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"Lost" at the Crossroads: An Exploration of Human Trafficking

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ABSTRACT

Human trafficking impacts a growing population of people in today's world. Due to mounting social, political, and economic problems and ongoing wars and conflicts, millions are now forced to leave their home countries and are trying to illegally immigrate to other countries in search of enhanced living conditions. That is why human trafficking urgently requires global attention. Various forms of human trafficking take place in the Global South. Türkiye, located at the crossroads of Europe and Asia and bordered by eight countries, plays a pivotal role in the recently escalating trafficking activities. As a well-established migration route and a strategic location, it is both a source and target country in human trafficking. This study aims at analyzing two award-winning Turkish movies, Seaburners and More, which depict vulnerability, exploitation, and struggle of the underrepresented minority, from the perspectives of children and women. The results, obtained through manifest and latent content analysis, will shed light upon this significant issue with the aim of contributing to the global fight against human trafficking. The study portrays vulnerabilities at the individual level and explores the potential social, political, and economic reasons and consequences of human trafficking through media works

Keywords: film analysis, Global South, human trafficking, Türkiye.

INTRODUCTION

As one of the major challenges of the 21st century, human trafficking requires global attention (Monique Burr Foundation, 2025). In a very recent US Presidential Document, more than 27 million people have been declared to be the victims of human trafficking and forced labor across the world (Biden, 2025). The victims may be people from all backgrounds from every region of the world; however, they may be the most vulnerable in society, that is, women and girls, LGBTQI+ individuals, people from ethnic and racial minorities, and marginalized backgrounds, that are exploited most. According to the 2024 Global Report on Trafficking in Persons which was published on December 11, and which covered 156 countries, the number of people being exploited by human traffickers has been increasing dramatically due to conflict, social inequality, poverty, and climate change. The victims of trafficking are generally tricked with fake promises of job opportunities and education and through violence or fraudulent employment agencies.

In order to bring the issue to the forefront, the media, particularly the film industry, has begun to explore the theme of human trafficking more. However, the coverage of human trafficking in the media and the exploration of this coverage are scarce in the Turkish context. This study seeks to examine the portrayal of human trafficking in Turkish films.

The purpose of this study was to analyze two award-winning Turkish films Seaburners (Kumun Tadı) and More (Daha), released in 2014 and 2017, respectively. Through manifest and latent content analysis, the study sought to answer how vulnerability, exploitation, and struggle of the underrepresented minority are depicted in these films, unveiling the perspectives of children and women.

LITERATURE REVIEW
Definition and Scope of Human Trafficking

Human trafficking, affecting millions of people all around the world in the 21st century, particularly from the vulnerable population, is "a grave violation of human rights" (United Nations, 2025). It has been defined as the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring, or receipt of people through force, fraud, or deception, with the aim of exploiting them for profit (United Nations, 2025). People from all ages and backgrounds may become victims of this crime in all parts of the world today. The main goal of human traffickers is to control the movements of victims, most of whom are children, women, and migrants, to exploit them (SACE, 2025; United Nations, 2025). In this regard, it is considered to be a modern version of slavery (SACE, 2025). People are trafficked for various purposes, including labor, removal of

organs, and sexual violence, and the traffickers often employ violence or deceitful employment agencies and fake promises of education and job opportunities to trick their victims (SACE, 2025).

Human Trafficking as a Global Problem

Human trafficking has been reported to be the third most common crime following arms and drug trafficking (Republic of Türkiye, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2022). Since the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been a dramatic increase in the number of trafficking victims in various regions of the world. According to the Global Report on Trafficking in Persons 2024, this number increased 25 per cent between 2019 and 2022 (United Nations, 2025). Table 1 presents human trafficking in numbers:

Table 1
Human Trafficking in Numbers

Victim	Number
World-wide modern day slaves	~ 27 million
Children	50% of victims
Women and girls	80% of victims
Female victims trafficked into the commercial sex trade industry	70%

Note. From *https://mbfpreventioneducation.org/human-trafficking-is-now-the-second-most-profitable-criminal-activity-in-the-united-states/*

Human Trafficking: Species and Global Distribution

Human trafficking is "a multi-billion-dollar criminal industry" (International Organization for Migration, 2025), and it has been violating the fundamental rights and dignity of millions of people across the world (Olisah et al., 2024). The internationally-accepted four human trafficking types are child trafficking, sexual exploitation and trafficking, organ trafficking, and forced labor (Havan & Şişman, 2023). Child trafficking, sexual exploitation and trafficking, and forced labor will be explicated within the scope of this study.

Child trafficking

Child trafficking is a form of child abuse and exploitation which may be committed by individuals, small groups, medium-sized groups, or large, international criminal networks (NSPCC, 2025). Children and young people are sold and forced to live in slave-like conditions and work after being persuaded, forced, or tricked to leave their homes. They are also exposed to physical, emotional, and sexual abuse. Child trafficking affects all the world

countries today, and the number of child victims has recently risen (United Nations, 2025). It has been estimated that 1.2 million children are affected by child trafficking. Child victims comprise 27 per cent of all the human trafficking victims worldwide. The proportion of girls as trafficking victims has risen from 3 per cent to 38 per cent (United Nations, 2025). According to the reports, two out of three child victims are girls. Children who live in conflict are more prone to trafficking, and 426 million children live in conflict zones in different parts of the world today (Save the Children, 2025). To exemplify, in Nigeria, children are forced to join armed groups like Boko Haram (Onapajo, 2025), while in India, many are trafficked and exploited for begging, prostitution and slavery purposes (Gavade, 2023).

