



Mizgin Mujde Arslan.

# Interview with Mizgin Mujde Arslan, Filmmaker

**Sergi Doladé.** Director of the International Association of Independent Producers of the Mediterranean (APIMED)

Along with the rising number of Kurdish short films, the production of feature and documentary films is also increasing, providing diverse visual and aesthetic aspects that shape the distinctive framework for Kurdish cinema. In this respect, Mizgin M. Arslan's personal approach to cinema can be described as a compilation of various stylistic characteristics of Kurdish cinema. Having worked as a journalist for six consecutive years, she began to shoot short films and documentaries, mainly focused on women, immigrants and cultural issues. Her first short film *The Last Game* (2006) was much celebrated, as was her first documentary, *A Fatal Dress Polygamy* (2009), which was broadcasted on a mainstream channel in Turkey and hit over 1.7 million views on YouTube. Her first feature documentary, *I Flew, You Stayed* (2012), has won several awards, including the Turkish Association of Film Critics, Documentary of the Year (2013), Best Documentary Award at Amed Film Festival, and Mirella Galetti Award in Italy. Another short film, *Houses with Small Windows*, which she co-wrote and acted in, was selected for the Official Competition at the Venice Film Festival (2013) and won the European Short Film Award, alongside many other prizes. At present, Mizgin is developing a new documentary project in the framework of the Close Up Initiative, a training, development and mentorship program for documentary filmmakers from Southwest Asia and North Africa.

**Sergi Doladé:** What made you decide to make films?

**Mizgin M. Arslan:** Growing up as a woman from the Kurdish community, I was deeply aware of the pervasive sense of injustice that surrounded me. From the smallest instances of daily life to the larger systemic issues, I saw and experienced unfairness at every turn. As a child, I often felt powerless and longed for a sense of agency and a voice to speak out against these injustices. Looking back, I realize that these early experiences planted the seeds of a deep desire to effect

change and make a difference in the world. Even now, I sometimes question why I feel the need to speak out and share my story rather than keep it to myself like so many others do. But the urge to tell my story – to narrate my own experience – is a powerful one. I believe that there is real power in giving voice to our struggles and sharing our stories, and that this is an essential step towards creating a more just and equitable world.

**S. D.:** What subject matters inspire you the most?

**M. M. A.:** My first documentary, *A Fatal Dress Polygamy*, was about my aunt, who suffered domestic abuse as a result of forced marriage at the age of 16. She was the second wife of her cousin. I remember watching her coming back to my grandparent's house with bruises. Each time, she was sent back to her husband's house by my grandfather. During my childhood, I was a witness to this painful experience that shaped my perspective in a profound way. As I grew up and became a filmmaker, my first documentary focused on this very experience. It was clear in my mind from the outset that this was the story I wanted to tell the world. However, some members of my Kurdish community and even some of my own family accused me of exposing our weaknesses and vulnerability to the world. I understood their concerns, but to me this story was a representation of our collective struggles, and it was important to speak out about it in order to make a change.

**S. D.:** How do you select your projects?

**M. M. A.:** Fiction or non-fiction, all of my films are based on my personal stories in one way or another. There is silence within me that seeks image and sound for reflection. I don't select them, it is usually a dream, an image that I want to understand or some pieces of a story that I want to complete. I have a strong passion for pure cinema, but unfortunately my filmmaking journey spanning about two decades was interrupted by my immigration. I managed to complete my second documentary, *I Flew, You Stayed*, a year before moving to England. I moved to the UK with luggage and started all over again. I worked hard to make a

living, learn the new language and culture, make a home, and even had two children. While busy settling into this new country, my new role as a mother, I couldn't make many films to explore or enhance my style of storytelling.

**S. D.:** What is the essence of your artistic work?

**M. M. A.:** The core of my artistic work revolves around honesty and creating connections. I believe that art is a tool to start a communication, to reach other people's hearts and start a conversation. It is hopeful to think that we can meet, listen and understand one another through our stories.

**S. D.:** How would you define your personal style?

**M. M. A.:** I like creating documentaries that explore family stories within their political and social contexts. My aim is to uncover the layers of a story that evolve over time and across generations. I like elements that give the sense of the land such as landscapes, folk songs, myths...

**S. D.:** How do you deal with creative insecurities at the time of writing or filming?

**M. M. A.:** I always have had a day job to be able to finance my own films, and I recommend this to anyone who dreams of being a filmmaker. Insecurity or financial difficulty is not easy, and I respect anyone who chooses to be an independent full-time filmmaker. I worked as a journalist for many years, then as a video editor, as a lecturer and, in the last few years, I started to work in a mental

health team where I give emotional support to people with serious mental health difficulties and I love my job as well as I love the filmmaking side of me.

