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Mirka ve Amerikan Rapsodisi Filmlerinin Etnisite Teorileri Üzerinden Karşılaştırmalı Analizi

## Female Identity in Electroacoustic Music: Finding a New Way for Existence

### Abstract

Electroacoustic music not only changed the ways of expression, performance practice, education, and the musical behaviour of the New Music in general, but also triggered a series of new discourses and opportunities for some of the 'other' members of the social system: Once in a bare male-domination, the idea of the musical composition now happened to be subject of a new attitude – due to its new manners, gesti, politics and *instruments* in a broad sense. Increasing number of women composers work now in the realms of electroacoustic music – almost never neglecting or overshadowing their female identity. New ways of expression help to ground a new public, as well. Electroacoustic music serves, almost as a 'survival-guide', for a young generation of women – musicians unwilling to cope with discriminating, narrow-minded, traditionalist issues and institutions. Methodologically a descriptive, historical context of the topic and its basic debates will be delivered. With the example of electroacoustic music, changing the common tools and methods, affecting a partial transformation in a social system, is investigated.

## 'Mirka' & 'an American Rhapsody': A Comparative Analysis of Two Films Through Ethnicity Theories

Arş. Gör. Şakir Dinçşahin\*

### 1. Introduction

The prevalence of ethnic conflicts throughout the world highlights the significance of ethnic issues and reveals the invalidity of the idea that all differences would be alleviated as a result of modernization. This world wide existence of ethnic conflicts has increasingly raised the interest of social and political scientists who attempted to tackle the issue of ethnicity and ethnic conflict, basing their studies on two distinct approaches, primordialism, and circumstantialism. In this paper, these two approaches will be exemplified through an analysis of the movies, *Mirka* (Rachid Benhadj, 2000, 107 minutes, Italy-France-Spain) and *American Rhapsody* (Éva Gárdos, 2001, 106 minutes, United States). In other words, this analysis will not be engaging in a critique of the technical qualities of the movies, the capacities of the actors, or the general flow of the stories. Leaving them to students of fine arts, this paper will pursue a limited approach by focusing only on ethnicity theories in analysing the films.

In the following sections, a review of the films will first be presented to inform the readers, who have not seen the movies, about their content. Since the themes of these two films could be closely related to the two approaches, the second part of this paper will include an outline of the basics of primordialist and circumstantialist approaches. Finally, in the third part, a comparative analysis will be conducted, taking into account the concepts of ethnic identity, integration to society, type of society and type of conflict within the frame of primordial and circumstantial theories of ethnicity.

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## 2. The Movies: *Mirka* and *American Rhapsody*

This part of the paper provides a synopsis of the movies in order to inform the readers about their content. This synopsis, however, will especially address those parts of the films which refer to issues of identity and ethnicity. In other words, several aspects of the films beyond the scope of this paper have been left out of this review.

### 2.1 *Mirka*

In the French movie *Mirka*, no specification of time and place of occurrence is revealed, in an attempt by Rachid Benhadj, the Algerian director, to convey the idea that ethnic conflict is wild and nasty regardless of the time and location of its prevalence. The movie owes its name to its main character *Mirka* who was born in a period when there was ethnic conflict. What makes the story dramatic is that his birth was a result of an unfortunate incident: rape by the soldiers of the enemy. The scenario relays that soldiers of the enemy army, which was defeated after a vicious fight, raped all the young girls in the village when the troops retreated from the village. When the villagers found that some of the girls who were raped had become pregnant, they decided to kill the children as they were perceived as 'the offspring of the enemy'. Eventually, all these children were slaughtered except *Mirka* whose grandmother found a way to save him and sent him away from the village.

The movie starts with the (re)appearance of the boy who had black, curly hair and black eyes sharing almost no physical feature with his blond, blue-eyed mother. When the people living in the village found out that he was still alive, they first excluded *Mirka* and his family from their community, then, blamed him for the diseases, drought and famine that occurred in the village. For them, the only way to restore peace in their community was to deny him the right to live. In short, *Mirka* is a story of a boy who is identified only by his physical traits for which he was subject to exclusion by a traditional society where the cleavage of 'us vs. the other' was sharpened due to an ethnic conflict.