Factors such as poverty, limited educational opportunities, armed conflict, socioeconomic inequality, demand for cheap or unpaid labor, and experiences of marginalization or discrimination substantially increase the risk of child trafficking. Among the most vulnerable children are the migrants and refugees. Children are mainly trafficked for forced labor (e.g., in agriculture, mining, or factories), domestic slavery (e.g., childcare, cooking, cleaning), committing crimes (e.g., moving drugs, theft, begging, recruitment into armed groups), benefit fraud, forced marriage, and sexual exploitation. While girls are generally trafficked for sexual exploitation and forced marriage, boys may be trafficked for recruitment into armed groups or forced labor and criminality (Save the Children, 2025; United Nations, 2025). For instance, Afghan child refugees in Iran are often trafficked into nearby countries to work in arduous jobs (Uriho Seburezi, 2023). Similarly, unaccompanied children, that is "the earthquake and war orphans" in Türkiye, are at the risk of being trafficked for various purposes (Terzi & Dündar, 2023). Children and young people trafficked may suffer from a deteriorated mental and physical health, feeling alienated and distressed, due to poor living or working conditions and being separated from their families, friends, communities, and cultures. Furthermore, they have no access to education thus have no opportunities for emotional and social development. Finally, they may also suffer from physical injuries as a result of being exploited for domestic servitude or forced labor (Rafferty, 2008; Yaman Kennedy, 2024).

Sexual Exploitation and Trafficking

Sexual exploitation and trafficking is an abusive form of human trafficking which involves the purpose of sexual exploitation (Monique Burr Foundation, 2025). Sex exploitation and trafficking involves power abuse by a third party (SACE, 2025). In sex trafficking, victims of any background, age, and gender are forced to provide sexual services against their will.

Individuals, particularly children, who suffer from violence, severe trauma, parental neglect, family break-up, and sexual abuse are easily lured into sexual exploitation or trafficking. It is considered as one of the worst forms of child labor (International Labour Organization, 2015).

Among all forms of human trafficking, sexual exploitation involved 36 per cent of victims in 2022. There is a growing concern pertaining to sexual trafficking, for it has been on the rise since 2019. 90 per cent of the victims in this category are women and girls, with girls constituting 28 per cent of this proportion. The average age of entry into sex trafficking is 12-14 (Monique Burr Foundation, 2025). Court cases reveal that victims are forced into prostitution and used for producing sexual abuse material. Sexual trafficking is a common crime in North America, Central America, and Europe (United Nations, 2025). A notable example is the case of Jeffrey Epstein's trafficking ring, in which underage girls were targeted and exploited by a network of collaborators across several countries (Ilchi, 2020). Concerning sex trafficking in Türkiye, the data is limited, and the statistical records are not easily accessible (Sever, 2018). There has been a dramatic increase in the number of trafficking victims, and the majority of the victims originate from former Soviet Union countries, including Russia, Moldova, Ukraine, Azerbaijan, and Georgia and Eastern Europe (U.S. Department of State, 2011). The victims are recruited through attractive job possibilities, particularly in the entertainment business (Demir, 2010). According to Zhidkova and Demir (2016), patriarchal traditions in Turkish society, that is subordination of women to men, and societal attitudes to sexuality are the main factors leading to increased sexual exploitation and trafficking.

Forced labor

Labor trafficking is defined as "the recruitment, harbouring, transportation, provision, or obtaining of a person for labour or services, through the use of force, fraud, or coercion for the purposes of subjection to involuntary servitude, peonage, debt bondage, or slavery" (Monique Burr Foundation, 2025). Forced labor impacts almost half of the victims worldwide. In 2022, 42 per cent of victims were reported to be victims of forced labor. Individuals are trafficked for various industries, including domestic servitude, agriculture, construction, and mining (International Labour Organization, 2015).

The overall number of individual cases reported worldwide was 222,852 in 2024 (The Counter Trafficking Data Collaborative, 2024). The number of countries involved in trafficking and exploitation is 197, and the victims come from 191 nationalities. As for the global distribution, in Europe,

adults comprise most of the victims. The proportion of the victims trafficked for labor is slightly higher than the victims trafficked for sexual exploitation. On the contrary, two thirds of the victims in the Americas are trafficked for sexual exploitation. More than 80% of the victims are female, and children comprise nearly a third (The Counter Trafficking Data Collaborative, 2024). A well-known example is the exploitation of migrant workers in Qatar's construction sector during the preparations for the 2022 FIFA World Cup. Many workers suffered from wage withholding, passport seizure, and inadequate living conditions (European Union, 2021). While men constitute the major target group, with an approximately 70 per cent of proportion of forced labor victims, women and girls are mainly exploited for domestic work. Due to conflict-affected and low-income areas, forced labor is prevalent in regions such as South Asia, the Middle East, and Sub-Saharan Africa (United Nations, 2025). For instance, forced migration from the former Soviet Union countries and Syria has enhanced forced labor in Türkiye (Demir, 2010, Sever, 2018).

