajectory encompassing personal experiences evolving into collective feminist+ solidarity endeavors, with a concentrated emphasis on the encounters of LGBTIQ+ refugees, specifically Syrian gay refugees. Through the prism of queer affect and queer migration studies, I delve into the narrative of *Mr. Gay Syria*, drawing from the extensive theoretical foundation of queer migration studies, as well as the expanding body of literature centered on the concept of "solidarity." This framework serves as a critical lens to contemplate the potential of intersectional and all-encompassing political actions

within the Turkish context.

1.5 Methodology and Outline of the Thesis

The second chapter of the thesis starts with an analysis of film focusing on its affective and performative dimensions. To this end, we primarily benefit from archival resources for the analysis from the media interviews and visual media sources related to the Mr. Gay Syria contest. These sources are formed mainly by Ayşe Toprak and Mahmoud Hassino's interviews with cinema journals, and civil society organizations' works on LGBTIQ+ rights. Relying mainly on secondary sources, Chapter 2 traces connections between art and activism through *Mr. Gay Syria*, and reflects on its contribution to underscore the diversity and particularity of stories from screen to politics. while highlighting *Mr. Gay Syria*'s existence as a sole act of, it aims to unfold its association with contemporary questions regarding queer refugees in Turkey.

In the third chapter of this study, I employ data collected from semi-structured Focus Group Discussions (FGD). The participants of the screening event, which was followed by a brief question and answer session, included the principal investigator of this research, Ayşe Gül Altınay, as well as Ekin Çalışır, the producer of the film *Mr. Gay Syria*. A total of 24 activists responded to our call for the screening, with 19 of them ultimately attending the event. Prior to the screening, potential participants were asked to complete an online form, providing information such as their preferred name, pronoun, age, and association affiliations (if any). To ensure the safety and privacy of the participants, the event was shared within a closed circle, thereby mitigating any potential security issues. The majority of participants identified as cisgender individuals, with an average age of 30 years. Among the participants, nine were Turkish citizens, of whom six attended the screening. On the other hand, nine participants were Syrian refugees, while two were European citizens and one was from the United States.

Notably, the activists were associated with various organizations both from Turkey, and international organizations including a wide range of NGOs and informal feminist, queer, human rights, migration and refugee rights organizations. Additionally, there were some participants who did not have any formal affiliations, underscoring the diverse representation of individuals engaged in the screening event. Following the screening event, and the Question and Answer session with the film's producer, the Focus Group Discussion was held only with the activists.

Through the Focus Group Discussions and participant observation during the screening event, my aim was to develop deeper insights into the experiences and perspectives of activists working at the intersections of feminism, LGBTIQ+ activism, and refugee/migrant rights. The diverse backgrounds and affiliations of the participants contributed to a multifaceted exploration of queer migration, feminist+ solidarity practices, and the affective and performative dimensions of activism. The data collected from these interactions enriched my analysis and offered valuable contributions to the broader discussion on Syrian LGBTIQ+ refugees in the context of activism in Turkey.

During the Focus Group Discussion (FGD), I relied primarily on feminist methodological tools that emphasize recognizing power relations within the group dynamics and interactions among participants (Wilkinson 1998). As the researcher, my role during the FGD was limited to mediating the conversations between the activists. Since there was no structured question guideline, my intervention in the discussions was only to prompt new conversations. It is worth noting that the number of participants in this FGD exceeded the typical design size (usually consisting of 8-12 people), which presented some challenges in ensuring equal time and representation for each participant. However, it is important to highlight that throughout the FGD, non-Turkish citizens, primarily Syrians, actively contributed to the discussions.

During the FGD, after the producer had left, I asked participants how they felt about the film. Activists who wished to speak took turns sharing their views. I then inquired about the extent to which they identified with the characters in the film and finally, we delved into the screen representation of LGBTIQ+ refugees and the solidarity practices of the feminist movement in Turkey. Throughout the discussion, it is crucial to acknowledge that activists occasionally asked questions to each other, aligning with the interactive nature encouraged by feminist methodology in FGD (Wilkinson 1998). My approach as the researcher was to minimize intervention and foster conversations between the participants. The preference for the FGD method stems from its suitability in facilitating solidarity practices within the field while providing activists with a space to engage with one another and explore pertinent political issues.

In conclusion, the FGD proved to be an insightful method in conducting this research on "solidarity," as it allowed for a dynamic exchange of ideas and experiences among different groups of activists, as well as provided the opportunity to act in solidarity in its fullest sense. By adopting feminist methodological principles, I sought to create an inclusive and interactive space where the participants could openly share their thoughts on the film, their identification with the characters, and their perceptions of

the representation of LGBTIQ+ refugees and feminist solidarity practices in Turkey. The FGD format not only facilitated the exploration of research questions but also empowered activists to engage in conversation with one another, contributing to a deeper understanding of the complexities surrounding queer migration and feminist solidarity actions in Turkey.

Based on a close analysis of the film and its reception, alongside an analysis of activist responses to the film, I argue that the stories of Syrian gay refugees portrayed in the film exhibit a diversity of representations that challenge binary narrative structures and reframe perceptions of the "Syrian gay refugee" figure on both the global and local level. Based on this analysis, I contend that migration regimes have a significant impact on Syrian gays in Turkey. While exploring film and identity politics concerning LGBTIQ+ refugee rights through film, I also raise questions about documentary works as *Mr. Gay Syria* has the potential to open up a space for refugee-inclusive feminist solidarity in Turkey.

2.   EXPLORING *MR. GAY SYRIA* IN THE GRIP OF MIGRATION REGIMES

In this chapter, we delve into the significance of *Mr. Gay Syria*'s narrative in critically examining the construction of the identity of Syrian gay refugees within the context of the film, as well as the reactions from both international and local media outlets. By closely scrutinizing the media's portrayal of the film, our aim is to challenge the restrictive regulations within the international refugee system that pertain to LGBTIQ+ individuals, along with Turkey's designated status as a "safe" third country. Looking at Turkey's short history in shaping refugee policies and the rhetoric of the AKP regime concerning refugees, I contend that the unique intersectional positioning of LGBTIQ+ refugees in Turkey leads to specific outcomes. Within this chapter, it remains pivotal to explore how the film portrays the intersectional positionality of Syrian gay refugees (as conceptualized by Crenshaw in 1989), with a particular focus on Husein's story, which we closely bear witness to. Moreover, we aim to outline the limitations inherent in the international refugee system and narratives that fail to extend beyond certain boundaries.

2.1 From the Global to the Local: Situating *Mr. Gay Syria*

When we go back to 2016 and 2017, when the movie was shot and then screened, there are certain global and local events that are important to remember to better situate the story of *Mr. Gay Syria*. Firstly, the agreement signed between Turkey and the European Union on 18 March 2016, as a response to the unauthorized mobility of refugees to Europe (Karadağ and Bahar N.d.), was significant in terms of the predicament of displaced Syrians both in Turkey and Europe. As a result of this agreement, accompanied by strict border securitizations, the number of refugees crossing Europe from Turkey decreased sharply (ibid, 3). This agreement, which was announced to the local media by the AKP government as the step toward restarting

Turkey's European Union process, was interpreted by academic circles as legitimizing Turkey's buffer zone status. In addition, this agreement, which defines Turkey as a "safe third country" for refugees, caused many international organizations to express their concerns about the agreement, especially UNHCR. Consequently, 3 billion Euros were allocated to Turkey, along with programs that encourage regular migration, primarily to support humanitarian aid projects, and in return, put forward the visa liberalization roadmap, which aims to lift the visa requirements of Turkish citizens by June 2016. However, as we know today, this bargaining process, which is carried out over the lives of refugees, has brought with it a period of paradigmatic changes, contradictory discourses and new practices in terms of migration management, especially in the period after 2016 (Karadağ and Bahar N.d.). As Didem Danış writes, the hypocritical policy adopted by the EU for its own benefit has turned the "refugee crisis" into an "opportunity" for the Turkish Republic as a result of the "successful" bargaining (Danış 2016).

The studies focused on the discursive level of migration policies and pointed out the early stages of the "open-door" policy supported by AKP regime together with Islam references by recalling *ensar* and *muhacir* relationship (Sert and Danış 2021). Often highlighted is the "Muslim brotherhood" idea to legitimatize the acceptance of a great number of Syrian people in Turkey. While AKP regime reclaimed "post-nationalist neo-Ottoman" role through these discourses, its poor regulations at the legislative levels forewarn the future possibilities of making Syrians part of the negotiation in the international area (Sert and Danış 2021). While the Turkish government relies on the neo-Ottoman role as the protector of Syrians, we can observe that it continually denied its colonial affiliation in history with Syria. Looking closely at President Erdoğan's discourse on the migrant population before the March 2016 European Union and Turkey agreement, we observe that there is often an emphasis on how the refugee population is presented as a "burden" for the Turkish government (Lüleci-Sula 2021).

AKP regime spokesmen have often criticized Europe for not sharing the burden of the refugee crisis, by highlighting the disparities between their respective interpretations of civilization, which are closely tied to nationalist and religious ideals. Additionally, while AKP regime denounces European countries' policies on the refugee crisis, regime's discourse legitimizes the idea of "Western" civilization. The regime selectively incorporates certain aspects of civilization, such as nationalist values, while disregarding issues pertaining to women's and LGBTIQ+ rights within the refugee population, treating them as separate matters. Furthermore, AKP regime's rhetoric positions Turkey as the protector of the "victims," this narrative can be seen as reminiscent of the colonial discourse employed by European countries to

justify invasions of other nations (Sert and Danış 2021). In this sense, we can argue that, following the 2016 agreement, the AKP regime adopted a similar discourse to legitimize transborder operations in Afrin and Idlib. As highlighted by Lüleci-Sula's study, President Erdoğan reformulates his discourse as Turkey's "duty to ensure security" in the region, contradicting the broader emphasis on "humanitarian responsibility" prevalent in political discourse regarding security practices in the field of migration management in Turkey (Lüleci-Sula 2021).

From these points forth, we can say that LGBTIQ+ Syrians are excluded from the concept of civilization according to the Turkish government's migration management policy discourse. Their statements such as "This nation will never stand by the oppressors but will continue to stand with the oppressed and the victims." legitimizes the constant "victimization" status of Syrians by distancing itself from the "oppressors", paradoxically also carrying out operations in Northern Syria. AKP regime's "Islamist morality" understanding leads to LGBTIQ+ Syrians' total exclusion from political discourse regarding migration and refugee management regulation. Therefore as Evren Savcı argues, AKP regime's Islamist morality defines neoliberalism within a Muslim-majority nation governed by an authoritarian regime that heavily uses Islam for moralizing. Thus, in this neoliberal setting the notions such as homonationalism and pinkwashing cannot offer the most directly applicable perspectives to approach LGBTIQ+ refugees (Savcı 2020).

However, as many scholars have pointed out, essentialist sexuality and gender categories have been reproduced and universalized, perpetuating the dichotomy of male and female as monolithic constructs beginning from the 18th century and onwards (Delice 2010; Najmabadi 2006). From this perspective, one can argue that Syrian LGBTIQ+ refugees challenge both the neo-Ottomanist claims and heteronormative policies of the AKP regime. Firstly, the notion of being LGBTIQ+ is often portrayed as an import from the "Western world," a perspective that is at odds with the existence of Syrian gay refugees and with historical studies on sexuality and gender in the Middle East(Delice 2010; Kuru 2007; Najmabadi 2006). Furthermore, it is plausible to suggest that the Syrian LGBTIQ+ refugee community depicted in the film goes beyond Western-centric descriptions of "queerness" and invokes by encompassing diverse pathways nurtured over centuries of this geography, which have contributed to today's LGBTIQ+ and feminist struggles in both Turkey and Syria.

Thus, the existence of Syrian gay refugees challenges the notion of historicism that imposes "cultural difference onto temporality" by sharply delineating between so-called pre-modern and modern sexual acts (Delice 2010). Neglecting the historical continuity and analyzing Syria-Turkey relations in isolation from the legacy of the

Ottoman Empire risks endorsing a linear perception of so-called "civilization," leading to an incomplete analysis (Delice 2010). Considering these aspects, it can be asserted that *Mr. Gay Syria* disrupts binary narratives and expands the scope of queer studies to encompass broader historical and geopolitical contexts(Butler 1999; Sedgwick 2003; Shakhsari 2014). The film's portrayal of Syrian gay refugees challenges essentialist categorizations and emphasizes the need to situate their experiences through their "intersectional" personalities, taking into account the complex interplay of cultural, social, and political factors that have shaped their identities and struggles (Crenshaw 2013).

2.2 Reframing Vulnerability Through *Mr. Gay Syria*

In one of the early scenes of the documentary, Ayman and Mahmoud conduct interviews with the candidates of the Mr. Gay Syria competition. During the interview, Ayman poses a question to Husein, asking him why he wishes to participate and whether it stems from courage or desperation. Husein promptly responds, stating, "Let's say that despair turned into courage." Through Husein's words, we can discern how despair has had a transformative effect, empowering him to openly share his queer identity with the public, despite the potential dangers involved. However, while examining magazine articles about the film, we observe that the portrayal of the "suffering Syrian gay refugee" tends to be described as less nuanced (Saleh 2020). While media articles describe the characters of the film as resilient individuals who are not solely victims, capable of embodying both sadness and humor, power and fear, the narrative is often depicted as a love tragedy, or simultaneously tragic and comic.[11] These opposing characterizations are intertwined with narratives surrounding LGBTIQ+ refugees as both "vulnerable" and "resilient" beings. As Saleh highlights, apart from the strategic use of visibility in "Western" discussions and the tendency to politicize representations of Syrian LGBTIQ+ refugees through oversimplified binary divisions such as freedom/oppression, suffering/joy, good/bad, or simplicity/complexity – often emphasizing the negative aspects of these binaries – there are valuable insights to be gained from studying the experiences of Syrian and Turkish queer and trans* individuals in public spaces. Their everyday visibility in society and the intricate dynamics that define their interactions with both society and the State offer rich opportunities for learning and understanding (Saleh 2020).