### 2.2 *American Rhapsody*

The film *American Rhapsody* begins during the socialist revolution in Hungary in 1956. The film conveys the story of a family who escaped from Hungary from behind the 'iron curtain' to the USA and the 'free world'. However, escaping from their country, the family had to leave their baby behind for security reasons. It had been dangerous for them to travel with

the baby because they had to cross the border illegally through a path of land mines.

The baby, *Suzi*, was raised in Hungary by a family in the countryside who adopted her and raised her as their own child. Until the age of six, she lived in Hungary and learnt how to speak and behave like a Hungarian. In the meantime, her biological family was trying to bring her to the USA. With that purpose, the mother appealed to many international organizations, including the international Red Cross, which succeeded in re-uniting the family after a long search. Subsequently, *Suzi* left the family who raised her in Hungary and reunited with her biological family in the USA at the age of six. When she arrived in America, she encountered the challenge of having to acquire a new identity as an immigrant, requiring her to learn English and to adapt to the American lifestyle. However, for a long time, the difficulties in determining her identity proved to be overwhelming so that she went back to Hungary to search her origins. Eventually, she realized that both countries, Hungary and USA, meant home to her.

To sum up, the *American Rhapsody* tells the story of 'Suzi' who enjoyed the serenity of an inclusive attitude from both the American and the Hungarian societies which are two modern and secular societies without a recent history of ethnic conflict which could escalate ethnic tension in a society.

## 3. Theories of Ethnicity

The themes of the movies summarised above can easily be related to the theories of ethnicity, especially to primordialism and circumstantialism. This part will therefore outline main characteristics of these theories and thereby provide a descriptive frame of ethnicity theories necessary to establish a theoretical frame to compare and contrast the movies.

### 3.1. Primordialism

The first approach to the study of ethnicity is primordialism<sup>1</sup> which refers to 'the original',

<sup>1</sup> The founding father of this approach is Shils (1957), the first scholar to use the concept 'primordial' in his famous article, *Primordial, Personal, Sacred and Civil Ties*, where he makes a distinction between primordial, personal, sacred and personal ties (as cited by Grosby 1996: 53). For him, "primordial attachments, to kin, territory and religion were characterised by 'a state of intense and comprehensive solidarity', 'coerciveness', 'ineffable significance', 'fervour and passion', and 'sacredness'..." (as cited by McKay, 1982: 396).

'the earliest', and 'the underived' characteristics of human nature such as race, religion, language, place of birth, and family *et cetera*. These are given, natural, and timeless attachments which can neither be changed nor removed. Ethnicity in this approach is considered "as being bone of their bone, flesh of their flesh and blood of their blood" (Fishman, 1996: 63).

The scholars who pursue the path of primordialism in their study of ethnicity do not totally reject the role of other factors such as acquired characteristics, in explaining the ethnic phenomena; however, they suggest that primordial bonds are more significant than all other factors. For them, the intensity of 'the primordial' can change from one society to the other and also from time to time. Nevertheless, primordial elements are always more important than any social interaction in any society, at any time.

Another aspect of primordialism is the assumption that ethnicity provides people with a sense of affinity with the others whom they believe to share a common descent. Geertz, for example, claims that the only loyalty that can make a newly established state "self standing, maximal social unit as a candidate for nationhood" is primordial ties because "the congruities of blood, speech, custom, are seen to have an ineffable, and at times overpowering, coerciveness in and of themselves" (1996: 42-3). Furthermore, Geertz harshly criticised the idea of "lifting of the primordial ties" in modern societies. Since primordial ties stem from "the givens of social existence" and "being born into a particular religious community, speaking a particular language, and following particular social practices", a society would become "pathological" if primordial ties are abandoned or ignored (*ibid*: 41-2). For him, assumed blood ties, race, language, region, religion, and custom are the fundamental and primordial elements of a society without which its integrity becomes questionable (*ibid*: 43-4).