Türkiye's Strategic Position in the Context of Human Trafficking

Geographical and socio-political features Türkiye has a unique geographical location, for it is situated at the crossroads of Europe and Asia, bridging the two continents. It is located in East Thrace in Southeastern Europe and the Anatolian peninsula in Western Asia. As one of the Eurasian countries, it shares borders with the Black Sea, Georgia and Armenia; the Aegean and Mediterranean Seas; Greece and Bulgaria; Azerbaijan and Iran; and Iraq and Syria (Britannica, 2025).

Becoming a member of the North Atlantic Alliance (NATO) in 1952 boosted its security and facilitated its integration into the Euro-Atlantic community. Türkiye plays a crucial role in maintaining stability and security in the Euro-Atlantic area (Republic of Türkiye, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2022). Due to its unique geopolitical location, Türkiye contributes significantly to NATO missions from the Baltic to the Mediterranean and the Black Sea (Işık, 2022). It is one of the top eight countries contributing to the Alliance with almost $100 million. Türkiye is also one of the top five allies, providing sustainable support to the Alliance with 1,100 personnel (Turkish Atlantic Council, 2023).

The relationship between Türkiye and the European Union (EU) is also crucial concerning political relations, human rights, civil society dialogue, economy and trade, and migration. Although it applied to become a member of the European Economic Community in 1987, and its eligibility was declared in 1999, Türkiye is still considered to be a candidate country, with its key strategic partnership on issues, including climate, security,

counter-terrorism, economy, and migration (Delegation of the European Union to Türkiye, 2021). With regard to the area of visa, migration and asylum, owing to the implementation of the March 2016 EU-Turkey Statement, the irregular and dangerous crossings on the Eastern Mediterranean route to Europe have been reduced. According to the 2024 Country Report on Türkiye, the country has been playing a significant role in providing support to 3.6 million refugees (as of September 2024) and has been working continuously to prevent irregular migration (European Commission, 2024).

Migration Routes and Türkiye's Role

Türkiye has been a country of origin, transit, and destination for migrants because of its geopolitical location. Today, as a natural bridge connecting east and west (Republic of Türkiye, Ministry of Interior, Presidency of Migration Management, 2025), it is still struggling with one of the biggest challenges deriving from irregular migration by land and sea (The International Organization for Migration, 2025). Approximately 40 million foreigners have entered and exited from Türkiye for various reasons, and over 5 million foreigners have resided in the country. This data highlights Türkiye's dual role, not only as a transit point but also as a destination for migrants (Republic of Türkiye, Ministry of Interior, Presidency of Migration Management, 2025; Sever, 2018).

The ongoing conflicts in the neighboring countries such as Iran, Iraq, and Syria have resulted in Türkiye's hosting one of the largest migrant populations in the world. 3.9 million refugees and migrants, 90% of whom are Syrians, reside in Türkiye today. The number of Syrians who have registered for Temporary Protection is 3.6 million. In addition, there are other migrants holding different nationalities that seek international protection, asylum, or refugee status in the country. As a result of the Mediterranean Crisis in 2015, more than 850,000 migrants arrived in Greece from the country. Despite the decrease of this number to 186,786 in 2017, the figures still remain substantial (The International Organization for Migration, 2025). According to The Group of Experts on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings (GRETA) report, the official number of victims identified in Türkiye between the years of 2019 and 2023 is 1,466, with an increase in the last four years. The main species of trafficking confronted in the country are sexual exploitation (52%), labor exploitation (30%), forced marriage (9%), and forced begging (6%). The victims are primarily from Syria, Uzbekistan, Afghanistan, and Türkiye itself (Council of Europe, 2024).

As part of the policies on migration, Türkiye has put a number of regulations into force, one of which is Law No. 6458 on Foreigners and International Protection (see the Official Gazette dated 11.04.2013 and numbered 28615). The law aims to protect the rights of refugees and migrants in 81 provinces, 148 districts, and abroad. These measures reflect Türkiye's ongoing efforts to manage migration effectively while addressing human trafficking risks within its borders (Republic of Türkiye, Ministry of Interior, Presidency of Migration Management, 2025). Figure 1 shows the countries of exploitation for victims trafficked from Türkiye.

Figure 1
Türkiye as a Country of Citizenship

Note. From *https://www.ctdatacollaborative.org/map.*
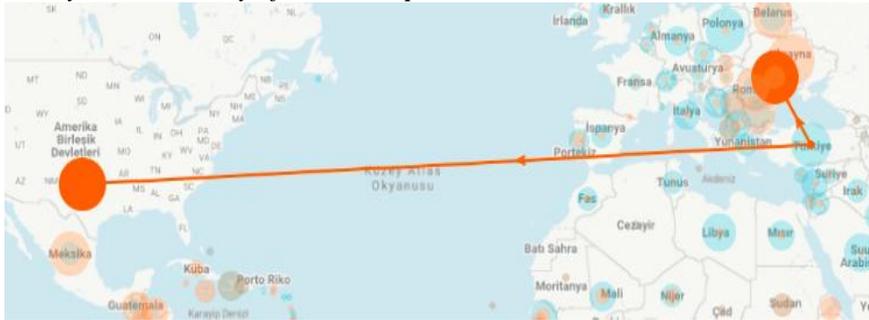
As shown in the figure, nearly 50% of the victims from Türkiye travel to the United States of America and Republic of Moldova. Figure 2 displays the global set of Türkiye as a country of exploitation.