––––––––––––––––––––––––

[11] Access to these articles was made possible through the shared media archive of Ekin Çalışır (producer) and Ayşe Toprak (director). This research would not have been feasible without their valuable support and cooperation.

Although media interpretations may compress the film into a limited frame, the narrative of the film itself operates in a more nuanced space, refusing to exclusively adopt any of these representations to depict the Syrian gay refugee community in Turkey.

In this sense, the film avoids conforming to stereotypical representations surrounding Syrian gay refugees, instead presenting the audience with raw and tender moments of a community that serves as a reminder of the diversity and richness inherent within the Syrian gay refugee community, beyond the confines of categories or predefined notions. Consequently, while the film transcends a singular narrative of Syrian gay refugees, media articles about the film underscore the coexistence of opposing poles within the Syrian gay refugee story, akin to an unexpected union of disparate facts. Additionally, analyses of being a Syrian gay refugee in a Muslim-majority country often equate it with being "the most vulnerable" or a community "in the midst of crisis," as portrayed in articles by the Huffington Post, CNN, and The Guardian.[12]

Other expressions employed to define the Syrian gay community in these articles include a "close-knit community" and a "little-spoken-of community," emphasizing the community's invisibility.[13] To summarize, we can argue that the general theme conveyed in these articles, based on the film, is that Syrian gay refugees, despite facing adversity and suffering, are still able to overcome and experience joy.

In one of the scenes within the film, we see participants of Mr. Gay Syria contest doing an interview with a journalist. The question this (German) journalist asks Mahmoud is this: "Crazy idea, isn't it? Have a look at the war, on the other side of the border. There are people who suffer, are wounded and dead. Help me understand the message." In response to this loaded question, Mahmoud answers with an anxious attitude by saying "It is my way of thinking about another advocacy plan to support the LGBTIQ+ in neighboring countries." He continues his words by saying that it is, in terms of security, challenging to organize a competition under the threat of ISIS (with a laugh accompanying his words). I believe that this conversation reflects two separate narratives on LGBTIQ+ refugees in Turkey. The German journalist constructs his narrative through binary oppositions, similar to mainstream constructions that we see in most media articles published in North America and Europe, whereas Mahmoud's response, with its focus on solidarity across borders, amalgamates these so-called contradictory situations, identifying

---

[12] Available at:
https://www.huffpost.com/entry/new-film-reveals-the-plight-of-gay-syrians$_b5897970fe4b02bbb1816bbfb$
https://edition.cnn.com/style/article/ime-mr-gay-syria-documentary/index.html
https://www.theguardian.com/film/2017/mar/02/mr-gay-syria-a-beauty-contest-in-this-crisis-its-a-way-of-surviving

[13] https://edition.cnn.com/style/article/ime-mr-gay-syria-documentary/index.html

an alternative positionality for himself and for the two countries mentioned. In his response, "Turkey" and "Syria" are not homogeneous entities with opposing characteristics.

In hegemonic discourse, being a Syrian gay refugee in Turkey versus being a Syrian gay refugee in a "queer-friendly European bloc" country are described as two opposite realities. In this vein, moments of joy, happiness, and laughter are presented as a powerful challenge "despite" the fact of living in a region that is surrounded by dire and hostile conditions. Even though this discourse goes beyond totally victimizing the "vulnerable" queer migrants, we can still observe the legitimization of the idea that sexual freedom arose from the European civilization's journey forward from the same media texts and interviews. On the other hand, Mahmoud's humorous response to the journalist regarding a very serious issue, the threat of being murdered by ISIS, challenges our taken-for-granted perception of Syrian gay refugees. While mainstream media explains the contest as a contractionary, surprising, and inspiring event regarding the current situation of Syrian gay community, Mahmoud's response, accompanied by a smile, can be read as his capacity to approach potentially traumatic circumstances with humor and his insistence to stay away from discourses of victimization, while recognizing the severity of violence and discrimination.

Looking through Mahmoud's statements in international media, he emphasizes the co-presence of feelings such as "sadness" and "happiness" and underlies that the tragedy of war is not the only element we should include in our narratives on Syrian gay refugees. Mahmoud's statement in I-NEWS interview, "If I'm crying all the time, I no longer exist," emerges as a queer critique of the famous statement of Descartes, "I think, therefore I am," resisting the thinking vs. feeling or the mind vs. body binary and introducing (queer) humor as an essential quality of existence.[14] Ayşe Toprak describes Mahmoud's sense of humor as follows, "for him, humor reminds him of his sense of freedom as well as a sense of permanent rebellion." (I-NEWS 2017). We can argue that, in *Mr. Gay Syria*, humor emerges as a point that assembles poles of emotions. Humor becomes more than a tendency of experiences to provoke laughter and provide amusement, but is an intersection point where the person is able to respond to potentially traumatic circumstances with creativity and joy.

It is important to acknowledge that, alongside Hassino's use of humor as a tool, there are also underlying explanations that contribute to the perception of migrants as a heterogeneous community composed of resilient individuals. Thus, Mahmoud's

---

[14]https://inews.co.uk/culture/film/new-documentary-follows-search-mr-gay-syria-47093

statement, "To make ourselves stronger, we should not forget the pain," aligns with the representation portraying refugees as resilient beings who draw strength from their experiences of suffering (Saleh 2020). In this context, Sarah Bracke introduces a gendered perspective on resilience by presenting the concept of postfeminist resilience saying "...the female subject who continues to survive patriarchy, is increasingly exposed to the neoliberal labor conditions of flexicurity, and is considered individually responsible for her survival. We might call her a subject of postfeminist resilience." (Butler, Gambetti, and Sabsay 2016)

This gendered critique on "resilience" connects with Hassino's determination for being powerful arises from one's ability to look at pain. Different from Dina Georgis' theoretical framework, I find Bracke's argument crucial to draw attention to the issue of women, in our case LGBTIQ+ refugees, being obliged to "overcome" structural disadvantages with the image of "resilient". In her view, "Look, I Overcame" expression that is at the very heart of postfeminist rhetoric which can be associated with LGBTIQ+ refugees' portrayal in the international media, as well as within the refugees' strategic narratives. On the one side, Hassino's "I laugh, therefore I am" message recalls the creative and transformative potential of the ability to look at pain from a psychosocial aspect (Georgis 2013*a*). On the other hand, following Bracke's argument, it is crucial to stay alert to the critiques on a constant push for our capacity to overcome struggles. I believe this situation can lead to disregarding the structural problems of gender and migration regimes. Therefore, instead of challenging the neoliberal-patriarchal agenda that constantly makes certain subjects vulnerable, which associates with Butler's question of "When is life grievable?", we find ourselves adjusting the neoliberal definition of "resilient" beings (Butler 2016). In this regard, Bracke explains "vulnerability" and "resilience" notions which aren't exactly opposite words, but they work against each other in politics. Vulnerability makes us think about changing society, while resilience keeps us from doing that, even though change might be part of what resilience promises, in a tough way(Butler, Gambetti, and Sabsay 2016). Thus, Hassino's humorist expression can be linked to the political vulnerability that Butler, Gambetti, and Sabsay (2016) and Bracke argues. This perspective associates with Georgis' argument as well on creative and transformative strength of the ability to recognize and look at the traumatic experiences (Georgis 2013*a*)

2.3 Queering Kinship through *Mr. Gay Syria*

Looking closely at narratives within the film and the media articles regarding family ties, Husein's story as a Syrian gay refugee who works at the city center Taksim as an openly gay refugee versus a father in his family house at the periphery of Istanbul conveys multidimensional discussions around the (im)possibility of coming out in his family and social context. In this vein, taking part in a film that includes a public "coming out" accompanies a serious risk of discrimination and violence. Media articles published in North America and Western Europe portray Husein's relationship with his family with such expressions as: "a hairdresser who is closeted from his family and has the added complication of an infant daughter," or "a secret has been revealed to the world."[15] In these depictions, while coming out is defined as a voluntary decision to share one's gender identity and sexual orientation publicly, media articles miss mentioning the motivations of Syrian gay refugees to be open publicly and to organize this contest. Besides, the very existential reasons expressed by Husein such as "I don't want to lie to myself anymore" and "I don't want to hide behind the mask," can be read as Husein's decision to take part in a film that risks his life, highlighting his motivation to be recognized as a "vulnerable" individual in order to "deserve" resettlement in a third country. In this regard, it is valuable to mention the link between vulnerability and selectivity, which holds significance in the conceptualization of resettlement as a mechanism for responsibility-sharing within the international community (Schneider 2021). Husein's identity as a gay Syrian father in Turkey creates a nuanced "coming out" situation, dependent on the audience he interacts with. Husein mentions his motivation to take part in the film, which carried the risk of revealing his identity as follows,

> I have started to tremble. I didn't know what to do. I'm 24 years old. Is it okay that my father hit me at my age? (Someone says "be patient") I cannot, it's impossible. I've thrown it all away. He wants me to stay away from my gay friends. I cannot be straight, I'm not like that. Why did I participate in Mr. Gay Syria? To leave Turkey and save my daughter. I do not want her to grow up in a country where everything is forbidden. I want her to be free, that she won't be forced. I participated in order to leave, but I could not. (Husein)

---

[15] Available at
https://www.theguardian.com/film/2017/mar/02/mr-gay-syria-a-beauty-contest-in-this-crisis-its-a-way-of-surviving
https://cineuropa.org/en/newsdetail/333371/

As we can understand from Husein's words, in order to gain refugee status in a European-North American country, he takes the risk of revealing his queer identity, which comes with consequences. Husein's urge to settle in a third country reflects not only his concerns towards Turkey but also the threat to his own community, to begin with, his own father. Moreover, in the aftermath of the 2016 Agreement, the Turkish state's designation as a "safe" third country raises inquiries concerning the criteria for refugee resettlement within the framework of international migration regimes. It also prompts questions about the extent to which this designation ensures secure application and resettlement procedures for LGBTIQ+ individuals and their families.

Husein's dual life comes with two separate kinship models: His biological family and his chosen family, the Syrian gay refugee community in Istanbul. Looking through biological families' legitimacy discourse, queer critique draws our attention to the question regarding what forms of relationship ought to be legitimated by the state. Thus, the marriage institution forms the important axis of state legitimacy which has been extended to gay marriage in a number of countries. One of the early works on queer migration by Luibhéid (2002) indicated marriage as a backbone of regulating borders of sexualities and gender identities, effectively establishing state-sanctioned categories of "LGBTIQ+" which do not exist in the context of Turkey and Syria. Therefore, fundamental human dependency is regulated under cultural, natural, and state laws. In such a setting, Husein's familial connections are fragmented within these dimensions which makes it impossible for him to legally represent himself as a Syrian gay male and "father" at the same time. Director Toprak's choice to depict the first and last scenes as the separation of Husein from his daughter highlights the violence embedded within the migration regime of the so-called "safe" third country, as well as the violence embedded in the international refugee regime. In her discussion of kinship, Butler argues that "the relations of kinship arrive at boundaries that call into question the distinguishability of kinship from community, or that call for a different conception of friendship." (Butler, Gambetti, and Sabsay 2016). Drawing insights from her articulation while reflecting on the Syrian gay community, we can argue that Husein's two separate familial linkages are both unrecognized by the state, either under the temporarily protected refugee status or due to his gay identity. Husein's affection for his daughter (as a gay man in a heterosexual family) represents a father-daughter relationship that has no appropriate representation on cultural, natural, and legal laws.

Looking at inter-generational patterns in familial relationships, Husein's queer identity creates breakage from the heteronormative-traditional family structure from his father to his daughter. When Husein talks about his relationship with his daughter

he says,

> When I'm with Salam. I do not stop thinking: when will I tell her that I'm gay? How old will she be? Will she accept it? I try to convince myself that yes. It's so sweet when she calls me Baba (Daddy). Baba baba. It is a beautiful feeling. A feeling without end. Even if she gets older, I'll feel it. (Husein)

This passage conveys the inner thoughts and emotions of Husein who is grappling with his identity as a gay person while also being a parent. It captures the complexities and concerns they face in terms of disclosing their sexual orientation to their child, Salam. The passage illuminates the internal struggle and anticipation experienced by an individual, referred to as the narrator, who contemplates the moment when they will reveal their gay identity to their child, Salam. It invites us to explore the themes of self-acceptance, parental love, and the challenges of reconciling personal identity with the responsibilities of raising a child. Thus, we can argue that Husein's gay Syrian refugee positionality both brings forward complex family relationships, but also new possibilities for the future of himself and his daughter. In this vein, building upon Dilara Çalışkan's work on queer *postmemory*, trans* identities inspire us to challenge traditional family norms by disrupting not only the gender binary but also fixed and predetermined notions of family, time, and memory (Çalışkan 2019). Husein's narrative as both a father and a semi-out-of-the-closet gay individual reflects the coexistence of queer and biological family ties in his everyday life, influencing the constant construction or deconstruction of his identity based on varying time and place settings. This observation leads us to consider Çalışkan's arguments on queer kinship and prompts an additional inquiry: what about "queer refugee" kinships? How do kinship relations of Syrian gay refugees in Turkey differ from those of LGBTIQ+ refugees in North America or Western Europe? While the answer to this question cannot be solely derived from the film, I argue that Syrian gay refugees in Turkey, due to their experience of multi-dimensional exclusion, are more likely to maintain ties with their biological families to ensure physical security and further support.