On the other hand, primordialism is criticised for being 'static and deterministic' because it fails to consider 'social interaction', and 'socially engendered identities'. It is also argued that new ethnic identities can be created due to social circumstances which imply that ethnic identity is not rigid but subject to change and modification (cf. Ellen and Coughlan 1996: 46). Moreover, primordialists underestimate the role of rational choice by exaggerating the significance of emotions that stem from common blood, religion, language *et cetera*. Lastly, primordialists ignore social, political and economic inequalities within a group of people who are equal or similar in terms of primordialism. As a result, revealing "the poverty of primordialism" (Eller and Coughlan, 1996), these criticisms led to the emergence of a new approach, circumstantialism, which is explored below.

### 3.2. Circumstantialism

The alternative approach to the study of ethnicity is circumstantialism which attempts to offer "a more dynamic perspective" as a "trend away from primordialism" with reference to "change, competition and contextuality" (McKay, 1982: 398). As a counter argument to primordialism, circumstantialism depends on three main assumptions: The first assumption is that ethnic identity is subject to change; and an identity is a product of a certain context –i.e. contextuality. Secondly, ethnic identity is about rational-choices which imply that ethnic groups use their identity as an instrument to attain political and economic goals. Thirdly, since ethnic identity is not static and natural, new ethnic identities can emerge and older identities can be redefined in time, that is, ethnic identity can be socially constructed, manipulated and invented.

Contextuality of ethnicity implies that ethnic identities emerge due to certain economic, historical and political circumstances or situations, meaning that, ethnicity is no more considered to be 'an underived factor' explaining politics, economics or history of a society but rather it is itself explained as 'a derivation' of political, historical and economic circumstances of a society. Barth (1996), for example, claims that social, political, economic, and ecological circumstances define the boundaries of an ethnic group. For him, the circumstances which prevail within the boundaries of an ethnic group are distinct from the circumstances<sup>2</sup> outside the ethnic boundaries. Thus, contextuality plays a significant role in the emergence of ethnic identities.

Another assumption of circumstantialism is that members of an ethnic group are rational self-seeking agents whose main purpose is to minimise pain and maximize pleasure (cf. Hechter, 1996: 90-1). In this approach, "ethnic groups are formed to solve instrumental problems such as access to political and economic resources"; and "primordial bonds are used to serve class/group interest" (McKay, 1982: 402). To illustrate this assumption, assume that individual A (of ethnicity X) had been patronizing individual B's (of ethnicity Y) grocery which is cheap and near to A's house. A had been told that individual C (of ethnicity X) was about to open a second grocery in the neighbourhood (Banton, 1996: 98). A decision of A

<sup>2</sup> Besides emphasizing the importance of 'local ecological factors', 'history of adaptation through invention and selective borrowing' (p.76) on the emergence of social boundaries, Barth (1996) also recognizes the fact that "ethnic boundary canalizes social life" (p.79). This implies that ethnic boundaries "are maintained by both ascriptions from within as well as from external resources" (De Vos, 1995: p. 16).

to shop only at C's grocery on the basis of the belief that cooperation among the members of their ethnic group is necessary for the aggravation of the group interest would exemplify rational-choice assumption of the circumstantialist approach.

Lastly, circumstantialism assumes that ethnicity can be defined as a "socially constructed, variable definition of self or other, whose existence and meaning is continuously negotiated, revised and revitalised" (Eller and Coughlan, 1996: 46). This assumption makes the construction of new ethnic identities and groups possible.<sup>3</sup> For example, Anderson (1991) approaches ethnicity in line with this assumption and claims that nations are imagined communities<sup>4</sup> under certain circumstances such as the rise of capitalism, the spread of national languages and rise of national consciousness thanks to print technology –i.e. circulation of novels and newspapers. Thereby, he argues that ethnicity is a socially constructed phenomenon.