The data retrieved from the maps come from the case management services or the hotline reports from Counter Trafficking Data Collaborative contributing organizations. Case management data have been gathered since 2002, whereas hotline data collection began in 2015 (The Counter Trafficking Data Collaborative, 2024). The dataset reveals differences in terms of the number and gender of victims and the type of exploitation. As presented in the table, adults constitute the majority of identified victims in both datasets; however, the proportion of minors increases when Türkiye is recorded as the country of citizenship.

Figure 2
Türkiye as a Country of Exploitation

Note. From https://www.ctdatacollaborative.org/map

As it can be seen in the figure, the source countries of the victims are Ukraine (27%), Turkmenistan (13%), and Kyrgyzstan (13%). Table 2 presents detailed information regarding the global dataset about Türkiye, both as the country of citizenship and the country of exploitation.

Table 2
Global Dataset about Türkiye

	Türkiye as the Country of Citizenship	Türkiye as the Country of Exploitation
Number of Victims	55	2,167
Gender of Victims	29% Female 71% Male 0% Transgender	91% Female 9% Male 0% Transgender
Type of Exploitation	91% Labor 9% Sexual 0% Other	24% Labor 74% Sexual 3% Other
Majority	75% Adult 25% Minor	96% Adult 4% Minor

Note. From https://www.ctdatacollaborative.org/map

Factors contributing to the increase in human trafficking in Türkiye

Human trafficking has social, cultural, political, and economic reasons; however, poverty remains a primary driver (Havan & Şişman, 2023). Individuals who wish to promote their standards of living and improve their

quality of life with higher earnings leave the source countries. In a similar vein, individuals who live in the transit or target countries like Türkiye and suffer from poverty and unemployment become involved in criminal organizations.

The annual inflation rate in the country was calculated as 39.05% in February 2025 (Trading Economics, 2025). Thus, Türkiye is listed among the high-inflation countries. As of February 28, 2025, the unemployment rate was 8.2%. The youth unemployment rate, however, was reported as 15.0% (FX Empire, 2025). In addition to economic factors, conflict and environmental crises, including wars, contribute to forced displacement, driving migration flows through Türkiye (Havan & Şişman, 2023). In this case, Türkiye, located at the crossroads, plays a crucial role in human trafficking networks. Owing to the county's geopolitical position and the world's cyclical situation, human trafficking has become a widespread crime in Türkiye. Furthermore, gender-based discrimination aggravates trafficking risks, particularly in male-dominated societies. In such societies, women and children who are not in a good financial state become potential victims, as in the case of Türkiye (Havan & Şişman, 2023).

Media and Human Trafficking: Representation in Cinema
1. The role of the media on human trafficking
Human trafficking has gained importance in the media as one of the fundamental issues of the 21st century. Media can be utilized to cover social issues, shape opinions, and present the "reality" (Dejen, 2020) as it has a facilitative impact on the resolution of social problems (Baguia, 2023). Hence, it can be used as a powerful means to increase social awareness in human trafficking (Todres, 2015).

Dejen's (2020) study aimed to assess the role of a local community radio in Ethiopia in addressing human trafficking issues. The news/program coverage of the Durame FM was analyzed. The analysis indicated that agriculture and health issues were emphasized more compared to human trafficking issues. Similarly, Beshah (2008) carried out a content analysis of the coverage of human trafficking through FM Addis 97.1 Radio Station. The findings showed that there was a need for a more frequent coverage of human trafficking in the media. Cabrera-Rodríguez and Antolínez-Merchán (2022) conducted a study to investigate how human trafficking is addressed in digital newspapers in Spain. The results revealed that there is a lack of media resources to inform and investigate the phenomenon, and sexual exploitation is the form of human trafficking that still dominates the media coverage.

2. Human trafficking in cinema to raise social awareness

As Todres (2015) highlights, the phenomenon of human trafficking has recently grasped the attention of the movie industry. In his essay, he examined *Human Trafficking* (2005), *Taken* (2009), and *The Whistleblower* (2011) in terms of how they portrayed human trafficking in the American movies, and addressed the misconceptions regarding human trafficking. In all the movies, the main focus was on sex trafficking and exploitation, which was criticized by Todres because all forms of human trafficking should be recognized and addressed. The other misconception was that all the trafficking victims were women and girls and were white. The essay also challenged the conception that exploitation is not rooted in our own cultures, and ""rescue" is the end" (p. 18). Rather than othering, self-acknowledgement is required to fully understand the issue of human trafficking. Also, "rescue" is just the beginning, what counts more is recovery and reintegration.

Plambech (2016) also addressed the issue of the depiction of human trafficking in two 21st century movies: *Trafficking* (2010) and *Becky's Journey* (2014). Based on her analysis, she proposed a more comprehensive depiction of human trafficking in films instead of solely possessing a one-dimensional perspective on sex trafficking and work. As part of the campaign against human trafficking in Nigeria, Shoroye's (2021) study provided information regarding Nollywood films thematizing human trafficking. Through the analyses of *Lady Bianca: Enslaved in Europe 1 & 2* (2001), *Western Union 1 & 2* (2007), and *Europe in My Heart* (2013), the study aimed to explore the conditions leading to the vulnerability of women and young girls as victims of trafficking. Another study unveiled human trafficking in relation to immigration in the critical analysis of *Rambo* and *Last Blood,* with a focus on the filmic representations of Mexico (Lengel & Newsom, 2020).