**S. D.:** This issue of *Quaderns de la Mediterrània* is dedicated to the Mediterranean minority cultures. In your opinion, what are the major stakes that they are facing at present?

**M. M. A.:** Kurdish, Palestinian, African or Syrian filmmakers are constantly on the move, leaving their past behind and creating a new future. It is a difficult journey full of obstacles that block you from moving forward as a filmmaker. I recently came to the realization of just how challenging this journey has been for me and for my fellow filmmakers, who are all at different stages of this journey. For some, the journey has just begun as they just left their homes and embarked on an unknown future.

To be able to continue making films, we need to create a safe base first. Our projects are usually not granted. There is no specific fund that is just designed for us and there is no official country or film institute that supports us or demands any films from us. Our films are only seen or discovered by small groups of cinephiles.

**S. D.:** What can you share about your experience being part of an oppressed minority culture?

**M. M. A.:** My experience with oppression began with my name, language and fear of authority. I remember not understanding Turkish when I first went to school at the age of five, and being called by a different

name than my birth name – Kurdish names were banned in Turkey after the military junta in 1980 –, which always felt strange to me. I grew up in a village where Arab and Kurdish cultures were equally dominant, and everyone spoke both languages. Village life was simple and stable, only changing with the position of the sun and seasons. I wish they could have continued to live that way...

I was detained during the making of my first feature documentary, along with the camerawoman who was working on the project with me. We were questioned about all aspects of our filmmaking and the film itself was used as evidence, before we were eventually released. I used to live in Turkey, and even though my films are personal stories about my family, as a Kurdish filmmaker, I always felt under threat and insecure. Despite this, I made almost all of my films in my hometown, with my grandmother even starring in two of them, but now I have had to move away from the creative hub of my hometown in order to feel safe.

**S. D.:** Who from your community has been for you a life inspiration?

**M. M. A.:** As I was growing up, my grandmother stood out as a remarkable woman who was highly respected by the entire community. She played several roles, including that of a midwife, nurse, storyteller and a skilled handcraft artist. Above all, she was my safe haven, and I was fortunate enough to have been raised by her. She was my miracle and believed in me and made me believe in myself, that I can be anything I want to be.



A frame from *I Flew You Stayed*.

**S. D.:** How is the creation process for you? What can you share about your new project developed at Close Up?<sup>1</sup>

**M. M. A.:** In 2012, I made a documentary film called *I Flew You Stayed*, which premiered at the Istanbul Film Festival. In the film, I endeavored to find my father's grave in a refugee camp in Iraqi Kurdistan. However, while searching for my deceased father, I unexpectedly came across my estranged mother, with whom I had little contact. The film culminates in a confrontation with my mother, marking the end of the movie, but the beginning of a new story that I needed to unravel. When I was two years old, my mother fled Syria with my one-year-old brother, leaving behind many unknowns in

the story, including the role my maternal grandmother played. The only photograph we have together is of me, my mother, her mother, and my brother. For years, I was haunted by the unknown details, especially after becoming a mother myself. I felt the need to comprehend my grandmother's story and the reasoning behind my mother's decision, as well as reconcile with her. So, I developed a story that follows two parallel journeys: one in the past and the other in the present, from London to Mardin, my village. *My Mother's Tale* has been a work in progress for about two years now. It is a personal exploration of my family's story across three generations, with a particular focus on my relationship with my mother. The story is complex and multi-layered, with twists and

1. <https://closeupinitiative.org/>

turns, and the main characters are women – mothers who are on a journey to keep their families safe and together. It’s a Kurdish story but universal, as mothers around the world living in countries of conflict, poverty, or inequality experience it.

**S. D.:** Was it difficult for you?

**M. M. A.:** The most difficult aspect is dealing with the emotional aspect of the personal storytelling. Even though the events occurred in the past, the impact still lingers and affects us to this day. Not giving up probably. While working on this film, I felt like giving up many times, especially during the moments when I had to confront my mother and deal with her feelings of guilt and her tendency to project them onto me. I am creating this film as a way to make peace. Leslie Greenberg says: “You need to arrive at a place in order to leave it.” I am trying to reach “that” place to be able to leave it and hopefully this will be a healing process for us and for audiences as well.

**S. D.:** I am interested to know if you collaborate with other artists and what has been the outcome of these collaborations for you personally and artistically.

**M. M. A.:** A diverse group of filmmakers, each with their unique skills, ages and backgrounds came together to create a stunning work of art. For my latest documentary project, we are collaborating with some of the most talented individuals such as Shirine Best, Avesta Kadir, Ronit Meranda, and Meryem Yavuz. While I have worked with male talents before, I must admit that I feel more comfortable working with

women, particularly given that we are still in the process of achieving true equality in the industry.