For a critique of circumstantialism, one could argue that it has limited explanatory power to understand ethnic conflicts in the world. Among the reasons for the emergence and persistence of ethnic conflicts, primordial elements such as irrationality and affectivity also have a significant place. However, circumstantialism fails to consider the non-material, moral, and idealist aspects of ethnicity by assigning too much importance to political, social, and economic goals. Furthermore, circumstantialist argument about "rationality" and "rational-choice" is not applicable to all ethnic tensions the world over. In fact, Apartheid was not a rational choice of the blacks in South Africa so that the answer to the query "whose rational-choice" remains ambiguous with respect to the circumstantialist approach (cf. Chatterjee, 1996).

<sup>3</sup> In Africa, for instance, during the post-colonial period, new 'primordial' identities have been created. In some cases this has been achieved through 'activation of some old realities' but in other cases when there is a lack of 'objective givens', they needed to be constructed (Eller and Coughlan, 1996: 46). Ethnicity, therefore, can not only be invented through (re)activations of cultural resources but also through installation of new cultural resources which had not been in existence (*ibid.*: p. 47).

<sup>4</sup> Anderson (1991) claims that nations are 'political communities' which are 'imagined' as 'inherently limited', and 'sovereign'. Among the cultural resources that facilitated the invention of nations, he enumerates 'religious community, dynastic realm and conception of temporality' each indicating a search for a new way of linking 'fraternity, power, and time'. In addition, the expansion of the book market (through novels and newspapers) has also played a significant role by providing an opportunity for people to associate themselves with each other and imagine that they are a nation.

#### 4. Comparative Analysis: Mirka versus American Rhapsody

Having outlined the main characteristics of primordialism and circumstantialism in the previous section, a conceptual frame will be established in this section with the purpose of comparing and contrasting the movies. Within this framework, the concepts of ethnic identity, integration to society, type of society and type of conflict will be discussed. Not surprisingly, primordial and circumstantial theories of ethnicity offer distinct definitions for these concepts. In this part of the paper, I will ask whether primordial or circumstantial definitions of these concepts are illustrated in each movie.

##### 4.1 Ethnic Identity

Ethnic identity has been defined by scholars in a variety of ways. Some of these definitions may be complementary while others may not be. Below, I will refer to a definition by Brass (1996) who argues for three ways of defining an ethnic identity with respect to the weight and importance of the particular sources in the formation of an identity: objective, subjective and behavioural (p.85). Objective definition assumes that the 'core elements of ethnicity' –i.e. language, religion, colour, and other surface pointers, are the only features that separate one group from another. Subjective definition, on the other hand, emphasises 'self-consciousness' which is not as definite as objective elements. In other words, subjective definition is self-definition of an ethnic group which does not require reference to objective attributes. Lastly, behavioural definition of ethnic identity argues that "there are specific, concrete ways in which ethnic groups behave or do not behave in relation to other groups" (*ibid.*: 85). This definition entails both objective and subjective traits because human behaviour is nothing but a reflection of objective attributes and subjective feelings. Each of these definitions is related to an ethnicity approach discussed previously: objective definition relates to primordial approach whereas subjective and behavioural definitions belong to the circumstantial approach.

After explaining the various aspects of ethnic identity with reference to objective, subjective and behavioural attributes, it is possible to scrutinize identities of 'Mirka' and 'Suzi'. To start with, objective attributes in Mirka's identity tend to be much more dominant than subjective and behavioural ones. At the very beginning of the movie he is introduced as a little boy who has "black, curly hair" that made him appear as a stranger. Due to the hostility of the villagers against strangers, he always has to wear a cap to conceal the physical 'surface pointers,' –i.e. his black curly hair. On the other hand, the identity attached to 'Suzi' is mostly

subjective and behavioural. In order to be integrated into these societies she is expected to display behavioural traits acceptable to the two distinct societies. When she moves from Hungary to the US, she first experiences a cultural shock because the norms of behaviour she had acquired in her first home are quite distinct from the ones required in her second home. Finally, while the movie *Mirka* illustrates a primordial, objective identity, the *American Rhapsody* provides an example of 'subjective and behavioural identity' which is circumstantial in its nature.