Although human trafficking in Türkiye has become a serious and common crime, and more action is needed to recognize and address this issue, its coverage in popular media, particularly in movies, is scarce. In a recent study, Ergün et al. (2023) examines the reflection of illegal migration in films through the Turkish film *Umuda Yolculuk* (*Journey of Hope*), which addresses the migration journey of a Turkish family seeking asylum in Switzerland, through content analysis. The findings revealed that the most crucial factor leading to increased illegal migration is the attractiveness of the destination. More studies investigating the theme of human trafficking in Turkish movies are required to better analyze the major underlying reasons for the rise in human trafficking in Türkiye, including the deterioration of

education and economic situation in the country, high unemployment rates, lack of hope, corruption, and moral decline.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study uses a descriptive, qualitative, and context-based research approach to explore how human trafficking is portrayed in Turkish cinema. The research focuses on two award-winning films, *Seaburners* and *More*. These films were selected as primary texts for their thematic depth and engagement with the socio-political realities of human trafficking, especially regarding women and children in Türkiye.

Manifest and latent content analysis have been utilized as the main method of analysis to interpret both surface-level content and underlying meanings (Berg & Lune, 2017). Manifest content analysis explores the clear, visible parts of the films, such as visual elements, spoken dialogue, and actions. Latent content analysis, however, looks deeper into hidden meanings, symbols, and emotions which may not be explicit. This method helps reveal complex issues concerning power, injustice, and personal struggle in movies, showing how media can reflect deeper societal problems (Berg & Lune, 2017). Using this approach, the study examines the abovementioned films, focusing on the vulnerability of trafficked individuals and the impact of human trafficking on their lives.

Selection of Films

Seaburners and *More,* each of which portray human trafficking in different contexts of Türkiye (i.e., *Seaburners*: the north; *More*: the south) have been selected as the primary texts. The former, directed by the Turkish Director Melisa Önel, was released in 2014. It depicts the story of a woman who discovers a group of refugees trying to cross the Black Sea. Similarly, the latter film, *More,* is a Turkish drama about the story of refugees who were coming from war-torn countries and were trying to go to Europe. The film, inspired by Hakan Günday's novel entitled *More*, was directed by Onur Saylak. It was shot in Antalya, and as part of the 52nd Karlovy Vary International Film Festival, its premier was released on 3 July 2017. It received many nominations and awards.

Analysis of Films

Manifest and latent content analysis, as the two key approaches particularly in media and communication studies and content analysis, were utilized in this study to bridge the surface level analysis and hidden analysis in content research (Insight7, 2025). As the name suggests, manifest content

analysis focuses on the explicit, surface-level content of a text or message, that is, what is directly observable and countable. In the surface level analysis, that is manifest content analysis, the focus is on words, images, or actions (i.e., explicit themes and symbols), all of which are tangible and observable elements. Latent content analysis, on the other hand, goes deeper by examining the underlying meanings, themes, or assumptions in a text or message, in other words, it focuses on what is implied rather than directly stated. This kind of analysis requires the exploration of the "hidden" beneath the surface. Hence, contextual meanings and underlying motives are analyzed (Berg & Lune, 2017, Kleinheksel et al., 2020). This study adopted an eclectic approach so that explicit messages as well as the underlying themes would be explored.

The first movie *Seaburners* depicts the story of Hamit who travels between the shady neighborhoods of İstanbul and a border town on the coast of the Black Sea. He works for Ali, a coal merchant who smuggles migrants. He takes illegal immigrants in the course of his return after transporting coal with his truck. Denise is a botanist who has travelled to Türkiye to contribute to an ongoing project. Hamit and Denise secretly meet in a hut by the sea at night. Hamit's only consolation is his relationship with Denise. However, the arrival of a new group of refugees leads to a tension between the two, deteriorating their relationship.

The movie primarily centers on Gaza, a fourteen-year-old boy. He lives with his father in a small coastal town. As an idealist student, he desires to leave this place and pursue his education in a large city. However, his father forces him to be involved in the human trafficking network, which is a reality that contrasts sharply with his dreams. Similar to his father, Gaza transforms into a human trafficker. He is now obliged to make a choice between building a life in this dark world full of crimes or becoming an immigrant himself. Despite trying hard, he is involuntarily forced to become involved in the crime of human trafficking.

Tables 3 and 4 present the manifest level analysis of *Seaburners* and *More* to reveal how vulnerability, exploitation, and struggle of the underrepresented minority are depicted from the perspectives of children and women in the movies.

Table 3

Vulnerability, Exploitation, and Struggle Depicted from the Perspectives of Children