Remembering Ahmet Yıldız's case, which is recorded as the first (publicly known) gay "honor killing" in Turkey, we can argue that the possibility of murder in the case of Husein is highly relevant in the context of "so-called 'honour killings' continue to be a grim reality wherever conservative social mores resist the rule of law." (Savcı 2020). In a scene, after Husein declines to have an interview with BBC journalist in order to keep his identity secret before the film is released, he shares his concerns

to be murdered in case of coming out publicly. The scene depicts a disagreement with Mahmoud, who insists that Husein carry out the interview to reinforce his visa application to Malta. In response to Mahmoud's insistence, Husein clearly notes that he will not risk his life to get a visa if they will not ensure his security. When Ayman says, "But those bullets stayed in Syria" to encourage Husein to carry out the interview, Husein's response bitterly reflects the precarity he feels in Turkey: "Bullets are cheaper here." Based on this scene, once again, we can point out Turkey's questionable "safe third country" status and analyze Syrian gay refugees' kinship models. The study by Shakhsari on LGBTIQ+ refugees sheds light on the conditions of third country asylum, leading to a state of "slow death" where human rights violations in these countries go unchecked (Shakhsari 2014). Lauren Berlant (2007) concept of "slow death" encompasses the geographical in-betweenness experienced by refugees in Turkey, characterized by ongoingness, survival, and living on, where structural inequalities are dispersed, and the pace of their experiences is intermittent, often evading consciousness organized by archives of memorable impact (Shakhsari 2014). Turkey's "safe third country for asylum seekers" status after the 2016 Agreement has brought forward contradictions in the discourse and practice of refugee rights. Shakhsari's reflections on the impact of "slow death" on refugees in this in-between zone prompt us to reflect further on the dialogue between Husein and Mahmoud immediately after declining the BBC journalist's interview request. Husein's statement about the potential of being murdered, "the bullets are cheaper here," highlights Turkey's failure to provide security against gender-based violence for its citizens, as well as for Syrian. Although the protagonists of the film strategically use "vulnerability" as a tool for their application for resettlement, Husein's mention of the risk of being murdered in Turkey questions Turkey's claim of being a "safe" third country for asylum (Shakhsari 2014). Moreover, we can argue that Mahmoud's advocacy plan through *Mr. Gay Syria*, while emphasizing the potential of hope and alternative narratives to inspire "better stories," incorporates the notion of "cruel optimism" (Berlant 2020). This notion aligns with Husein's expressions, urging us to be mindful of the narratives we cling to and to recognize when our attachments hinder rather than enable positive change (Berlant 2020; Georgis 2013*a*). Thus, the film reminds us that while trying to mobilize vulnerability, "cruel optimism" can come at the cost of lives(Berlant 2020; Butler, Gambetti, and Sabsay 2016)

To sum up, we can argue that Husein's decision to take part in this documentary brings forward the high risks related to "coming out" in this geography (Alonso and Koreck 1989; Altman, Richardson, and Seidman 2002). In this context, we can argue that Husein makes a strategically risky decision to secure his and his daughter's

future. While he is trying to keep his connection with his family, he adopts a strategic discourse that incorporates the fact that in countries such as Turkey and Syria "coming out" of the closet comes with the danger of being murdered. However, he is not simply putting his life in danger by saying he is openly gay, instead, he adopts separate discourses for each audience that also shows his strategic use of discourse to play accordingly to convince "deservingness" of refugee status in a third country asylum (Culcasi 2019; Koçak 2020). Another point regarding Husein's familial linkages with both queer and biological kinship models is that his connection with both contains "sites of uncertainty and unpredictability," where care and violence may coexist (Çalışkan 2019; Singh 2011). In the end, Husein's story prompts us to contemplate new political grounds for articulating queer kinship within resettlement procedures (Çalışkan 2019).

2.4 Navigating Hope and Shame in Queer Migration

The opening scene of the film is placed at the Cilvegözü Border Gate at Hatay where Husein talks on the phone saying, "May Allah help you" to his daughter and wife in their trajectory of return. This separation at the border coincides with the same period following the EU and Turkey Agreement was finalized which caused an acceleration in the number of deportations of non-Syrians as well as "voluntary returns" of Syrians since according to the agreement, Turkey was recognized as a safe third country (Karadağ and Bahar N.d.). In this particular scene, we are presented with the depiction of Husein's wife voluntarily deciding to return, accompanied by their daughter, to their village located in the northern region of Afrin. At that time, this area was classified as one of the so-called "safe" zones. However, it is important to note that this perceived safety was short-lived, as in 2018, Operation Olive Branch (Zeytin Dalı Operasyonu) was carried out in the same region by the Turkish military resulting in the loss of lives and displacement of thousands of Syrians (HRW 2018).[16]

As the film progresses, we understand that actually, the first scene is the ending scene, the separation of Husein from his family at the border. Reflecting on Ayşe Toprak's preference for circular editing of the story can be argued as a way of illustrating migration journey through the cinema medium. Starting the film at the Cilvegözü Border Gate, and then coming back there again at the end also can be read as an intervention to the traditional storyline, which also incorporates with precarious trajectory of migration journey at the discursive level. Husein talks about

---

[16] Available at hrw.org/news/2018/04/08/syria-afrin-residents-blocked-fleeing-aid

his migration journey as follows,

> All of us, my brothers, my parents, we enter Turkey illegally through a small village. My father's friend helped him find an apartment. I work and live in the center, one hour from my house. I live my life six days a week, but when I come back home on my day off, I cannot be myself. I become the person that my family wants me to be. (Husein)

As many refugees crossed the border after the outbreak of civil war in 2011, their migration journeys relied upon mostly the network built with those who came to Turkey before. As we can understand from Husein's words, he settles in Istanbul's periphery with his family, yet due to his work at the barber shop, he also had to have a place to stay at the center. This double locality facilitated to live his gay Syrian identity openly in Istanbul. Besides the six days of a week where Husein socializes with Syrian gay community, on his day off he goes back to his biological family's home where he takes over the role of the heterosexual father, husband, and son. In Husein's case, these shifts in his daily life can be elaborated as a source of challenge to develop a sense of belonging towards his surroundings and towards his sexual identity.

Within a theoretical frame, we can discuss the ephemeral connections of Husein with different groups and spaces through Manalansan's arguments about the impact of urban life on queer migrants' sense of belonging. We can argue that the characters' connection to their "stuff" is designated based on future possibilities of moving to another country (Manalansan IV 2014). Thus, we can say this situation might cause the Syrian gay refugee community to keep their connection with their surrounding at the temporal level because of their precarious positionality against the cultural and legal accounts of Turkey. In this context, we can argue that Syrian gay identity is constructed and deconstructed constantly according to different spatial presences which also reflect on the narratives of the migrants. Husein's words upon his refugee journey since the outbreak of the war illustrate in the very first words of the film as follows, "This was not expected. Everything went wrong. It's like you climb to the top of a mountain and fall to the bottom on the other side." These words can be read as the obscurity of the journey for a gay Syrian refugee where the dream of being safe and liberated in another country comes with new challenges due to both their ethnic and sexual identity. Turkey's positionality between Europe and Syria, especially for queer individuals, is often presented as a stepping stone towards "civilized" Europe (Shakhsari 2014). This perspective comes together with a feeling of "being stuck" in this formerly "transit" country, as Husein says, "I am afraid to stay stuck. Not get-

ting ahead. That scares me." In this vein, Esra Stephanie Kaytaz's study on refugee narratives incorporates Husein's discourse of how their journey as queer refugees transcends the binary structure of the migration journey, where there is no beginning and no end (Kaytaz 2016). In the case of LGBTIQ+ migration journeys, it is not only the linear narrative of the migration journey that is transgressed but, from a queer perspective, other linear spatial and temporal expectations as well (Dinshaw et al. 2007; Halberstam and Halberstam 2005; Muñoz 2019). Looking at Syrian gay refugees' narratives within the film from Halberstam's queer time and place concept, we can argue that Syrian gay refugees as the queer subcultures of Istanbul produce alternative temporalities by allowing their participants to believe that their futures can be imagined "according to logics that lie outside of those paradigmatic markers of life experience-namely, birth, marriage, reproduction, and death." (Halberstam and Halberstam 2005). In addition to this approach, we can also define the film as an example of queering archives. Manalansan puts forward the fluidity of queer migrants' everyday life experiences that are composed by "(the) contrasting moments of detachments, letting go, moving away, the pleasure of discovery, and the reality that nothing is ever really permanent in order to enable themselves to move literally and figuratively through times and spaces, beyond days and rooms." (Manalansan IV 2014). These theoretical arguments emphasize Mr. Gay Syria's masterly intervention in looking at narratives through their intersectional features while creating a queer archive.

One of the frequently mentioned words in *Mr. Gay Syria* is "hope." It is possible to examine Husein's narratives on "hope" through the lens of the anthropology of emotions, which considers the historical, political, and legal construction of this term in relation to the case of Syrian gay refugees (Abu-Lughod 1989; Briggs 1970; Lutz 2011; Myers 1991). In this regard, Ayşe Parla and Dina Georgis' theoretical discussions shed light on "hope" and its connection to Syrian gay refugees' understanding of the term, taking into account both structural and "radical" expectations (Georgis 2020; Parla 2019). Husein's words about the future are often accompanied by hope, e.g. "I hope tomorrow is better than yesterday. It's the most optimistic thing I can say. You have to look forward. And that's it." Drawing insights from José Esteban Muñoz, we can argue that Husein's narrative aligns with the concept of "queer futurity," which revolves around envisioning and striving towards a utopian future for queer individuals. It entails transcending the limitations and hardships of the present to create an environment where queer lives and communities can flourish (Muñoz 2019). In addition to Muñoz's theoretical standpoint, we can also associate Husein's desire for a "better" future with Georgis' notions of "radical hope" (Georgis 2020). Dina Georgis interprets it as a state of mind capable of disrupting

30

and weakening our individual/cultural habitual mindsets and hardened trauma responses while giving rise to unexpected queer feelings and longings for an alternative way of life (Georgis 2020).

The phrase "tomorrow be better than yesterday" highlights a forward-looking perspective, emphasizing the importance of looking ahead rather than dwelling on the past (Georgis 2013a; Muñoz 2019). Analyze the significance of temporal orientation in the context of "hope," as it encourages individuals to focus on the possibilities and potential for growth and improvement in the future even in challenging circumstances. On the other hand, Husein's narrative emphasizes the challenges of arriving in Turkey and being trapped in this situation, which aligns with studies that underscore the legal and economic vulnerabilities experienced by refugees (Parla 2019; Shakhsari 2014).

Based on Dina Georgis' conceptualization of "radical hope," we can emphasize the transformative and visionary nature of hope in Husein's journey. In this vein, "radical hope" goes beyond conventional notions of optimism by envisioning and actively working towards a social, political, and personal change, eventually creating a "better story" (Georgis 2013a, 2020). Thus, Husein's expression explores hope as a way of being transformative and transcending which inspires himself and the other members of community to fuel personal agency and collective efforts for social transformation on a larger scale through the film lens. "Hope" plays multiple roles in the film. On the one hand, it highlights the vulnerability of gay refugees, while also pointing to its potentials for fostering resilience and facilitating coping mechanisms. Yet, the transformative nature of hope should not be taken for granted. As Ayşe Parla suggests, hope as a "collective structure of feeling," one that varies according to social class and is shaped by migration bureaucracies, has transformative potentials (Parla 2019).

Another point often embedded in the narratives of Syrian gay refugees in *Mr. Gay Syria* is "shame," which is shaped by cultural and moral norms. As Dina Georgis argues, queer identities are often experienced as a "painful site of shame" in today's conjecture (Georgis 2013b). In the film as well, we remark Husein's narrative that points out a shift in his perspective from shame to pride, as if linear trajectory; "in the past, my life seemed like a disease to me. I looked in the mirror and hated myself. Why am I like this?" As we mentioned in the kinship context, pressure on Husein as the oldest son in the family, his semi-out-of-closet situation survives in Istanbul by hiding his gay identity from his biological family. In this vein, as Georgis points out, the ethos of pride is "implicated in a colonial discourse that fails to see that the right to come out and the right for legal changes are not the only

strategies for queer becoming." (Georgis 2013b). Thus, the shame of being gay in normative settings leads queer subjects to develop political and emotional responses to homophobia. Husein's monologue performance in Mr. Gay Syria contest narrates the dilemma of shame and pride as a gay Syrian refugee,

> Mom, I'm Husein, your eldest son. The one that fills you with pride. The one you get on the with best. It's Mother's Day. This is for you (gives a present). Mom, I should have told you so many things, but death separated us. I wanted to tell you what I really felt. Something that I have carried inside since I was born. But I was afraid. Fear of my father and my brothers. I was afraid for you and for me. But I do not care anymore. You are the first one I tell it to. mom, dad hit me yesterday. Yes, mom. I'm gay. Be proud of me. (Husein)

Building on Dina Georgis' analysis of "shame" and "pride," we can argue that the Syrian gay refugee community is inventing itself through and not against shame (Georgis 2013b). When we look at LGBTIQ+ refugee status in Turkey through Husein's words, we observe that both pride and shame come together in the Syrian gay refugee narratives such as Husein's. Husein describes his emotions within his narrative as being ashamed "locally" when socio-moral codes are publicly violated and "globally" for being too gay or not gay enough that requires him to prove his deservingness for third country resettlement (Georgis 2013b; Koçak 2020; Sarı 2021; Shakhsari 2014). In the film, Husein's mother emerges as someone who tries to protect him against his father, bringing together pride and shame, love and fear, in the "becoming" of a gay man's mother. As we mentioned in the context of refugee narratives ' strategical usage within the "global" frame of migration narratives, Husein's words in his performance highlight a process of making peace with his identity by not "caring" anymore about "what other people" are going to think. Thus, he performs a coming-out scene on stage, with the Syrian gay community in the audience. This hypnotical "coming out" scene makes us reflect on further strategical usages of "pride" in refugee and LGBTIQ+ narratives. Husein's strategic usage of his vulnerability can be analyzed through the contributions of Gayatri Spivak and Judith Butler on how minority groups mobilize their vulnerabilities as part of political struggles (Butler, Gambetti, and Sabsay 2016; Spivak 1996). This "pragmatic" usage can be observed in the case of *Mr. Gay Syria* concerning the essentialist depiction of the Syrian gay refugee identity. While Spivak argues that strategic essentialism is something that should be resisted to avoid "frozen" identities and uphold feminist agendas, in the context of *Mr. Gay Syria*, it emerges as a powerful political strategy where differences within a group are temporarily

downplayed, and unity is assumed for the purpose of achieving political goals (Eide 2016; Spivak 1996).