**S. D.:** Which filmmakers do you like?

**M. M. A.:** I have always been drawn to art house films that allow the audience to reflect and stay immersed in the story. When I attend film festivals, I search for family stories, political films from underrepresented regions, and those directed by women. Recently, I watched and liked Carla Simón’s films and found them to be relatable to the themes I am trying to explore.

**S. D.:** What’s your ultimate goal as an independent artist?

**M. M. A.:** My ultimate goal is to be part of a platform where I can teach and guide new filmmakers while being able to make my films independently. I feel like I’m close to achieving this goal sometimes and other times not. My current goal is to complete *My Mothers’ Tale* and reach the audiences’ hearts everywhere in the world. Becoming a mother has dramatically changed my life, goals, and the meaning of life itself. While working on a project that tells the story of mothers in difficult times, I have been contemplating the role of motherhood and its impact on children. It’s a delicate role, and there is no one right way of doing it. We all improvise and don’t always get it right. To understand my childhood better, be a better mother, and help children in distress, especially those who come from trauma, war, and conflict backgrounds, I am training to become a child counselor.

**S. D.:** Where is home for you?

**M. M. A.:** Home is wherever you feel safe, warm, fed and can be truly yourself, but most importantly it is a feeling that you carry anywhere with yourself. In my dreams, my home is where I spend my childhood; so my village in Mardin.

**S. D.:** Is it important for your films to be screened in Kurdistan? Why is it so important for Kurds to see your films?

**M. M. A.:** It is significant to me that the Kurdish people see my films as they are largely centered around their culture and language. Everyone deserves the right to see their own representation on screen and to hear their native tongue, particularly if that language is prohibited by an oppressive regime and speaking it results in punishment. I'd like to start a communication with my people through a film, but filmmaking is above any nations or borders. We all want to tell universal stories and reach international audiences.

**S. D.:** What's your opinion on Kurdish cinema?

**M. M. A.:** Kurdish cinema is a young, compassionate, both pessimistic and optimistic, puzzled, colorful, growing field that I admirably follow. Young filmmakers are leading it and there are some good questioning going on regarding identity, history, belonging, family stories and cultural conflict. Kurdish cinema is a fragmented cinema as Kurdish filmmakers are constantly moving from one place to another while looking for somewhere to live. This is constantly changing the aspects of Kurdish filmmaking. The faces of Kurdish cinema vary from one director to another and depending on where they are based.

**S. D.:** Making films in Kurdistan can have a great effect on the population there. In your opinion, what effects can cinema have on culture and society?

**M. M. A.:** Art or filmmaking is a discussion and a communication with the community. Wherever you go, you spark a discussion. This has been my experience of my filmmaking as it usually originated a controversial conversation with my people in my hometown.

**S. D.:** As a Kurdish citizen, what role have borders played in your own life? What do they mean to you? Have you portrayed them in any way in your stories?

**M. M. A.:** I was born in Mardin, a Kurdish village in Turkey, just a few kilometers away from the Syrian border. I believe that borders have somehow shaped my life story because I grew up looking at a border that I couldn't cross. My mother and siblings lived on the other side of the border, and we could only visit them twice a year at the border, where there were a hundred yards of minefields between us and we could only wave at each other. Despite growing up in a small village and not leaving until I was a teenager, I knew that the world was much bigger than this and that we shouldn't be restricted by anything, especially borders. Currently, I live in London with my two children and partner, and I am trying to establish myself in this new country after living here for eleven years.

**S. D.:** The revolutionary filmmaker Yılmaz Güney wrote many of his scripts in prison. How do you relate to artists that have been forced to lower their voices?

**M. M. A.:** If I had the chance, I would love to meet Yılmaz Güney. He, like all of us, has flaws as a person, but I admire his filmmaking character, creativity, and storytelling. I particularly appreciate the Kurdish part of him that he never abandoned and had to hide to become a successful filmmaker in Turkey. Despite the dangerous times for Kurds and leftist people in Turkey during the 1980s, he managed to make his most political films. That's something that deserves pure respect and admiration. I feel more motivated and encouraged after watching his films.

**S. D.:** How do people react to your films? What effect do you expect them to have on society?

**M. M. A.:** The most common and unforgettable reaction that audiences have to my films is when they queue up to give me a hug. The story of *I Flew, You Stayed* somehow manages to connect people from different political views, experiences, and backgrounds. My goal is to bring people who cannot live together due to political biases closer. Naively, I make films to create a sense of peace on the screen and among audiences. We are all different, yet similar at the same time.