	Seaburners	More

Recurring words/phrases	photo, dress, give, wait, restroom	Hurry up!, Come!, Cuma! (The name of the little boy)
(Recurring) actions	hiding, waiting, hugging, protecting, shouting, looking at photos, watching the cows, chatting with mom, obeying	hiding, waiting, drawing pictures, playing games, shouting, crying, coughing, flying paper planes, doing origami, practicing a foreign language, listening to stories, making music, dancing, doing hand shadow animals, holding ears, sharing, hitting, drinking alcohol, beating, escaping, smoking, reading books, cleaning, serving, helping, swimming, escaping, obeying, being beaten
(Recurring) sounds	cow moos, motorbike/truck arriving, sound of the blowing wind, sound of grass, sound of the sea waves, sound of the cow bells, police car siren	bucket hit, lullaby, people murmuring, coughing, crying, screaming, asking for help, and fighting, children playing games, flies buzzing, sound of the sea waves, sound of grass, music.
Prominent visuals/objects	the sea, swaying grass, people lying on the coast, man/people lying on the shore, cows, a photo album, family photos, a dress	Greek radio, a rap song the sea, swaying grass, vomit, a dirty kitchen, a messy house, a toy truck, a teddy bear, paper planes, an origami frog, drawings on the wall (SUN, house, tree, plane, bird), (test) books, Jack London's *John Barleycorn: Alcoholic Memoirs*, the sky & stars, the planets, piles of money, torch, tombstone, dead bee shell, a fan rotating, a welding mask, mirror
Overall emotional tones	fear, boredom, despair, longing, pessimism, sorrow, feeling lonely,	fear, boredom, optimism, pessimism, despair, anger, sorrow, regret, feeling isolated,

| insecure, homeless, lost, and stuck | lonely, insecure, homeless, lost, and stuck |

As the perspectives of children are reflected in the table, the recurring words in *Seaburners* are mainly simple and everyday words. Whereas, in *More*, urgent commands and repeated names like "Hurry up!", "Come!", "Cuma!" reflects a sense of urgency and control. The actions center on passivity, protection, and human connection (e.g., hugging, watching cows, chatting with mom) in *Seaburners*. In *More*, however, there is broader range in actions, from childlike innocence (drawing, games) to violence and survival (beating, escaping, drinking, serving). To be precise, *More* reflects a more violent environment, emphasizing the complexity and intensity of the trafficked individuals' experiences. The sounds in *Seaburners* are natural and calm: cow moos, wind, waves, grass, sirens. On the contrary, in *More,* both human and mechanical sounds (e.g., screaming, crying, fighting, music, coughing, children playing*)* have been utilized. The sound in *Seaburners* creates a feeling of loneliness and calm, while in *More,* it highlights chaos, pain, and emotional stress. The prominent visuals (e.g., sea, grass, photo album, cows*)* in *Seaburners* are minimal and symbolic, whereas denser and more metaphorical visuals and objects were used in *More* (e.g. toy truck, drawings, books, tombstone, money, mirror). More specifically, everyday objects are dominantly used in *More* so as to contrast innocence and exploitation. *Seaburners* deliberately isolates characters visually in order to emphasize solitude. The surface level analysis of the movies suggests emotional exhaustion and alienation, but *More* emphasizes tension and inner resistance. In *Seaburners*, the emotions highlighted are fear, longing, boredom, sorrow, and loneliness. *More* reflects a more complex emotional tone: fear, regret, despair, anger, isolation, and optimism.

Various underlying themes and meanings emerge in the movies. Regarding the innocence and corruption, for instance, childlike behaviors (drawing, making origami, playing) exist beside disturbing acts (beating, serving, smoking) in *More*. This reflects the loss of innocence, and how trafficking environments lead to the corruption of childhood. In *Seaburners*, the focus on photos, dresses, and hugging reflects a desire for a normal life and a sense of identity, during a time of displacement. The sea in the two movies symbolizes both freedom and fear. In *More*, the use of everyday objects (e.g., a tombstone, dirty kitchen, toy truck, books) symbolizes the collapse of domestic life, suggesting that the home is no longer a safe space. Recurring images like photo albums and cows in *Seaburners* are indicative of memory and disconnected identities. *More* uses drawings and books to show

both escape through imagination and a record of personal experiences, indicating a struggle to regain independence. Power and control are signalled in the movies in diverse forms. Commands such as "Hurry up!" and *"Come!"* in *More* reflect authority and domination. The repetition of the boy's name (Cuma!) suggests emotional manipulation. In *Seaburners*, direct commands are infrequent, and the focus is primarily on environmental sound, which suggests self-acceptance of unfair treatment. In other words, the characters are trapped by silence and isolation at the same time.

To wrap up, human trafficking was dealt with through different tones and techniques in these movies. *Seaburners* is reflective and submissive, while *More* is intense and direct. Each movie reveals different dimensions of suffering, control, and survival. Table 4 displays how vulnerability, exploitation, and struggle are depicted from the perspective of women.

Table 4

Vulnerability, Exploitation, and Struggle Depicted from the Perspective of Women

	Seaburners	*More*
Recurring words/phrase	money, passport, give, wait, restroom	Hurry up!, Come!, open, animal, money, goods
(Recurring) actions	hiding, waiting, hugging, protecting, shouting, looking at photos, chatting with children, obeying	hiding, waiting, shouting, crying, praying, reading Quran, drawing pictures, telling stories, singing a lullaby, begging, obeying, being raped, being beaten
(Recurring) sounds	cow moos, motorbike/truck arriving, sound of the blowing wind, sound of grass, sound of the sea waves, sound of the cow bells, police car siren	bucket hit, lullaby, people murmuring, coughing, crying, screaming, shouting, asking for help, fighting, and begging, children crying, children playing games, flies buzzing, sound of the sea waves, sound of grass, music
Prominent visuals/objects	the sea, swaying grass, man/people lying on the shore, cows, a photo album, family	the sea, swaying grass, drawings on the wall (SUN, hands, house, child), baby bottle

	photos, flowers/plants in jars	
Overall emotional tones	fear, despair, longing, pessimism, sorrow, feeling lonely, insecure, homeless, lost, and stuck	fear, pessimism, despair, sorrow, feeling lonely, insecure, homeless, lost, and stuck