The structure of the narrative as well brings forward a "progressive" trajectory, while being ashamed of his identity, he starts to be proud of himself by performing "coming out" on stage, with a queer audience, and the fictive presence of his mother. From this point forth, we can argue that performativity theory through Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's contributions where pays attention to affective articulations. In her words,

> A spatialized and local performativity is also likely to offer some new conceptual tools for moving back and forth between speech act theory and dramaturgical performance; ideally, it might even make room for talking about performative affectivity in a way that would not reintroduce either intentional or descriptive fallacies. (Sedgwick 2003, 68)

In her discussions, spatial accounts of performativity help us to reflect further on Husein's performance at the Mr. Gay Syria contest. Sedgwick dismantles dualistic thought in her critique as to the importance of vicinity in the process of verbalizing the utterance. In this regard, the audience and location of the event also impact the narrative that Husein built upon which Sedgwick conceptualizes as "periperformative utterances" (Sedgwick 2003). Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's term "periperformative utterance," introduced in her book *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*, refers to a particular type of speech act that operates at the periphery of conventional performative speech acts. "Periperformative utterances" often deal with the nuances of identity, affect, and subjective experiences. They can evoke affective responses, shape relationships, and contribute to the construction of meaning and understanding. These utterances invite exploration of the complexities and subtleties of human experiences beyond strict performative speech acts. This is a generative framework to understand Husein's performance as a Syrian gay refugee who performs in front of a refugee community audience in Istanbul. Sedgwick's deliberations upon the affective dimension of narratives incorporate the audience's response to Husein's performance.

Sedgwick's usage of the "inner child" metaphor offers a way to explore the complexities of affect, identity, emotional vulnerability, and personal growth. It encourages us to engage with our emotional selves, cultivate empathy, and embrace the transformative potential of understanding and caring for our inner child. In this regard, Husein's performance is significant to reflect on how he connects with the

audience in emotional vulnerability and resilience, unresolved emotional trauma accounts while exploring multiple layers of Syrian gay refugee identity in a collective manner. Thus, similarly to Georgis' and emphasis on hope's transformative power, Sedgwick suggests looking closely at affective speech acts by embracing the transformative potential of understanding and caring for our "inner child." In the end, both theoretical approaches offer different perspectives that highlight the complexities of affect, identity, and the potential for personal and collective growth while keeping in mind structural challenges regarding neoliberalism and migration regimes. *Mr. Gay Syria* film and the contest in the film build a bridge for connecting affectively in personal to collective accounts from white screen to audiences.

2.5 Mapping Belonging: Impact of Spatial Accounts

The film recalls the spatial setting's influence on narratives through the example of the Pride March in 2016 in Taksim. Going back to the 2016 Pride March just before the attempt of the 15th of July Coup d'État and after Gezi resistance, there was a significant increase in oppression upon the visibility of queer individuals in the public spaces.[17] This march also coincides with the time after the EU and Turkish government Agreement regarding refugees in Turkey. In this tense period of time, the pride march in Istanbul was banned with "security" excuses, where the police used teargas and water cannon to disperse participants, same as the previous year. Looking at pride parade in Turkey since 2003, we can argue that it got bigger each year. On 30 June 2013, during the Gezi protests the pride parade attracted almost 100,000 people. In 2014, parade pride witnessed the most populated march ever, with more than 100,000 people. After the 2014 parade, gradually the government brought forward different reasons to ban the march either using its overlap with Ramadan, pandemic or security "concerns".[18] In the documentary, we have a chance to witness closely the 2016 march, where the police brutally target participants by using rubber bullets and tear gas. When Ayşe Toprak talks about the process of filming, she adds with a laugh: "Whenever we were stopped by police or officials, we would say we were making a film about the cultural institutions of Istanbul called The Joys of Life. We were very well-rehearsed." [19] This strategic discourse towards

---

[17] Available at: https://kaosgldernegi.org/images/library/lgbti-larin-i-nsan-haklari-raporu-2022.pdf

[18] SPOD report published in 2022 "From 2015 to Today Prohibitions on Istanbul LGBTI Pride Marches"

[19] Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/film/2017/mar/02/mr-gay-syria-a-beauty-contest-in-this-crisis-its-a-way-of-surviving

officials also reflects the insecure environment not only for refugees and LGBTIQ+ people in Turkey but also for filmmakers.

Beyoğlu has played a significant role as a political space for the Turkish queer movement (Çetin 2016). In this regard, the film critically highlights the historical affiliation of the Taksim area with queer politics by incorporating the stories of Syrian gay refugees there. Husein's participation in the pride parade in 2016 provides insight into the transformation of Taksim and the queer movement over the years, with the presence of Syrian refugees at the parade.

Another spatial aspect that drew our attention is related to Istanbul's distinctive characteristics compared to other third countries, such as its Muslim majority population and its spatial proximity to the Middle East in terms of geography and culture. This raises questions about the sense of belonging of LGBTIQ+ refugees in Turkey. In a scene where Nader and Omer walk through Tarlabaşı Boulevard and discuss LGBTIQ+ rights in Middle Eastern countries, they comment on Turkey's relatively "safe" position for LGBTIQ+ refugees from the MENA region. However, alongside the security dimension, they also express how Istanbul reminds them of their homeland, Damascus. As they walk ahead of us, passing by an image of a white, elegant minaret, Omer says, "I love this street, it reminds me of ancient Damascus. Look at the cobblestones and the mosque. It fills my heart with happiness." The film suggests that Istanbul actually offers a living space to satisfy their longing for the cities they are separated from by war. However, Istanbul, despite its resemblances with old Damascus, also carries the danger of being persecuted in the same street for the same reasons. In this regard, spatial remembrance of Damascus in Istanbul can be analyzed as a source that strengthens the sense of belonging for Syrian gay refugees, even though threatening their lives for similar reasons. In this vein, a body of literature has emerged that explores the concept of (im)migrant belonging and acknowledges various dimensions of belonging and their impacts (Anthias 2006; Antonsich 2010; Duyvendak 2011; Ehrkamp and Leitner 2006; Yuval-Davis 2006). Drawing insights from these studies, we can argue that the sense of belonging experienced by Syrian gays, as witnessed through Omer's words, conveys a personal feeling of emotional attachment, particularly towards Istanbul, due to its resemblance to Damascus. This "sense of home" represents a symbolic space of familiarity, comfort, or refuge, despite the lack of security (Antonsich 2010; Yuval-Davis 2006). Another scene that encourages us to reflect on further spatial connection of remembering the "home" country where British photographer Bradley Secker takes pictures of Husein at the top of a skyscraper. While Bradley taking pictures of him, he explains why he wanted to take Husein's pictures at the top of high buildings,

> Why do I take photos of you on a rooftop? I want to explain more. Basically, I'm doing an ongoing series of photos, very slowly, gay Syrians in a place that ISIS would throw them off. So, something supposed to be reflective of that but also positive in the sense that they are alive, they do survive and they are in Istanbul. (Bradley Secker)

ISIS terrorists have used a series of violent methods to kill LGBTIQ+ people, such as stoning to death, shooting in the head, or throwing from high buildings (NBC News 2015; NY Daily News 2017; Syria Human Right's Report 2017).[20] Particularly, a photo that circulated on online platforms in 2016 created a powerful impact on the global media to acknowledge the level of persecution of being "gay" in Syria. Hussein's reaction is simply silence in response to Bradley's explanation of the series of photographs. In this regard, Husein's presence atop a skyscraper in Istanbul, as captured through the lens of a British photographer, is associated with the notion of Turkey as a "safe" third country. However, as numerous studies have pointed out, Turkey's in-between status can lead to the "slow death" of trans* and queer migrants. Therefore, the experience of Syrian gays in Istanbul can be seen as another precarious state where they find themselves at the top of buildings, relieved not to be thrown off from it, thereby highlighting the paradox of refugee rights in a so-called "safe" third country Shakhsari (2014). In the same scene, we hear Husein's yearning for Mount Qasioun which is the famous mountain that overlooks Damascus,

> Syria was beautiful. There were mountains, like Mount Qasioun. Today, people still talk about its beauty. This breeze is nothing compared to there. The height did not scare us. But they came and destroyed everything. Now we are afraid. (Husein)

This expression not only mirrors Husein's yearning for his country and his city, but he praises his country for its natural beauty by comparing it to the suffocating urban texture of Istanbul, undoing narratives of development and modernization. Once again ISIS danger (re)emerges in Husein's words as a possible threat. From the rooftop to Mount Qasioun Istanbul becomes a space for Husein to remember the horror and the beauty. Within the context of spatial remembrance, the words of Hussein as a Syrian gay refugee illustrate the emotional attachment to their homeland, the presence of spatial memory and nostalgia, the loss and displacement experienced, the trauma and fear associated with the destruction of familiar spaces,

---

[20](trigger warning) Available at https://web.archive.org/web/20170508104608/http://www.lailasblog.com/2016/12/isis-thugs-throws-prisoner-down.html

and the preservation of identity amidst displacement. These elements emphasize the significance of spatial remembrance in shaping their experiences and understanding the complex impact of displacement on individuals' sense of self and belonging (Antonsich 2010; Ehrkamp and Leitner 2006; Huizinga and Van Hoven 2018).

3.   CULTIVATING SOLIDARITY WITH *MR. GAY SYRIA*

The second chapter was significant to understand affective and performative articulations of identity and belonging in Mr. Gay Syria to understand the film's contribution to solidarity and its potential to impact political grounds. In this chapter, I would like to reflect on the film's impact on feminist+ solidarity in Turkey, based on the growing scholarship on solidarity and intersectionality (Crenshaw 2013; Dean 1998; Hemmings 2012). I argue in this chapter that Mr. Gay Syria, deepening our understanding of the intricacies of gender and sexuality, extends an invitation to what Altınay and Petö call "feminist+ solidarity," an invitation to "open ourselves up, personally and collectively, to a better story of feminism" (Altınay and Peto 2022).

When I first started to think about the focus of my MA research, it was primarily listening to solidarity stories with queer migrants and activists from the field. My experience in the field for one and half years now pushed me to seek further engagement in queer and feminist politics with LGBTIQ+ refugees in Turkey. In the previous Chapter, we looked closely at the representations around and within the film both with strategic, affective, and performative usages. One of the issues raised in that discussion had to do with the multiple factors that shaped the articulation of the Syrian refugee as a "vulnerable" subject. Characters' identification with vulnerability was situated in their belonging to a community at the heart of Istanbul that celebrates joy despite discriminatory discourses and practices towards the LGBTIQ+ and Syrian communities in Turkey. In light of these points, the film not only allows us to witness the lives of the Syrian gay community but also compels us to reflect on its role in promoting concrete acts of solidarity and cross-cultural exchanges. One of the prominent goals of this study was to gather activists who are involved in queer migration-related advocacy activities in Turkey to view the film and engage in a discussion. In June 2023, a screening of *Mr. Gay Syria* with the participation of activists from different groups was organized, followed by a Focus Group Discussion to share and reflect together on the presence and potential of

solidarity in Turkey through the story of *Mr. Gay Syria.* A total of 19 participants came together with two research investigators and the film producer. First, the film was screened, and then a discussion round with the film's producer was carried out. Finally, a focus group discussion only with one research investigator and activists hold the conversations around the film and the LGBTIQ+ migrant rights advocacy.

3.1 Why *Mr. Gay Syria*'s Story Matter Now More?

One early screening of the film took place at the AFM International Independent Film Festival (!f İstanbul Uluslararası Bağımsız Filmler Festivali). During this screening, the film's director, some of the cast members, and the audience engaged in post-viewing discussions. Since 2018, several developments have transpired, but the most prominent and direct of these changes was the electoral process that unfolded in May 2023, which included othering, stigmatizing and even threatening, messages directed against "refugees" and the LGBTIQ+ in Turkey. Given the increasingly precarious status of both of these identities within contemporary Turkish society, it becomes more imperative than ever to lend an ear and share the stories of LGBTIQ+ refugees, as this represents a critical intersection point.

During the May 2023 presidential election campaign process, the frequency and intensity of hate speech directed towards LGBTIQ+ individuals escalated. A study conducted by the Hrant Dink Foundation prior to the May 14th elections revealed that out of the 184 news articles analyzed, 36 contained discriminatory discourse and hate speech specifically targeting the LGBTIQ+ community. These articles depicted LGBTIQ+ individuals using negative adjectives such as "imposition," "deviant" and "pervert."[21] Furthermore, these articles argued that LGBTIQ+ individuals posed a threat to children, families, and society as a whole. The same study indicated that 126 out of the 184 news items containing discriminatory discourse and hate speech focused on statements made by politicians about immigrants and refugees. Within these articles, 19 out of 28 news items portrayed refugees as a security problem and perpetuated common misconceptions about them. Following the first round of elections, as neither candidate surpassed the 50 percent threshold required to become president, Turkey entered into another campaign period lasting two weeks.