#### 4.2 Integration to Society

Integration of a stranger is a common issue discussed by the scholars focusing on ethnic issues. These studies especially concentrate on two opposing attitudes toward strangers: exclusive or inclusive. While the first attitude can be labelled as primordial, the latter is mostly circumstantial in its essence. Below, I will attempt to describe these two attitudes and subsequently examine integration of Mirka and Suzi in the two distinct societies.

Firstly, an exclusive attitude towards strangers is adopted in societies where primordial ties are dominant. This attitude basically depends on the assumption that ethnic groups have boundaries. As formulated by Barth (1996), within the boundaries of an ethnic group are fellow members, citizens, and compatriots whereas those outside the group are seen enemies and barbarians. Therefore, any attempt of outsiders to enter the group should be repelled. In fact, this exclusive attitude can be followed by a group of people who believe that they are the 'chosen ones' for whom the initiation of 'the other' would be degrading and detrimental for the group (Weber, 1996: 37; Smith, 1996: 189). This type of attitude especially occurs in groups where primordial, objective, and physical elements of ethnic identity have the utmost importance over other elements of identity.

However, if identity of a group comprises subjective and behavioural elements –as in America– then the group would most probably pursue an inclusive attitude and welcome the new member. In contrast to the attitude which strictly prefers to exclude strangers, the inclusive attitude aims at integration of the outsiders to the group through an assimilative process. This means that, penetrating into boundaries of inclusive groups is permitted provided that the newcomer conforms to the new circumstances and adapts to the new ethnic context. This type of attitude especially occurs in groups where circumstantial, subjective, and behavioural elements of ethnic identity are dominant over other elements of identity.

Ethnic boundaries are both visible in the movies '*Mirka*' and '*American Rhapsody*'. By

entering the village as a 'fugitive', Mirka also crosses the boundaries of an ethnic group in which the cleavage of 'us vs. them', 'self vs. the other', or 'ethnic vs. non-ethnic' are very sharp and divisive. Therefore, Mirka as an 'ethnic other' is excluded from the community of the village, and perceived as an infection in the body which is to be eliminated. "Death for the fugitive" is the song that the children in the community are singing when they are running after Mirka to beat him.

On the other hand, Suzi goes back and forth between the boundaries of two ethnic groups she belonged to, American and Hungarian. At the age of six, she leaves Hungary for the States where she can become a member of American society provided that she learns English and adopt to the American way of life. Later, she goes back to Hungary when she is 16 as an American teenager searching her origins in a place where she is not excluded by the people because she already knows how to behave like a Hungarian. Thus, Suzi was included in both societies due to the fact that she behaved in line with social circumstances. In short, *Mirka* illustrates an example of 'exclusion' on the basis of primordial reasons whereas *American Rhapsody* provides a case of 'inclusion' on the grounds of circumstantialism and contextuality.

#### 4.3 Type of Society

The differences between modern and traditional societies have been of interest to many social scientists. In this part, I will focus on a particular difference between modern and traditional societies –i.e. ethnic attitudes, with respect to modernist school of thought and its critics. According to the modernists, traditional societies assume a primordial attitude towards ethnicity by giving a great deal of importance to religion, culture, and tradition whereas modern societies approach ethnicity more as a circumstantial, contextual phenomenon. In modern societies, ethnic identity is more about achieving self or group interest and less about emotions such honour and pride (cf., Hether 1996; Banton 1996).

Critics of the modernist approach claimed that traditionalism and modernity are not mutually exclusive; and therefore primordialism cannot be safely excluded from all modern societies. For instance, racism, xenophobia, and right-wing extremism in Europe illustrate that modernity with high levels of development do not necessarily prevent primordial attitudes in a society. In line with this idea, Wallerstein argues that the capitalist world economy brings about an ideology which is not only universalist but racist, as well (Wallerstein and Balibar, 2000: 43). For him, this racist attitude in contemporary Europe is manifested through 'ethnicization of

labour' (*ibid.*: 45). Besides, Balibar also tackles the problem of the rise of racism in Europe with reference to social, economic and cultural crises that emerged as a result of immigration (*ibid.*: 270-3). Thus, in contrast to what modernists have claimed primordial attitudes still prevail in modern societies.