From women's perspective, the recurring words such as money, passport, give, wait, and restroom point to survival needs and negotiation in *Seaburners*. In a way, the use of these words may be considered as proof of women's dependency on others. Commands like "Hurry up!", "Come!", and dehumanizing terms like "animal", "goods", indicate how women are controlled and reduced to objects. When the recurring actions in the two movies are compared, the actions such as hugging, chatting with children, and obeying in *Seaburners* represent women as nurturing, submissive, and emotionally controlled. They barely show resistance and deal with things quietly. In *More*, actions, including praying, begging, being raped and beaten, explicitly portray women's suffering and submission, through violence and powerlessness. *Seaburners'* use of natural, calm, and distant sounds such as cow moos, wind, sea, and sirens may emphasize emotional distance, loneliness, and an implicit trauma. In contrast, *More*'s use of human-centered sounds (e.g., crying, screaming, fighting, begging) reflects pain, resistance, and suffering, resulting in a profound emotional impact on audiences.

The analysis of prominent visuals and objects indicates that objects like family photos, flowers in jars, and photo albums suggest memory and a longing for stability in *Seaburners*. In *More, v*isuals like drawings, baby bottles, and images of children convey the loss of innocence and the impact of trauma on motherhood and childhood. Overall emotional tones in *Seaburners* can be proposed as fear, despair, longing, pessimism, loneliness, homelessness, and feeling lost and stuck. Similarly, fear, pessimism, sorrow, despair, homelessness, isolation, insecurity, and trauma are the emotional tones reflected through the emotional keywords in *More*. Despite the similarity in the emotional tones being portrayed, *Seaburners* presents quiet suffering, whereas *More* draws the viewer deeply into loud and visible trauma.

Women's vulnerability in *Seaburners* is portrayed through waiting, silence, and lack of control. Women are depicted as passive individuals, waiting for decisions made by others, specifically men. In *More*, women are not only vulnerable but also continuously mistreated. As for exploitation, the

movies show physical abuse, sexual violence, and forced obedience, highlighting women's exposure to systemic cruelty. *More* offers a direct depiction of women's being referred to as goods, commanded, abused, and rendered powerless. In *Seaburners*, exploitation is not shown explicitly. The emphasis is rather on emotional exploitation. Women's trauma is implied through silence, longing, and faded family memories. The presentation of struggle in *Seaburners* is quiet and internal, the characters are obliged to cope with hopelessness, identity loss, and isolation. *More*'s portrayal of struggle is physical, loud, and traumatic, on the contrary. Through the acts of begging, crying, and praying, it depicts resistance and despair.

To conclude, the two films unveil women's experience of displacement and exploitation, but through different lenses. *Seaburners* highlights emotional trauma in a silent way, *More* presents a harsh and loud depiction of abuse and exploitation. Each movie presents a unique gendered perspective pertaining to the issue of human trafficking. They both reveal how vulnerable children and women are in the context of human trafficking in Türkiye. Being mercilessly exploited and tortured by the more "powerful", they are the most fragile population.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

These two movies are of paramount importance in terms of how crucial it is to comprehensively understand and resolve the issue of human trafficking in this century both at the individual and social level, particularly at the crossroads, Türkiye. Due to the ongoing war between Ukraine and Russia and the unresolved conflicts in Syria and the neighboring countries, millions of men, women, and children have been forced to leave their homelands, in search for a more secure and humane life.

The first movie is about Hamit, who, in a way, is "lost" in his own country. Having no sense of belongingness and direction in life, he becomes involved in the illegal act of human trafficking. Being homeless and desperate, he struggles to survive psychologically, socially, and financially. The recurring use of the sea and swaying grass not only depict Hamit's psychological state and feeling of helplessness but also aid viewers to gain insight into the victim's psychological experience. To illustrate, the young girl in *Seaburners* attempts to establish a sense of safety and security in the barn by engaging in comforting activities such as looking at family photographs, recalling her favorite dress, listening to the sound of cows, embracing her mother, and engaging in conversation with her. At times, she feels miserable, jaded, frightened, and lost. She complies with her mother's instructions without question. Similarly, her mother feels as fearful as her.

With very little that she is able to provide for her daughter, she often feels desperate, insecure, lost, and occasionally stuck, like the flowers and plants that Denise, who has been a home to Hamit, places into jars. To what extent will they be able to attain improved living conditions and greater security? Is it feasible for them to achieve happiness in the future? Overcome by despair, she endures an extended period of waiting until she ultimately passes away alongside her daughter, finding peace in their final rest on the shore, embraced by the sand.

Overall, the movie portrays how migrants who escape war and poverty are vulnerable, and how their desperation can expose them to traffickers' exploitation. Hamit's transformation from an ordinary man to a participant in human trafficking illustrates the challenging moral dilemmas individuals confront when facing threats to survival. *Seaburners* explores the emotional burden and internal conflicts endured by those who are involved in exploitation.