During the interim period between elections in 2023 May, there was an alarming increase in radicalized discriminatory discourse, particularly targeting migrants, and

---

[21]Available at https://hrantdink.org/en/asulis/activities/projects/media-watch-on-hate-speech/3979-on-the-edge-of-elections-how-was-the-discriminatory-discourse-in-politicians-statements-reflected-in-the-press

more specifically, Syrians. Alongside the far-right Republic Alliance's campaign that promoted homophobia, sexism, and racism, the People Alliance adopted an extremely xenophobic discourse, equating the oppositional alliance (Kepenek 2023)[22]. Consequently, in this environment, the safety of LGBTIQ+ refugees, particularly Syrian gay refugees, became even more precarious.

3.2 Practicing LGBTIQ+ Rights Advocacy Through Film

In this politically charged atmosphere, we organized a screening of *Mr. Gay Syria* and a focus group discussion with activists five days after the 28th May election. On a sunny Saturday afternoon, we gathered at a former bank building in the heart of Karaköy, Istanbul, now one of the buildings of Sabancı University. We came together to watch *Mr. Gay Syria* and engage in a subsequent discussion. Over the past five years, as the film embarked on its screening journey, its story has remained relevant and has gained increasing importance within the context of (re)evaluating the inclusivity of refugees in our feminist and queer political agendas in Turkey. The motivations behind the creation of the film, along with reflections on its impact in both international and local spheres, have been expressed in conjunction with its strategic objectives. In line with this perspective, film's producer mentioned that their intentions became clearer as they made progress. They also developed a strategy for the film's impact from the very start. Thus, it was vital for them to establish specific goals, one of which aimed to foster greater solidarity and enthusiasm among LGBTIQ+ groups in Europe and the US, particularly those seeking resettlement. Producer went on to explain that achieving this goal required them to cultivate connections between host communities and newcomers. Additionally, she highlighted another significant objective: empowering the community itself and providing them a platform to voice their concerns. She described how the evolving process transformed the film into a means of communication, akin to a "letter" primarily directed at Syrians and Arabic-speaking refugees. The film's purpose was to convey the message, "This is who I am, this is who we are," essentially functioning as a "calling card" within host communities. Consequently, based on feedback from refugee communities, the film conveys their statement, and it was their responsibility to widely share this message.

Her deliberations in this context align with our analysis, which reveals that Husein

---

[22] Available at: https://m.bianet.org/bianet/lgbti/278415-secim-yarisinda-nefret-yayiliyor-lgbti-dernekleri-uyardi-suc-isliyorsunuz

and the other protagonists adopt a specific discourse toward the audience. The strategic messaging primarily targets North American and European audiences, as well as the "host" country. The aim is to employ a strategic discourse that facilitates or expedites the resettlement process by perpetuating the prevalent image of the "suffering Syrian gay refugee" (Saleh 2020). However, the director's intention to appeal to Western audiences does not restrict the film's capacity to portray intimate, affective, and joyful moments within the Syrian gay community in Istanbul. Thus, the film crew asserts, the film conveys a message to both the Syrian gay refugee community and international audiences, urging them to recognize the "vulnerability" of the community while emphasizing the collective responsibility to continually disseminate this message. Consequently, the film distinguishes itself not merely as an artwork, but also as a political statement that seeks to reach both local and international audiences. Cüneyt Çakırlar argues that contemporary forms of multi- and trans-media documentaries play a significant role in reshaping the realms of art, ethnography, and screen activism. They offer an alternative to the globalized, hyper-commodified landscape of contemporary arts, challenging its commodification of ethnography through engagement with transnational capital (Çakırlar 2017). Within this framework, the primary focus on Syrian gay refugees in *Mr. Gay Syria* invites audiences to adopt an ethnographic lens, simultaneously incorporating and challenging the prevalent depiction of the Syrian gay refugee. Thus, while the documentary serves an ethnographic purpose by presenting a specific community, it also fosters the formation of solidarity groups within the movie theater halls.

Another significant aspect addressed in the background of the documentary is Hassino's effort to ensure that the participants in the film benefit from the vulnerable status designated by UNHCR within the framework of migration regimes. The criteria outlined on UNHCR's website can be seen as embodying the representation of Syrian gay refugees in the film. According to these regulations, the "vulnerability" status comprises five distinct criteria: age, sex, gender identity, sexual orientation, health and well-being concerns, and protection needs. These criteria are further classified into low, medium, and high levels of vulnerability. Consequently, individuals who are at risk of violence due to their sexual orientation and/or gender identity are considered vulnerable subjects eligible for prioritization in the third-country resettlement process. However, as previously discussed in detail in the second chapter, these procedures can be lengthy and arduous for individuals.

Mert Koçak's study on the deservingness of settlement status for LGBTIQ+ refugees sheds light on Turkey's unique position in examining the role of UNHCR within migration regimes. It highlights the complexities of "policing and regulating the borders of sexuality and gender identity" as UNHCR possesses the authority to resettle

refugees in Turkey to a third country (Koçak 2020) In this regard, the documentary exposes these procedural aspects to the audience, portraying the authentic experiences of the Syrian gay community in Istanbul, encompassing both poignant and joyful moments on-screen. Vulnerability, in conjunction with the film, transcends the limited definitions imposed by official migration regimes and offers a glimpse into the diverse richness of individual experiences. Judith Butler's exploration of vulnerability emphasizes the need to reconsider the narrative structure that shapes our understanding of the relationship between vulnerability and resistance. Butler underscores the inseparable connection between resistance and vulnerability, stating, "It would seem that without being able to think about vulnerability, we cannot think about resistance, and that by thinking about resistance, we are already underway, dismantling the resistance to vulnerability in order precisely to resist." (Butler, Gambetti, and Sabsay 2016). Therefore, the implication of "vulnerability" in internalizing gendered norms, as explained within the framework of performativity theory, involves recognizing the field of unwilled receptivity, susceptibility, and vulnerability as an integral part of gender assignment. It represents a state of being exposed to language prior to the possibility of forming or enacting a speech act (ibid.). Thus, social normativity requires and enforces specific forms of corporeal vulnerability upon individuals, making an understanding of vulnerability at the discursive level crucial in comprehending "the performative account of agency" (ibid.). Similarly, Eve Sedgwick argues that "queer" should not be viewed solely as an identity but as a movement of thought and language that challenges accepted forms of authority, also creating space for the recognition of desire beyond established norms (Butler, Gambetti, and Sabsay 2016; Sedgwick 2003). These theoretical perspectives contribute to the exploration of vulnerability and resistance within the film, expanding our understanding of these concepts beyond conventional boundaries. Butler argues that,

> Feminism is a crucial part of these networks of solidarity and resistance precisely because feminist critique destabilizes those institutions that depend on the reproduction of inequality and injustice, and it criticizes those institutions and practices that inflict violence on women and gender minorities, and, in fact, all minorities subject to police power for showing up and speaking out as they do (Butler 2016, 20).

Feminist and queer politics provide a crucial lens through which to underscore the profound interplay between "vulnerability" and its firm connection with solidarity and political action. Consequently, the film navigates the terrain of vulnerability

at both the international legal framework and the local resistance movements, exemplifying its potential to foster a network of solidarity for the LGBTIQ+ refugee community. However, in practice, establishing a ground for solidarity between different parties is not something that can be easily achieved. Even when the intention for building common political ground is expressed by activist communities, putting this intention into practice and keeping channels open between the parties can be challenging due to the different priorities and experiences of each group. Not surprisingly, the film crew mention different responses between European and Turkish audiences.

When examining the initial audience reactions during the first screenings, Çalışır straightforwardly compares the differing responses. These contrasting reactions still reflect the absence of migration and refugee rights as focal points within feminist and queer politics in Turkey, thereby raising critical questions about the existing motivation and capacity to stand in solidarity with queer migrants. Consequently, viewing *Mr. Gay Syria* as a valuable tool for engaging in discussions on feminist+ solidarity in Turkey also prompts us to reflect on ways of enhancing inclusivity within the feminist movement. In this regard, a deeper understanding of the concept of "solidarity" within the feminist+ framework necessitates an exploration of its fundamental meaning. Drawing insights from the comments of Cynthia Enloe, "solidarity" emerges as a process that requires the establishment of trust between unfamiliar corners within patriarchal heteronormative contexts (Altınay et al. 2022). In these unfamiliar corners, Mert Koçak draws attention to the presence of homonationalist tendencies within the feminist movement in Turkey which emerges as a barrier to solidarity (Koçak 2020; Puar 2018). However, Koçak also reminds us, there have been efforts made, particularly in engaging with Arabic-speaking migrants in Turkey. As exemplified in the documentary, activities such as the Tea and Talk sessions organized by SPoD (Sosyal Politika, Cinsiyet Kimliği ve Cinsel Yönelim Çalışmaları Derneği) serve as prominent examples of these initiatives. These Sunday Talks, initially known as "Coming Out Sessions," started in 2016. These meetings happened in person at a specific place. Moderated by trained peer facilitators, they were free and open to all those who were interested in participating. Yet, after the pandemic outbreak in 2020, meetings were moved to online platforms, to gradually fade out.

In this regard, it is crucial to mention the impact of funding and grants on activism practices in the field. The majority of sponsors provide grants for specific areas, which can be analyzed as a "funding market" with its own dynamics. Consequently, civil society organizations need to respond to sponsor calls to obtain financial support for their events. The influence of neoliberal governmentality on local LGBTIQ+

rights organizations is manifested through the marketization of activism, characterized by competition for funding and the measurement of activist efficiency, or the retreat and erosion of state presence in civil spheres leading to the individualization of structural issues such as mass unemployment, rising inequality, and, in our case, the violation of LGBTIQ+ and migrant-refugee rights(Arik et al. 2022). This structure can be incorporated with different tendencies in civil society funding under the influence of major social events such as pandemics, or migration.

Moving forward, it becomes imperative to examine the role of civil society in the political sphere, as it brings forth various dynamics depending on its transnational and local origins. A Gramscian critique on the relationship between civil society and the state reminds us that these entities are neither separate nor autonomous, but rather co-constructed (Arik et al. 2022). In light of the feminist critique regarding the influence of the neoliberal market system on the agendas of NGOs, it is essential to delve into the intersection of gender and migration within transnational civil society activism. Within this context, a documentary such as *Mr. Gay Syria*, viewed through both a humanitarian and strategic lens, serves as a powerful example of the interaction of artworks within the political realm.

One of the most repeated arguments for the lack of refugee-inclusive solidarity practices in the queer scene is explained by the transformation - increase of hate speech and banalization of discrimination over the last years.[23] In this vein, Turkish activists argued how it became more challenging to establish foregrounds for a solidarity network between refugees and Turkish citizens. Sevgi's deliberations along these lines reflect the queer movement's growing struggle since the film was released,

> During the time that the film was made, I think there was a level of connection with Syrian queers and Turkish queers. But recently it lost...I think that, you know anti-LGBTI+ discourse increased in Turkey. And we don't have the capacity to directly impact politics and shape politics, here in Turkey. We are just trying to survive. I think this survival mode is very harmful to solidarity because it makes you selfish. (Sevgi, he/him, 28)

LGBTIQ+ individuals in Turkey, who are continuously targeted by the government, are growing increasingly concerned about their ability to construct a future in the country. This state of affairs is described by Sevgi as a survival mechanism, which simultaneously hampers solidarity. Sevgi's depiction of the ambiguities faced by the

---

[23]Report available at: https://kaosgldernegi.org/images/library/lgbti-larin-i-nsan-haklari-raporu-2022.pdf

Turkish queer community, characterized by a "survival" mentality, creates a sense of distance between different communities. Based on these observations, I argue that while it is relatively easier to theorize about feminist+ solidarity in times of struggle, putting it into practice becomes complex due to the unequal distribution of resources and representation among diverse groups. In light of Cynthia Enloe's insights on feminist+ solidarity, it is crucial to remember that engaging in feminist solidarity efforts is not akin to entering a comfortable environment; rather, it involves a process of self-examination, deepening understanding, fostering energy, building trust, and stretching one's boundaries(Altınay et al. 2022). Hence, Sevgi's critique regarding the individualization of Turkish LGBTIQ+ activists highlights an important perspective that prompts introspection and calls for new imaginaries and possibilities for the future.

Another dimension that arises for consideration is the interplay of frictions and connections between refugee and Turkish activists in terms of comprehending each other's experiences and the intersectionality of their political subjectivities. As Turkish activists engage with the Syrian gay refugees represented in the film, they mention the significance of connecting with these stories and experiences.

> I watch the film, by thinking what would happen if I go to a country and seek asylum? And it was a chance for me to you know have a connection. It was a chance for me to find a common experience for me while watching the film. Because there are so many Turkish LGBTI+ in Germany and all over Europe who are seeking asylum at the moment. And these are our friends, and we are still in contact with them. You know, we hear their stories and experiences during this process... Of course, conflict is not the same because, Syrian people were running away from a war, and there is no war in Turkey. There are still so many differences. But yeah, it was good to think about common things, again, for me." (Sevgi, he/him, 28)

Especially in the post-28 May election period, where discourses and activities casting a shadow on Pride Month were followed with concern, the possibility of seeking asylum in Western Europe and North America has increasingly become a topic on the Turkish LGBTIQ+ community's agenda. Within this context, LGBTIQ+ activists from Turkey who have already migrated to Europe have prompted activists based in Turkey to contemplate shared experiences through the lens of queer migration phenomena. However, scholars discussing this subject have raised concerns about the risks of empathy in solidarity practices among different groups(Hemmings 2012). Clare Hemmings, for instance, suggests that approaching the experiences of different

groups solely through empathy can lead to a reductionist understanding, as feminist subjectivities are entangled with diverse social positions and the ontological and epistemological recognition of the impossibility of categories fully encompassing inclusive experiences(Hemmings 2012). Instead, Janet Borgerson's notion of "bearing witness," proposed by Hemmings, offers an alternative perspective that emphasizes an intersubjective approach to acknowledging power inequalities and resisting the impulse to hastily resolve them(Borgerson 2007; Hemmings 2012). In this regard, *Mr. Gay Syria* provides Turkish LGBTIQ+ activists with an opportunity to bear witness to the stories of the Syrian gay community.