The two films illustrate the assumptions of the modernists rather than its critics '*Mirka*' takes place in a traditional society where ethnicity is 'affective, ineffable and coercive'. The people in the village believe that "the stranger brought drought and diseases..." because the "stranger is evil". *American Rhapsody*, on the other hand, takes place in two modern societies where there is no reference to primordial beliefs or ties. Nevertheless, the point of reference in the Rhapsody is to the circumstances: "You have to speak English or everybody says creepy things to you". Suzi learns American culture and language as a rational choice. Her preference of minimising the difficulties and reaping the fruits of living in America compels her to 'become similar'. In brief, primordial values of a traditional society make life miserable for Mirka while the assimilation in a modern society as a rational-choice brings about a decent life for Suzi.

As a result, the assumptions of modernists are exhibited when the films are studied in a comparative way. This is mostly because the films –especially *Mirka*, are away from being realistic but surreal exaggerations of identity issues. Thus, the objections raised by the critics of the modernist approach cannot be falsified only with reference to the films; their validity, however, should be tested with respect to a real case which is outside this paper's scope.

#### 4.4 Type of Conflict

In general, whether conflicts are ethnic or ideological, they all play an important role in deepens the cleavage of 'us vs. the other' in a society. While ethnic conflicts may act as a factor that deepens the ethnic cleavage, ideological conflicts incite the ideological cleavage. If, for example, a society has experienced an ethnic conflict, the dominant attitude in that society might be primordial because an ethnic conflict deepens the duality of 'us vs. them' on ethnic grounds. Whereas if a society has experienced an ideological conflict, the conflict would not have an influence on the ethnic perceptions of the society but there would be an exaggeration of the "self vs. other" cleavage which is ideologically defined such as 'whites vs. reds' or 'liberals vs. socialists'. In the light of this argument, we can come to the conclusion that conflicts deepen and sharpen cleavages in a society. When a society experiences an ethnic conflict, its ethnic cleavages will become very visible and the attitudes will become primordial.

In '*Mirka*', the community in the village had a traumatic experience of an ethnic conflict which intensified the duality of "self vs. the other" in such a way that made 'the other' to be also perceived as 'the enemy'. This illustrates the aggravation of ethnic cleavage generated by an ethnic conflict. On the other hand, in '*American Rhapsody*', the nature of the conflict is ideological which led to the accentuation of an ideological cleavage and protected Suzi from being exposed to any ethnic exclusion.

#### 5. Conclusion

In this paper, the two approaches to the study of ethnicity, primordialism and circumstantialism, are demonstrated through a comparative study on the distinct attitudes of societies on issues of ethnicity as revealed in *Mirka* and *American Rhapsody*. As a result, following ideas are illustrated by looking at the content of the movies: First, an exclusive attitude toward strangers is adapted in societies where objective attributes have the utmost significance over subjective and behavioural ones whereas ethnic groups are more likely to pursue an inclusive attitude if the group identity comprises subjective and behavioural elements. Second, the modernist assumption that argues for a process in which all differences would be alleviated is exhibited. However, the objections raised by the critics of modernist approach are also acknowledged. Third, it is argued that ethnic conflicts are likely to act as a factor that deepens ethnic cleavage. Ideological conflicts, on the other hand, incite ideological conflict and do not necessarily lead to an ethnic conflict. As a result, in the first film, *Mirka*, an exclusive attitude of a traditional society that underwent an ethnic conflict is illustrated with respect to the primordialist approach. In contrast, an inclusive attitude toward the new member is exemplified in *American Rhapsody* with regard to the circumstantialist approach.