The second movie *More* is about human greed, as the name suggests. It portrays the story of a violent, selfish, and an uneducated and uncaring father and a poor boy, Gaza, who is abused, neglected, and forced to serve for his father, a man with low self-esteem, whilst committing the crime of human trafficking. Despite being a successful student at school, he is not allowed to pursue his dreams, like those kids whose families have left their home countries for better living conditions. Day by day, he dies inside, while a woman in the underground storeroom is being exploited by his father, and while a boy dies locked in the truck. All women and children are exploited and tortured by the more "powerful". The women hide, wait, shout, cry, read the Quran, pray, and try to protect. When their mothers are begging, obeying, being beaten, singing lullabies, and telling stories for them, the children draw suns, houses, trees, and birds on the wall, fly paper planes, and play with paper frogs, which cannot jump any more. The women are perceived as the goods to be possessed and served to the officials, as victims of gender-based violence and sextortion. In a state of fear, hopelessness, and emotional hardship, they persistently await enhanced living conditions in the new lands with their families, striving for safety and security.

In the same vein as the first movie, *More* presents a captivating portrayal of the human trafficking crisis and illustrates how individuals can be dehumanized and treated as possessions. It critiques the normalization of exploitation within families and communities, particularly when the struggle for survival takes priority over moral values. Gaza's transformation from an innocent child to an active participant in human trafficking highlights the deep

psychological impact of such environments and the recurring nature of this issue across generations.

Similar to the more vulnerable depicted in the previous movies on human trafficking, these women and children suffer a lot due to grave violation of human rights (International Labour Organization, 2015). As suggested in literature, women are exploited for sexual purposes while children suffer more from forced labor and forced crime (International Labour Organization, 2015; Save the Children, 2025; United Nations, 2025). In their analysis of *Journey of Hope* (1990)*,* a Turkish film, Ergün et al. (2023) describes the humanitarian crises faced by migrants and refugees in the case of illegal immigration and what individuals can afford for a more livable environment. People who illegally immigrate become victims of human trafficking and inhumane living conditions.

Briefly, these two films enable viewers to explore the potential social, political, and economic reasons and consequences of human trafficking. Poverty, economic vulnerability, lack of economic stability and education, inequalities in societies, inadequate political measures by governments, and insufficient or poorly implemented policies result in corruption at multiple levels. As Enste and Heldman (2017) assert, corruption directly impacts inequality, the shadow economy, and crime. Thus, without understanding the root causes, one of which is the lack of safe migration options, sustainable solutions to human trafficking cannot be attained.

A more detailed and empathetic reading of *Seaburners* and *More* reveals how these films not only depict systemic failures but also advocate for the lived experiences of vulnerable individuals. Through the portrayal of characters who suffer displacement, fear and exploitation, the films arouse emotional responses that deepen viewers' understanding of the human cost of trafficking. Their use of minimal dialogue and symbolic imagery allows for reflection and emotional engagement, encouraging audiences to connect with the theme on a personal level.

As a form of popular culture, movies address and reflect this issue in an authentic and heart-wrenching way. Cinematic narratives should not only be appreciated for their artistic value but also critically analyzed for their potential to depict personal stories. In this sense, they offer a crucial understanding of the psychological and emotional dimensions of trafficking. Hence, a great many such films should be produced and analyzed so as to provide new perspectives on human trafficking and inform both public awareness and policy debates.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The analysis of these two films shows how critical arts and media are in the fight against human trafficking, and how crucial the role of Türkiye is in human trafficking in today's world. Cinema contributes to a deeper understanding of the nature and impact of human trafficking, for the films provide first-hand experiences, reflections, and perceptions of the most vulnerable, namely women and children, through their eyes. They also provide multiple perspectives, enabling the audience to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the social issues, with enhanced social awareness.

In light of these, it can be concluded that the increasing number and diversity of migrants and refugees in Türkiye, due to its position as a natural bridge between two continents and recent global socio-political developments, requires more effective humanitarian assistance, migration management strategies, and migrant protection. Under these circumstances, human trafficking, as a global issue, should be resolved and prevented in cooperation with all world countries and numerous international organizations. The underlying social, economic, and political causes linked to human trafficking should be carefully analyzed and addressed.

To address the ongoing challenges of migration and human trafficking in Türkiye, a proactive approach should be adopted. Humanitarian, international, and non-governmental organizations should work together for the sustainable management of migration and human trafficking (The International Organization for Migration, 2025). Policymakers should prioritize legal reforms, long-term integration policies, and cross-border cooperation in order to enhance the protection of vulnerable populations. Women and children protection should be urgently prioritized, and a new national action plan should be developed and implemented. Additionally, more action should be taken to overcome the issues of lack of commitment and inadequate funding.

In addition, Kalai (2014) underscores the importance of public education and awareness in combating trafficking. Educators can play a pivotal role by incorporating human rights and anti-trafficking education into school curricula so as to raise students' awareness from an early age. More training should be organized within the framework of strengthening the human rights protection of migrants and victims of human trafficking. Filmmakers and media professionals should also be encouraged and supported to produce socially conscious content which highlights trafficking and its impact on society, with the aim of contributing to public discourse and empathy. Various means of media should be used to inform and educate

people about human rights, empower them to protect their own rights, and inform authorities of their duties regarding human trafficking and human rights.

This study is limited to the analysis of two Turkish films, which may not fully represent the broader spectrum of media portrayals within the Turkish context and across different regions or cultural contexts. Thereby, future research could expand the scope by comparing media representations from diverse countries or delving into other forms of media, including documentaries, news coverage, or digital content.

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