3.3 Reflecting on Feminist "Affective Solidarity" Through the Medium of Film

Hemmings' critique of empathy is further developed in her theoretical framework of "feminist affective solidarity" (Hemmings 2012). Reflecting on the frictions between Turkish and Syrian queer communities and drawing from my personal engagement with politics, I have come to realize that emotions have played a significant role in driving my involvement in feminist politics. For instance, Audre Lorde's reflections on the transformative power of anger in combating racism has allowed me to explore the anger that has motivated my political pursuits. Recognizing the influence of affect in both my academic and political endeavors have also made apparent the distinction between my sense of self and the social possibilities available to me. As Hemmings argues, this gap with "affective dissonance" notion, the feminist and queer identities' connection with *Mr. Gay Syria*'s story - either audience of the film or the researcher- incorporates a formulation of the desire to "build a connection to others and desire for transformation not rooted in identity, yet thoroughly cognizant of power and privilege" (Hemmings 2012). Consequently, the film's focus on the everyday lives of the Syrian gay community provides us with a solid ground on which solidarity can be imagined. Hemmings argues, by drawing insights from seminal feminist works such as notion of "situated knowledges" by Haraway (2020), intersectional positionality of the individuals produce different and more reliable knowledge due to their experiences of inequality, which necessitates understanding dominant frames of legitimation for survival and generates local knowledge for the same reason(Hemmings 2012). By drawing insights from Hemmings's analysis of affective accounts of feminist identity, we can discern that affective solidarity operates beyond notions of identity or belonging (ibid.). During the focus group discussion, one of the initial inquiries pertained to the participants' emotional reactions after

viewing the film. Their responses encompassed a mixture of bitterness and joy, reflecting the complex range of emotions evoked by the film,

> I feel very bad about myself because I'm not following what's going on with Syrian LGBTI+ in Turkey. And sometimes I feel like I know about the Turkish LGBTI+ community more than I know about Syrians. So, like this was the first feeling, like bad and the movie was really sad. It's very sad. And I start thinking about what I can do very soon about this. I started thinking that maybe I can write an article because I am a journalist. So, I thought maybe I should do a piece about this. I should go make interviews with people. (Aman, she/her, 30)

The initial response from Aman reflects a sense of sadness mixed with guilt, as she acknowledges her lack of knowledge about the Syrian LGBTIQ+ community in Turkey, despite her connections with Turkish LGBTIQ+ individuals. This raises questions about visibility and its role in shaping our analytical praxis. Aman's emotional state, which motivates her to take action for her community in Istanbul, prompts us to further contemplate the affective impact of the film. Hemmings's conceptual framework on affective solidarity expands beyond identity or group characteristics, encompassing a broader range of affects such as rage, frustration, and the desire for connection, all essential for sustainable feminist politics of transformation (Hemmings 2012). Aman's affective response to the film, as we interpret it through Hemmings's conceptualization, serves as a poignant catalyst that resonates with her sense of belonging to the community. In addition to feelings of sadness and guilt, some participants also expressed a sense of empowerment in response to the film,

> When I watched the movie actually, I felt like in a positive way despite of the all of attacks they continue. They were going on in living, and they were making bigger their lives and loves. So, I thought that life itself, how can I say, the existence itself is turned into resistance in a way. So, I thought about the same sentence that my despair turns into my courage. So, I think that one of the bases to build resistance is to build change. Yeah, we have despair on everything (Ahmed, he/him, 31)

In Chapter 2, I had analyzed Ahmed's mention of despair transforming into courage. When we consider the affective dimensions of this situation, it becomes evident how Ahmed's constant struggle, intertwined with their personal identity, aligns with their daily experiences. To comprehend Ahmed's connection with Husein's words

and reflect on their political identity, it is essential to read them in conjunction. Ahmed's engagement with the film reveals the political positioning of Syrian gays in Turkey, characterized by resilience and bravery, rooted in their daily struggles and personal encounters. Ahmed's active participation in left-wing circles in Turkey, particularly in political organizing efforts for the rights of working-class Syrians, reflects a similar duality of vulnerability and resistance. Aligning with the framework established earlier in our exploration of queer studies, it is plausible to interpret Ahmed's state of being as queer beyond mere sexuality and gender, echoing the ideas put forth by Puar and Mikdashi on queer theory and the perpetual state of war (Mikdashi and Puar 2016). Hence, beyond the wounds inflicted by feminist and queer experiences, the very nature of war itself becomes a source of feminist affective connection and encouragement for individuals to take political action. Furthermore, in revisiting the reflections on feminist+ solidarity, the queer resistance of the Syrian refugee community in Turkey lays out an inclusive platform that brings together queer, trans*, antiracist, anti-authoritarian, and anti-austerity struggles. This convergence of marginalized subjects' experiences provides a foundation of reliability, as Hemmings emphasizes when contrasting them with the privileged positions within the patriarchal society (Hemmings 2012). Another crucial aspect to contemplate in light of Ahmed's reflections is the film's impact on his inclination to resist and drive for change. By drawing insights from Georgis' notion of the "better story," once again we can posit that the film also operates as a catalyst for resistance, fostering the aspiration for transformative action. The "better stories" serve as wellsprings that assist Ahmed in envisioning alternative narratives, offering possibilities that enable him to imagine a transformative shift.

3.4 Frictions Between Communities

One of the prominent themes that emerged from the focus group discussions between Syrian and Turkish activists was looking at the time we spent together in Turkey for over a decade. Through these conversations, we delved into the shared experiences, perspectives, and divergences between the two communities. Notably, one of the initial points of divergence that was raised pertained to religion. Consequently, I believe that exploring the manners in which the Turkish and Syrian queer communities engage with Islam, particularly by referencing certain symbols portrayed in the film, touches upon a significant aspect in terms of fostering stronger solidarity networks. The film presents instances where the Syrian gay community's relationship with Islam is referenced, such as phrases like "May Allah help you," "Why did

Allah create him like this?" and engaging in Turkish coffee fortune-telling rituals with the invocation of "Bismillah". In this context, the comments made by Turkish activist Sevgi draws attention to the contrasting approaches to Islam between the two communities.

> For example, religion was a very important topic for Syrian queers. Also, there are so many Muslim queers in Turkey, but I realized that LGBTI moment here does not talk about and discuss religion so much. And you know it was something, I learned from these meetings (means tea and talk).[24] (Sevgi, he/him, 28)

In this regard, he provides significant insights into the disparities between the queer community and Turkish refugees in their relationship with religion. Examining this situation entails considering various contexts, beginning with acknowledging the cultural differences in the approaches of Syrian and Turkish societies toward the religion of Islam on a broader scale. It is challenging to assert that queers in Turkey adopt an identity strategy within the framework of a group that can be characterized as more socially democratic, Ataturkist, and leftist. Instead, we can identify a political sphere that encompasses queers within the Kurdish movement and the more left (Çetin 2016). In the recent 2023 general election, the majority of parliamentarians who endorsed the declaration drafted by SPOD on the law for the protection of LGBTIQ+ rights belonged to parties representing left ideologies[25]. Hence, it can be argued that the queer agenda, predominantly finding resonance within leftist organizations, diverges drastically from an Islamic standpoint, unlike conservative right-wing voters who hold opposing views. Additionally, numerous interpretations rooted in sin-based notions put forth by Islam regarding LGBTIQ+ individuals contribute to a prevailing perception that Islam and queerness are fundamentally at odds. However, it is important to highlight that over the past decade, more inclusive discussions and representations pertaining to Islam have emerged within feminist and queer organizations in Turkey.[26]

On the contrary, the limited availability of detailed information on queer politics in Syria poses significant challenges when attempting sociological analyses of various groups' perspectives on queer identity in the public sphere. Nevertheless, it remains my contention that in a society where homosexuality is criminalized and

---

[24]Referring to previous meetings that he participated through his organization that he is engaged with.

[25]https://kaosgl.org/haber/lgbti-haklari-sozlesmesi-ni-imzalayan-hangi-adaylar-meclise-girecek

[26]e.g Havle Kadın Derneği https://www.havlekadin.com/

Islam holds significant influence over social life, the boundaries between queerness and Islam encompass more transitional spaces compared to a secular state such as Turkey. Furthermore, I believe that conducting a post-colonial feminist critique of this differentiation will shed light on essential aspects related to this distinction.

One way to explore the experiences of Muslim queers is by examining the historical imprints within the context of the early years of the Turkish Republic and its efforts towards "modernization" and secularism. In its pursuit of establishing a homogenous society with a Western influence, the Turkish Republic sought to sever cultural and social ties with the Middle East, influenced by the heavy legacy of the Ottoman Empire. The prevalent perception associating concepts like "backwardness" with Middle Eastern culture, commonly equated with "Arabs" in public discourse, highlights the persistence of a Euro-centric discourse of modernization within certain segments of society (Akturk 2010). While these preconceptions cannot be solely attributed to the early modernization agenda of the Republic, it is important to highlight their impact on the current perception of Syrian migrants and queer Muslims. Aligning with criticisms directed towards refugee and human rights regimes that rely on "essentialist and timeless notions of identity that travel in the teleological time of progress," it is plausible to incorporate lack of international and local refugee regimes lack to point out intersectional positionalities (Crenshaw 2013; Shakhsari 2014).

Moving forward, it is pertinent to explore how the intersectional identities of Syrian LGBTIQ+ refugees are positioned amidst the lingering remnants of "civilization" discourse in Turkey, which intersects with colonial claims in the Middle East region. Particularly when interpreting the prevailing understandings of nationalism in Turkey along the lines of Islam-oriented and positivist ideologies, we observe a heightened expression of hate speech against Arabs, particularly Syrians, within Atatürkist, center-right communities with the decline of the Muslim Brotherhood phenomenon. In this context, it can be asserted that the queer and feminist movements, with their close affiliations to both the Kurdish and leftist movements, have not aligned themselves with these racist approaches in the political sphere. However, it is important to acknowledge that the extent of collaboration with refugee LGBTIQ+s in Turkey, the host of the largest refugee population globally, has not been sufficiently deliberated within the movement. In the year 2023, growing hate-speech against Syrian migrants following the election and in the aftermath of the February earthquake, the queer movement in Turkey exemplified one of the significant and crucial acts of solidarity with migrants. Therefore, it can be stated that the queer movement not only serves as a remarkable embodiment of solidarity for the future but has also increasingly brought this issue to the forefront of its politics in recent

times.

Nevertheless, revisiting Sevgi's statements sheds light on a recurring argument that highlights the insufficiency of the movement in Turkey on its own and the potential absence of immediate struggle in the development of inclusive policies. This disconnection becomes particularly evident when considering cultural variations, such as those related to religious values and historical imprints. In light of this, I contend that the domains of queer politics in Turkey must undertake significant efforts to combat Islamophobia and effectively address the intersectionality of Muslim queers alongside diverse ethnic queer identities.

During the FGD, another line of conflict that emerged was class-based differentiation. The barriers between communities were explained through economic factors, which materialize the impact of refugees' precarious position within the market on their socialization practices. Additionally, the language barrier was briefly mentioned during the discussion. It is indeed important to consider the articulation of language barrier and economic parameters in the case of Syrian gay refugees. Most of the time, the common language for communication between the parties is English, yet proficiency in English is often associated with a certain level of social, economic, and cultural capital (Bourdieu 1984). Therefore, the lines of differentiation between the two communities can be further explored in separate research, using Bourdieu's "distinction" theory to understand the different "habitus" between Syrian LGBTIQ+ refugees and Turkish LGBTIQ+s.

3.5 Acts of Solidarity in the Midst of Crisis

On the 20th of June, World Refugee Day coincides with Pride Month each year, and in 2023 we witnessed heightened visibility of declarations on refugee rights and inclusive events for queer refugees, accompanied by Arabic and Persian translations. These developments shed light on the intersectionality of the feminist movement and the efforts for political engagement in Turkey. Consequently, these conversations bring forth a critical approach toward the rich tapestry of the feminist queer movement in Turkey. Within this context, it becomes imperative to pose the question, "Who are we?" in relation to Turkey's feminist movement.

Acknowledging the cultural and historical diversions of Turkey's feminist movement, it is crucial to trace its trajectory, epitomized by the widely embraced slogan "personal is political." Over time, this movement underwent a significant transformation

through its entanglement with international politics. Influenced heavily by the neoliberal agenda, both feminist and queer politics in Turkey were simultaneously challenged and compelled to align themselves with neoliberal frameworks (Duggan 2002; Savcı 2020). For a considerable period, Turkish and Kurdish women constituted the primary driving forces of the feminist movement, with the emergence of LGBTIQ+ politics gaining traction within the movement around the 2000s. Concurrently, Istanbul has become a magnet for international migration, attracting individuals from sub-Saharan Africa, Iraq, Iran, and more recently, Syria and Afghanistan. However, it is arguable that feminist politics in Turkey responded relatively late to the issue of migration, despite the significant numbers involved. Presently, we can observe a much more pronounced focus on migrant and refugee inclusivity, particularly within the LGBTIQ+ rights movement in Turkey.

During the FGD, participant Feza, an activist from Turkey, drew attention to an initiative known as the Lubunya Deprem Dayanışması (Queer Earthquake Solidarity). This initiative emerged in the aftermath of the Syria-Turkey Earthquake disaster on February 2023. It is noteworthy that, based on the available information, feminist and queer associations stood out as the only political groups providing aid specifically tailored to LGBTIQ+ refugees. The act of extending support and assistance to LGBTIQ+ individuals within the context of a humanitarian crisis is a significant development. While broader humanitarian efforts may overlook the specific needs and challenges faced by LGBTIQ+ refugees, feminist and queer associations have recognized and addressed these issues. Their involvement in providing aid signifies an intersectional approach that acknowledges the vulnerabilities and unique circumstances experienced by LGBTIQ+ individuals within the refugee population. By highlighting the role played by feminist and queer associations in responding to the needs of LGBTIQ+ refugees in the wake of the Syria-Turkey Earthquake disaster, Feza emphasizes the importance of recognizing and supporting the diverse dimensions of activism within the Turkish feminist movement. This serves as a testament to the movement's commitment to inclusivity and solidarity and its ability to adapt and respond to the evolving challenges for different intersectional positionalities of "marginalized" communities face.

