

# *Pain, Desire, and Neo-arabesk Queenness*



Bergen, ca. 1986

Merve Bedir and  
Asena Hayal

Emerging in the 1960s on the periphery of Turkey, the arabesk music genre was once a sonic voice for migrant workers. Today, the genre defies categorization, with older members of Generation Z being the largest group of listeners, and neo-arabesk queens challenging gender norms. Merve Bedir refuses heteronormative narratives, claiming that arabesk is a living expression of surviving urban life and a rebellion that moves through the cracks of broken worlds, and the many intersections of generation, gender, class, beliefs, and identity. Accompanying the narrative is an arabesk DJ set by Istanbul's Asena Hayal, celebrating the genre's polyphony and fluidity.

The rising interest in the arabesk music genre is clearly visible in Spotify data. Arabesk listening from January to August 2022, rose 287 percent compared to the same period in 2019. More than 162 thousand user-created playlists with »arabesk« in the title are listed on Spotify. 84 percent of 2022 records in the genre come from Turkey; the three countries that follow are Germany, the Netherlands, and France. The largest group of arabesk listeners is between eighteen and twenty-four years old (older members of Generation Z), and Müslüm Baba (Gürses) is the genre's most followed artist.

Spotify provides the above description with its ten most listened-to songs and the ten most followed artists of 2022 within the arabesk music genre. Besides the striking interest in arabesk, the report highlights a young generation, points to the diaspora, and glorifies the father of arabesk, Müslüm Gürses. Many people in Turkey listen to arabesk, whether they openly admit it or not. In the following, I claim that today, arabesk is an ethos that is accepted across generations, classes, genders, and identities. It is the music of rebellion, pain, and desire, and an urban vehicle across the center and the periphery of the city cancelling these polars. It is played mostly in a minor key, but also atonal and offbeat, typically in varieties of the Phrygian mode. To a first timer's ear, it could sound Middle Eastern and North African, even Moorish, with »lots of strings, traditional ›Arab‹ riffs mixed with Congo beats.«<sup>1</sup> I can't think of arabesk as an instrumental music genre, in fact, I would claim, the vocal, the singer is at the center of this music.

Arabesk is an important aspect of everyday life in Turkey and across the diaspora. But instead of looking for reasons why by examining the conventional categories of sociology, I would rather start with *isyan*, arabesk's rebellion against an urban life that has become drastically more difficult to sustain. Arabesk is a music genre, but more importantly, it is a »moving space«

through the confluence of sound and migration from the periphery of the urban towards an alienation from established patterns and rhythms of life. Parts of my subjective definition hold part of the more formal definitions made in sociology and musicology, and further characteristics of the genre are mentioned in this literature, for instance, as »east contesting the west,« or »lower class« in general terms, and »gentrification after the 2000s.«<sup>2</sup> However, Spotify's lists show us that understanding this genre as a matter of class, or between urban x rural, east x west polars is not enough. Arabesk's defining spirit is its spatial sound of pain, rebellion, and desire; a sound that neither relies on established (musical or physical) structures, nor other approximate genres, but something of its own that comes out of the transgression of urban sounds. It's also difficult to coin a territory to it. It is known to be the most popular to make and listen across the Balkans, the Caucasus, Anatolia, North Africa, towards Middle East and Persia.

If modernization is defined by the dominant and hegemonic culture of the »center« made in the city, arabesk departs from the city's margins, outside that determinism. Arabesk music might be a special outcome of this »raising tensions between the urban and its outside,«<sup>3</sup> and among the civilized and the otherwise, but then also in its collective sound, poetry, and performativity, it proves that a reading through polar opposites, at least by now, is incorrect and misleading.

Not fitting in the frame of modernization, the center and the good citizen, arabesk was subjected to official bans and censorship in Turkey until the 1980s. The music has changed and transformed since then, reaching a wider audience, also facilitated through the neoliberal transition (during which the center also attempted to appropriate, regulate, and confiscate arabesk). During this process the artists and followers of the music have expanded as well, singers of classical



Screenshot from a Facebook post, Bergen playing in dolmuş (minibus), September 23, 2023

Singer: Bergen  
 Song: Sen Affetsen (Even if you forgive)  
 Album: Acıların Kadını (Women of pain)  
 Lyrics: Ali Tekintüre, Music: Burhan Bayar  
 4' 25", Producer: Yaşar Kekeva Plak, 1986

and folk music, rappers, etc. Arabesk production in the diaspora is a crucial extension connected to the growth of migrant workers in Germany, the Netherlands, and elsewhere in Europe. In Rotterdam Noord, I lived a long time on the street parallel to the one of Azer Bülbül, the first arabesk singer in the Netherlands, who is also on the Spotify list of the ten most followed artists.