> . . . after the earthquake, LGBTIs formed a Solidarity Group and this group acted to support migrants first. They created urgent support mechanisms for migrants living in the earthquake regions. And this was important. As far as I can see the most inclusive social and political movements are the feminist movement and LGBTI+ movements in Turkey in relation to migrant issues. Especially after the election, we

couldn't see any other social and political groups will support migrants or who have discourses. In line with migrant questions, it was important to see that development after the earthquake (Feza, they/them, 35)

Lubunya Deprem Dayanışması (Queer Earthquake Solidarity) initiative was primarily motivated by the imperative to prioritize the most vulnerable groups within the earthquake-affected region, namely sex workers, refugees, and LGBTIQ+ individuals. This solidarity network swiftly formed in response to the earthquake disasters, bringing together human and animal rights activists, and serving as an exemplary demonstration of rapid mobilization on the ground, coupled with effective actions. The ongoing efforts of this initiative have been sustained through the collaborative endeavors of numerous LGBTIQ+ and feminist organizations.[27]

The transnational aid initiatives targeting LGBTIQ+ refugees in the earthquake zone are complemented by the active involvement of local feminist and LGBTIQ+ associations, who operate within their own capacities to respond to this urgent crisis. This multi-faceted response can be understood as an outcome of the extended capabilities of vulnerable groups in dealing with crises. It is important to note that feminist and queer politics have long been engaged in struggles against censorship, bans, and detentions. In light of these adversities, it is plausible to argue that our capacity to resist hegemonic regimes has evolved and strengthened over time. The emergence and effectiveness of the Lubunya Deprem Dayanışması initiative underscore the interconnectedness between different social justice movements, as well as the resilience and adaptability of marginalized communities. This initiative serves as a testament to the transformative power of collective action and highlights the potential for change even in the face of oppressive regimes and challenging circumstances.

Ways of foresting solidarity during difficult times were discussed by activists in different shades. Syrian activist Mizar who has been living in Turkey for 7.5 years now, gave examples of how we can act in solidarity through her experience,

Be creative in the solidarity. I mean, we, that's what I miss, like being creative and spreading love... It's not dangerous in Turkey. No one will arrest you if you go and knock on the door of Syrians. In Syria it was... If you go and support IDP[28], someone who's coming from another city that was affected by war. You can be arrested or killed if you just go

---

[27]According the scanning LGBTIQ+ NGOs decelerations and actions after the earthquake

[28]IDP: Internally displaced people

give them bread. We were doing it. Under the risk of being arrested and killed. We would go and put flowers on their doors. We would go give them love. We would say, you're not alone. . . I mean like in the high-risk, we were acting in solidarity with people who are scared in their rooms. (Mizar, she/her, 33)

Mizar highlights the importance of small acts of kindness and solidarity within the refugee community, emphasizing that although being LGBTIQ+ or a refugee is not currently criminalized in Turkey, these gestures can still make a significant difference. Drawing from her experiences in Syria, Mizar discusses the solidarity practices she engaged in with internally displaced people. By comparing the situation in Turkey to that in Syria, Mizar underlines the reluctance of individuals in Turkey to publicly associate themselves with migrants, despite the absence of criminalization. This distinction between the communities also reflects broader societal differences between Syria and Turkey. In a context where engaging in acts of solidarity can be dangerous, Mizar's actions challenge the dominant narrative of fear and hostility. By choosing to support IDPs and show them love and compassion, she actively works towards constructing a solidarity with care, and compassion. Mizar's acts of placing flowers on their doors and offering reassurance convey a message that they are not alone and that there are people who care about their well-being. What would be similar acts of kindness and everyday politics that would expand feminist+ solidarity with refugees? What inspirations are offered by the film *Mr. Gay Syria* regarding the future of such solidarity in Turkey and beyond? I reflect on these questions in the below section.

3.6 Whose story is *Mr. Gay Syria*?

To better comprehend the underlying factors that shape solidarity within the feminist and queer movement in Turkey, it becomes crucial to explore the question of what forms the basis for such solidarity. Jodi Dean's work, published in the late 1990s, offers insights into feminist solidarity through a materialist lens. Contrasting with the affect theory framework previously introduced in our analysis, she introduces the concept of "reflective solidarity" (Dean 1998). According to Dean, reflective solidarity is rooted in the notion that feminist solidarity must encompass two fundamental aspects: opposition to those who seek to exclude or oppress others and the mutual recognition of each other's specificity (ibid.). She contends that acknowledging our individual uniqueness and distinctiveness leads us to rely on others for

acknowledgment and connection, thereby enabling us to appreciate the significance of our interpersonal relationships in pursuing shared political goals (ibid, 6).

Dean's perspective on reflective solidarity provides a theoretical framework for understanding the dynamics of solidarity within the feminist queer movement in Turkey. By recognizing the importance of mutual recognition and acknowledging the specificities of individuals, this form of solidarity facilitates collaborative efforts towards common objectives, transcending the limitations imposed by individual identities. In examining the frictions within the feminist queer movement in Turkey, an exploration of the grounds on which solidarity is built is essential. Dean's concept of reflective solidarity offers valuable insights into the transformative potential of recognizing and embracing our individual distinctiveness while fostering connections and alliances in pursuit of shared political goals.

Reflective solidarity is built on three constitutive tools; specificity, genealogy, and accountability. Starting with specificity, she argues our different vulnerabilities bring us together against the larger scale struggle. She relies on the alliance idea by borrowing Phelan's reflections on coalition involves relationships that extend beyond specific issues, but are continually constructed and reconstructed through ongoing engagement and interaction(Dean 1998). Genealogy, on the other hand, is acknowledging the diversity of the movement, not relying on the requirement of complete agreement in approach and interpretation. Finally, accountability is another tool for a coalition, she defines accountability as a notion of solidarity that depends on partial knowledge and perspectives that remain open for criticism and reinterpretation.

While Dean talks about reflective solidarity, she highlights a "discursive notion of accountability" which remind us of the limitation of discourse with a final vocabulary or universal language. In this context, she argues "we" as the constitutive element of solidarity cannot remain fixed, therefore "we" definition is accountable to potential members regarding the fact we might exclude another (Dean 1998). Thus, within this framework our "we" is performative where the content of it is constantly changing and evolving with every interaction. While recognizing the partiality of our perspective and myth of creating an absolute inclusion in the movement, Dean brings forward a third perspective along with "I" and "we" in reflective solidarity that she calls situated third. Adopting a third-person perspective underscores the tangible embodiment of any perspective we assume, encompassing both ourselves and our interactions. Therefore, embracing the third-person perspective becomes a means through which we demonstrate responsibility. Consequently, we direct our attention toward our relationships, employing them as a mechanism for evaluating

and assessing them. Drawing insights from Jodi Dean's concept of reflective solidarity and Mizar's example, I propose that the film *Mr. Gay Syria* serves as a relevant illustration to examine the formation of reflective solidarity within the context of the feminist and queer politics and refugees in Turkey. Analyzing the film and the discussions that arise during focus groups allows for an exploration of the diverse experiences and perspectives that contribute to the richness of the solidarity ground and the shared struggle against oppression.

In analyzing *Mr. Gay Syria*, several questions emerge regarding the composition of the "we" that arises in relation to the film. These questions revolve around the identities represented within the film itself and the individuals who constitute the audience participating in focus group discussions. Exploring the specificity, genealogy, and accountability of each individual life story in the film conveys perceptive tools to establish a strong foundation for solidarity. This examination allows us to understand the various identities and struggles that contribute to the formation of a collective "we" within the context of the film. Simultaneously, investigating the audience participating in focus group discussions sheds light on the individuals engaged in the process of meaning-making and interpretation.

As we mentioned previously, *Mr. Gay Syria* exhibits characteristics of an act of solidarity that extend beyond a mere narrative, given its joint production process involving a primarily Turkish team and the efforts to secure funding from the international arena, predominantly Western Europe and North America.[29] This collaborative production highlights the film's significance as a form of solidarity. Furthermore, the focus group discussions surrounding the film create a platform for communication and dialogue between different parties. In this regard, I propose that these discussions align with Jodi Dean's concept of the hypothetical third-person claim, where space for discourse remains perpetually open (Dean 1998). The focus group has also facilitated the exchange of ideas and perspectives, fostering a sense of shared understanding and collaboration. Some of the participants expressed the intention to show the film in their own communities and also across activist communities, to further the conversation on the potentials of collaboration and solidarity. The film's production process, with its cross-cultural and international elements, emphasizes the collaborative nature of solidarity beyond national boundaries. The involvement of diverse contributors and funding sources highlights the collective effort and shared commitment to the film's message and objectives. Additionally, the focus group discussions provided a space for engagement and interaction among participants. This setting aligns with Dean's concept of the hypothetical third-person claim, as it en-

---

[29]For detailed information about kisskissbangbang: https://www.kisskissbankbank.com/en/projects/mr-gay-syria-film

ables ongoing conversations and exchanges of viewpoints. The open and ongoing nature of the discourse allows for the exploration of different perspectives and the cultivation of a collective understanding.

During the focus group discussions, each participant was invited to contribute to the conversation articulating their unique experiences. Indeed, the uniqueness of different experiences were emphasized, alongside the interconnectedness of experiences. This reflects a form of reflective solidarity that acknowledges the differences in struggles, particularly between Turkish activists and Syrian LGBTIQ+ individuals concerning the impact of war. While both countries face the reality of an embedded patriarchal culture, participants' positions and perspectives on the film differ. We watched the documentary in the heart of Istanbul, with the film's shooting location merely a few hundred meters away. The engagement of Turkish participants with the story becomes even more significant in the spatial context of Beyoğlu, a space of importance for the feminist+ and LGBTIQ+ movement. Returning to the question of "Who are we?", beyond being a group gathered for research purposes, Turkish activists remained open to the limitations of their understanding of the stories of Husein, Mahmoud, Omar, and others. This approach does not aim to glorify "subaltern" perspectives or create "other" to consolidate alliances. Through the lens of *Mr. Gay Syria*, we were invited to turn inward (for self-reflection and critique) and to turn towards each other. We recognized our own significance, as the film not only represents a collective group but also shares the stories of individuals. These individual stories possess communicative and performative qualities that strengthen the solidarity of the feminist+ movement. It is a solidarity that is not against "them" but rather for "us" (Dean 1998).

4.   CONCLUSION

My primary objective in this thesis was to critically examine the inclusivity and intersectionality of queer and feminist politics in Turkey concerning LGBTIQ+ migrants and refugees. As I embarked on the process of reconstructing the research with a focus on *Mr. Gay Syria*, I discovered the potentials of artistic interventions for advancing new forms of connection and solidarity. Conducting research in Turkey on a "vulnerable" group, I often found myself grappling with questions about my different roles as a researcher, activist, and friend. Having been involved with various projects on and with LGBTIQ+ refugees over the past two years, I have borne witness to numerous stories. In a context where I faced challenges in defining the boundaries of emotional labor involved in volunteer work as a case investigator, the study of *Mr. Gay Syria* opened new paths of understanding and research possibilities for me. Throughout this research, my aim was to draw attention to the potentials and limitations of refugee-inclusive feminist+ solidarity in Turkey. In this regard, I questioned Turkey's "safe" third country recognition within the international migration and refugee regimes, critically analyzing it in view of the stories we bear witness to through *Mr. Gay Syria*.

This thesis analyzes the film *Mr. Gay Syria* around three conceptualizations of solidarity: affective (Hemmings 2012), reflective (Dean 1998), and intersectional (Crenshaw 2013). I argue that *Mr. Gay Syria* imagines, articulates and puts into action a "better story" (Georgis 2013*a*) of solidarity, which includes bearing witness to pain and mourning, as well as to hope and (mutual) transformation. This analysis is supported by the use of Focus Group Discussion as a methodology that has the potential to create an intersectional space for reflective and affective solidarity.

In Chapter 2, I analyzed *Mr. Gay Syria* within the current political climate, as well as through themes of vulnerability, kinship, migration, and space. These discussions illuminated the various strategies employed by Syrian gay refugees to challenge hegemonic representations on Syrian gay refugees, as well as a way out from this "safe third country". One important limitation of *Mr. Gay Syria*'s story is that it only

allows us to bear witness to the experiences of a specific group of gay refugees in Istanbul. The Syrian LGBTIQ+ community is characterized by rich diversity in terms of ethnic and religious backgrounds, as well as of gender and sexuality identifications and expressions. Furthermore, my research framework remained restricted to Syrians, while the articulation of the Iranian queer community with the feminist+ movement in Turkey, or the experiences of lesbian, bisexual, queer, and trans* migrants with different ethnic and national backgrounds, could not be explored in the context of *Mr. Gay Syria.*

Chapter 2 analyzed the ways in which affective and performative accounts presented in *Mr. Gay Syria* transcended binary structures in language, with humor emerging as a crucial tool frequently employed by Syrian gay refugees in their narratives. In addition to these layers, the concept of "resilience" emerged as a prominent theme, illustrating the capacity of Syrian gay refugees to overcome struggles while also highlighting the danger of legitimizing their exposure to oppression (Butler, Gambetti, and Sabsay 2016). Sedgwick's notion of "periperformative utterances" provided a framework for connecting the personal narratives of the characters to the collective, with attention to their local characteristics. Furthermore, personal stories revolved around vulnerability and hope, which are associated with Georgis' reflections on the genuine characteristics of queer affects in the Middle East. However, one challenge I encountered while writing this chapter was the lack of primary and secondary resources to extend the implications of these arguments from the film's story to the public sphere.