When we look closer through Spotify's list (2022), striking and never mentioned is that half are female, and all but one of the most followed songs are by female artists. For a genre that has been dominated by hetero-male artists and characteristics all along, this is significant. Going back to its beginnings, it isn't difficult to see where the early male domination in arabesk comes from. As a space, ethos, and genre, arabesk was mainly created for and by the male migrant workers in rapidly growing cities, and fast spread across the worker diaspora in Europe. The 1950s in Turkey was a period of transition marked by increasing urbanization, the dissolving rural realm, and migration (especially labor migration) toward the industrializing city and toward Europe, which was mostly shaped by the hetero-male structures and hierarchies. But what needs to be acknowledged, reread, and relived is that arabesk has become more than the male, the periphery, and the poor. More than else, it is a refusal of the patriarchal oppression of the system(s) that dictate a certain way of living, working, and being in this world. I would claim that this refusal to succumb to this oppression is produced by the queen artists, and their gender performativity.

Cansu Demirer explains the term »Neo-Arabesk Queen« first used in 2000s for drag artist babykilla, and which later included female singers like Melike Şahin, Sıla, and Gülşen (all on the 2022 Spotify list): »The concept refers to the transformation of urban culture as well as the regeneration of the arabesk genre over time. Queenness refers to a gender-positive attitude that includes feminism, fluidity, and queer culture.«<sup>4</sup> Demirer mentions that the initial reactions in the media from

researchers and public to the Spotify news were about Generation Z's dissatisfaction, unhappiness, and hopelessness. Obviously, this explanation is not only simplistic, but also humiliating in that it separates members of Gen Z from their agency. Instead, the lists of artists and songs could be understood as a valuable contribution to queerness and queenness; i.e., this contribution to the arabesk ethos. These artists and songs tell additional stories that pluralize the culture and polyphonize the genre.

Arabesk is labeled as a »degenerate« urban subculture by the modern definitions I

describe above. But seeing the genre as such is a missed opportunity to understand the pain and the struggle of what it means to survive in the city, and perhaps to find a way out of it. This music reveals the broken world, and the broken city, as a phenomenon or a space that flows through those cracks of sound, beat, and radio waves. It leaks to spread among the people who are the very producers of the urban space, who also share the pain and the desire. Right now, arabesk cannot be possessed, claimed, or taken over by a single class, identity, or generation. As a class issue, arabesk might have been born at the periphery of the city, among the migrants, the workers, the poor, but it is reductive to define it as a marginal other, as such. Arabesk is the distress of existing in, surviving, and inhabiting the

city. Its vibrations are the pain felt in the body, and in the collective body. Arabesk is the rebellion that moves through the many trans-sections of generations, genders, classes, beliefs, and identities that don't fit into the precarity, and the predetermined values, imposed on the city and its city-zens. And further across home and diaspora, across generations, classes, and identities as urban heritage of the present with its polyphony and the fluidity, it is the neo-arabesk queenness that resists the capitalist which tries to appropriate it, and the modernist which tries to regulate it.

I started singing something between arabesk and blues when I moved to the Netherlands fifteen years



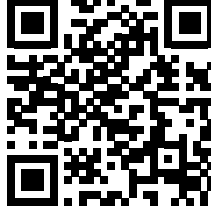
Screenshot from an Instagram post, babykilla singing Gülşen, April 24, 2021

ago. Last summer I made another attempt to return to it, trying to index and mix boxes of cassettes that my friend Philippa Driest found in a house in Rotterdam South. This text is another attempt in my wish and desire to continue singing in this genre, and learn more about the diaspora, and myself, I guess, as part of it. As an epilogue for now, but to be continued, I asked Asena Hayal to create an arabesk DJ set for a sonic conversation in this piece.

**Merve Bedir** is an architect based in the Netherlands.

**Asena Hayal** is a cultural manager, producer, and DJ based in Istanbul.

Listen to Asena's DJ set on Soundcloud



1 Kimberly Bradley's note on how Müslüm Gürses sounds to their ears.

2 İsmail Afacan and Sibel Öz, eds. *Müzikte, Sinemada Ve Edebiyatta 2000 Sonrası Arabesk Yeniden*. Istanbul 2020.

3 »ANIL SAYAN: ARABESKİN RAP'İ,« in: *Yeni e* (July 14,

2019), available online at <https://yenie.net/anil-sayan-arabesk-rap-2/> (accessed January 28, 2024).

4 Cansu Demirir: »Spotify'in Arabesk Müzik Açıklaması: Neo-Arabesk Kraliçeleri Zaferi,« in: *5Harfililer* (December 15, 2022), available online at <https://www.5harfililer.com/>

[spotifyin-arabesk-muzik-aciklamasi-neo-arabesk-kralice-leri-zaferi/](https://www.5harfililer.com/spotifyin-arabesk-muzik-aciklamasi-neo-arabesk-kralice-leri-zaferi/) (accessed January 28, 2024).