The focus of Chapter 3 was solidarity. Bringing together activists from diverse backgrounds, we explored the challenges faced in enacting solidarity with Syrian LBGTIQ+ refugees in contemporary Turkey. One prominent issue that emerged in our discussions was the question of "who are we in our different positionalities? And how can we connect with one another more?" Careful examination of the circulation of affective accounts in political action necessitates the incorporation of "reflective solidarity" as a concept, emphasizing the essential tools for building a coalition (Dean 1998; Hemmings 2012). Additionally, we focused on the reflections of activists regarding the film and the intersectionality (Crenshaw 2013) and inclusivity of feminist politics in Turkey.

One notable aspect of our analysis was the discouragement imposed by the political atmosphere, which hindered activists from engaging in solidarity, while simultaneously fueling their resistance by embracing vulnerability (Butler, Gambetti, and Sabsay 2016). Prior to conducting fieldwork, my reflections on the Syrian and Turkish queer communities viewed them as separate entities. However, after cre-

ating a space for collective reflection, I realized that it was crucial to explore the common grounds in order to build solidarities in intersectional settings. Although different legal statuses determine various factors in the lives of queer individuals, insights gained from discussions on "reflective" and "affective" solidarity led me to the understanding that the coalition against hetero- and cis-normative patriarchal structures is primarily rooted in connecting with others and maintaining a critical stance during these encounters. My desire to highlight the lack of inclusivity in feminist politics in Turkey over the past decade failed to sufficiently reflect on the necessary tools for building such feminist+ solidarity. My pre-fieldwork reflections on solidarity were unsettled after the focus group discussion, as they were deemed too naïve to account for the complexity of solidarity, which can only be achieved through a mutual understanding of different perspectives. Nevertheless, during the discussions, I realized that before understanding what we need most in feminist+ politics in the Turkish context, is to foster encounters among different groups. Thus, by acknowledging our differences and making efforts to create a collective "we" out of diverse individuals, we can begin to build solidarity. While remaining mindful of the hegemonic structures that LGBTIQ+ refugees contend with, I have learned that we should prioritize taking care of each other rather than focusing solely on individual well-being. I consider the inclusivity of the movement not merely as a statement against hegemonic accounts but as a source of strength for envisioning a better future, or as Georgis puts it, for crafting "a better story" (Georgis 2013*a*).

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Abu-Lughod, Lila. 1989. *Veiled Sentiments: Honor and Poetry in a Bedouin Society.* Berkeley: University of California Press.

Akturk, Ahmet Serdar. 2010. "Arabs in Kemalist Turkish Historiography." *Middle Eastern Studies* 46(5): 633–653.

Alonso, Ana Maria, and Maria Teresa Koreck. 1989. "Silences:"Hispanics," AIDS, and sexual practices." *differences* 1(1): 101–124.

Altınay, Ayşe Gül, Andrea Pető, Arlene Voski Avakian, Oksana Dutchak, Cynthia Enloe, Mert Koçak, María López Belloso, and Madeleine Kennedy-Macfoy. 2022. "Open forum: feminist+ solidarity." *European Journal of Women's Studies* 29(4): 618–635.

Altman, Dennis, Diane Richardson, and Steven Seidman. 2002. "Globalization and the international gay/lesbian movement." *Handbook of lesbian and gay studies* pp. 415–425.

Altınay, Ayse Gül, and Andrea Peto. 2022. "Feminist plus solidarity as transformative politics Introduction.".

Anthias, Floya. 2006. "Belongings in a globalising and unequal world: Rethinking translocations." *The situated politics of belonging* 17: 31.

Antonsich, Marco. 2010. "Searching for belonging–an analytical framework." *Geography compass* 4(6): 644–659.

Arik, Hülya, Selin Çağatay, Mia Liinason, and Olga Sasunkevich. 2022. "Unsettling the political: conceptualizing the political in feminist and LGBTI+ activism across Russia, the Scandinavian countries, and Turkey." *International Feminist Journal of Politics* pp. 1–24.

Berlant, Lauren. 2007. "Slow death (sovereignty, obesity, lateral agency)." *Critical inquiry* 33(4): 754–780.

Berlant, Lauren. 2020. *Cruel optimism.* Duke University Press.

Borgerson, Janet L. 2007. "On the harmony of business ethics and feminist ethics." *Business and Society Review* 112(4).

Bourdieu, P. 1984. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP).*

Briggs, Jean L. 1970. *Never in anger: Portrait of an Eskimo family.* Vol. 12 Harvard University Press.

Butler, Judith. 1999. "Revisiting bodies and pleasures." *Theory, culture & society* 16(2): 11–20.

Butler, Judith. 2016. *Frames of war: When is life grievable?* Verso Books.

Butler, Judith, Zeynep Gambetti, and Leticia Sabsay. 2016. *Vulnerability in resistance.* Duke University Press.

Çakırlar, Cüneyt. 2017. "Transnational pride, global closets and regional formations of screen activism: Documentary LGBTQ narratives from Turkey." *Critical Arts* 31(2): 44–60.

Çalışkan, Dilara. 2019. "Queer postmemory." *European Journal of Women's Studies* 26(3): 261–273.

Çetin, Zülfukar. 2016. *The Dynamics of the Queer Movement in Turkey Before and During the Conservative AKP Government: Working Paper, Research Group EU/Europe 2016/01, January 2016, SWP Berlin.* SWP Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik.

Crenshaw, Kimberlé. 2013. *Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory and antiracist politics.* Routledge.

Culcasi, Karen. 2019. ""We are women and men now": Intimate spaces and coping labour for Syrian women refugees in Jordan." *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 44(3): 463–478.

Danış, Didem. 2016. "Türk göç politikasında yeni bir devir: Bir dış politika enstrümanı olarak Suriyeli mülteciler." *Saha Dergisi* 2(1): 6–10.

Dean, Jodi. 1998. "Feminist solidarity, reflective solidarity: Theorizing connections after identity politics." *Women & Politics* 18(4): 1–26.

Delice, Serkan. 2010. "Friendship, sociability, and masculinity in the Ottoman Empire: An essay confronting the ghosts of historicism." *New Perspectives on Turkey* 42: 103–125.

Dinshaw, Carolyn, Lee Edelman, Roderick A Ferguson, Carla Freccero, Elizabeth Freeman, Judith Halberstam, Annamarie Jagose, Christopher S Nealon, and Tan Hoang Nguyen. 2007. "Theorizing queer temporalities: A roundtable discussion." *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 13(2): 177–195.

Duggan, Lisa. 2002. "The new homonormativity: The sexual politics of neoliberalism." *Materializing democracy: Toward a revitalized cultural politics* 10: 175–194.

Duyvendak, Jan. 2011. *The politics of home: Belonging and nostalgia in Europe and the United States.* Springer.

Ehrkamp, Patricia, and Helga Leitner. 2006. "Rethinking immigration and citizenship: new spaces of migrant transnationalism and belonging.".

Eide, Elisabeth. 2016. "Strategic essentialism." *The Wiley Blackwell encyclopedia of gender and sexuality studies* pp. 2278–2280.

Freedman, Jane, Zeynep Kivilcim, and Nurcan Özgür Baklacıoğlu. 2017. *A gendered approach to the Syrian refugee crisis.* Taylor & Francis.

Gammeltoft-Hansen, Thomas, and James C Hathaway. 2014. "Non-refoulement in a World of Cooperative Deterrence." *Colum. J. Transnat'l L.* 53: 235.

Georgis, Dina. 2013*a*. *The better story: Queer affects from the Middle East.* Suny Press.

Georgis, Dina. 2013*b*. "Thinking past pride: Queer arab shame in Bareed Mista3jil." *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 45(2): 233–251.

Georgis, Dina. 2020. "Play and the affective space of hope in Hani Abu-Assad's The Idol." *Emotion, Space and Society* 37: 100738.

Halberstam, J.J., and J. Halberstam. 2005. *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives.* Sexual Cultures NYU Press.

Haraway, Donna. 2020. "Situated knowledges: The science question in feminism and the privilege of partial perspective." In *Feminist theory reader.* Routledge pp. 303–310.

Hemmings, Clare. 2012. "Affective solidarity: Feminist reflexivity and political transformation." *Feminist theory* 13(2): 147–161.

Hooper, Louise. 2019. *Gender-based asylum claims and non-refoulement: Articles 60 and 61 of the Istanbul Convention.* Council of Europe.

Huizinga, Rik P, and Bettina Van Hoven. 2018. "Everyday geographies of belonging: Syrian refugee experiences in the Northern Netherlands." *Geoforum* 96: 309–317.

Kara, Hayriye, and Damla Çalık. 2016. "" Tekin Olmayı" Beklerken: LGBTİ Mültecilerin Ara Durağı.".

Karadağ, Sibel, and İlker Bahar. N.d. "ENDING UP IN A CUL-DE-SAC?: CRITICAL JUNCTURES IN THE EU-TURKEY "DEAL" ON ITS SIXTH ANNIVERSARY." . Forthcoming.

Kaytaz, Esra Stephanie. 2016. "Afghan journeys to Turkey: narratives of immobility, travel and transformation." *Geopolitics* 21(2): 284–302.

Kepenek, Evrim. 2023. "Seçim yarışında nefret yayılıyor, LGBTİ+ dernekleri uyardı: Suç işliyorsunuz.".

Koca, Burcu Toğral. 2016. "Syrian refugees in Turkey: from "guests" to "enemies"?" *New perspectives on Turkey* 54: 55–75.

Koçak, Mert. 2020. "Who is "queerer" and deserves resettlement?: Queer asylum seekers and their deservingness of refugee status in Turkey." *Middle East Critique* 29(1): 29–46.

Kuru, Selim S. 2007. "Sex in the Text: Deli Birader's Dâfi 'ü'l-gumûm ve Râfi 'ü'l-humûm and the Ottoman Literary Canon." *Middle Eastern Literatures* 10(2): 157–174.

Luibhéid, Eithne. 2002. *Entry denied: Controlling sexuality at the border.* U of Minnesota Press.

Luibhéid, Eithne. 2008. "Queer/migration: An unruly body of scholarship." *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 14(2): 169–190.

Lutz, Catherine A. 2011. *Unnatural emotions: Everyday sentiments on a Micronesian atoll and their challenge to Western theory.* University of Chicago Press.

Lüleci-Sula, Çağla, Sula Ismail Erkam. 2021. "Migration Management in Turkey: Discourse and Practice." *Uluslararası İlişkiler Dergisi* 18(72): 1–17.

Malkki, Liisa H. 1995. "Refugees and exile: From" refugee studies" to the national order of things." *Annual review of anthropology* 24(1): 495–523.

Manalansan IV, Martin F. 2014. "The "stuff" of archives: Mess, migration, and queer lives." *Radical History Review* 2014(120): 94–107.

Mikdashi, Maya, and Jasbir K Puar. 2016. "Queer theory and permanent war." *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 22(2): 215–222.

Muñoz, José Esteban. 2019. "Cruising utopia." In *Cruising Utopia, 10th Anniversary Edition.* New York University Press.

Myers, Fred R. 1991. *Pintupi country, Pintupi self: sentiment, place, and politics among Western Desert Aborigines.* Univ of California Press.

Najmabadi, Afsaneh. 2006. "Beyond the Americas: are gender and sexuality useful categories of analysis?" *Journal of Women's History* 18(1): 11–21.

Parla, Ayse. 2019. *Precarious hope: Migration and the limits of belonging in Turkey.* Stanford University Press.

Puar, Jasbir K. 2018. *Terrorist assemblages: Homonationalism in queer times.* Duke University Press.

Saleh, Fadi. 2020. "Queer/humanitarian visibility: The emergence of the figure of the suffering Syrian gay refugee." *Middle East Critique* 29(1): 47–67.

Saraçoğlu, Cenk, and Danièle Bélanger. 2021. "Governance through discipline in the neighbourhood: Syrian refugees and Turkish citizens in urban life." *The Canadian Geographer/Le Géographe Canadien* 65(4): 463–475.

Sarı, Elif. 2021. "Lesbian refugees in transit: The making of authenticity and legitimacy in Turkey." In *Lives That Resist Telling.* Routledge pp. 84–102.

Savcı, Evren. 2020. *Queer in translation: Sexual politics under neoliberal Islam.* Duke University Press.

Schneider, Hanna. 2021. "Implementing the refugee resettlement process: Diverging objectives, interdependencies and power relations." *Frontiers in Political Science* 3: 45.

Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. 2003. *Touching feeling: Affect, pedagogy, performativity.* Duke University Press.

Sert, Deniz Ş, and Didem Danış. 2021. "Framing Syrians in Turkey: State control and no crisis discourse." *International Migration* 59(1): 197–214.

Shakhsari, Sima. 2014. "The queer time of death: Temporality, geopolitics, and refugee rights." *Sexualities* 17(8): 998–1015.

Singh, Bhrigupati. 2011. "Agonistic intimacy and moral aspiration in popular Hinduism: A study in the political theology of the neighbor." *American Ethnologist* 38(3): 430–450.

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. 1996. *The spivak reader: selected works of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak.* Psychology Press.

Ticktin, Miriam. 2014. "Transnational humanitarianism." *Annual Review of Anthropology* 43: 273–289.

Toprak, Ayşe. 2018. "Making Mr. Gay Syria in Istanbul." *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* 14(2): 242–245.

Wilkinson, Sue. 1998. "Focus group methodology: a review." *International journal of social research methodology* 1(3): 181–203.

Yuval-Davis, Nira. 2006. "Belonging and the politics of belonging." *Patterns of prejudice* 40(3): 197–214.