



The Representation of Motherhood in Netflix Series: The Case of *the Maid* and *Who Were We Running From*¹

Türkiye ve Amerika Yapımı Netflix Dizilerinde Anneliğin Temsili: *Hizmetçi* ve *Biz Kimden Kaçıyorduk Anne* Örnekleri

Duygu Onay Çöker*

Abstract

This study, arguing that motherhood/mothering is a political act, analyzes two Netflix productions centered on the theme. To analyze the representation of mothering/motherhood, it applies Fiona Joy Green's (2020) three central concepts within feminist mothering: oppose the institution of motherhood, view mothering as an empowered and political act, and practice matroreform. The method of this study is Feminist Close Reading, which allows for a comparative analysis of whose narratives will be prioritized, amplifying the voices of marginalized perspectives across various traditions. The research focusing on Netflix delivering duplicate content to a large audience across different countries demonstrates that these productions do not romanticize motherhood, impose outdated gender roles, or define women solely through their familial roles. Instead, they reveal that the mothers in these narratives resist societal norms, representing women characters striving to fulfill their authentic identities and stay true to themselves.

Keywords: Motherhood/Mothering, Feminist Experience, Netflix Series, *Maid*, *Who Were We Running From*?

Öz

Bu araştırma, anneliğin politik bir pratik/rol olmasından hareketle iki Netflix dizisine odaklanarak, feminist medya çalışmalarının, kadınların medyada kurban ya da zayıf olarak, erkeklerle yalancı bir eşitlik içerisinde temsil edildiği yönündeki eleştirilerini temel alır. Bu bağlamda da seçilen iki diziyi ataerkil bir kurum ve feminist bir deneyim biçimi olarak alan annelik bağlamında tartışır. Green'in üç feminist annelik deneyimi bağlamı üzerinden bu dizilerdeki anneliğin temsilini analiz eder. Bulgular, söz konusu yapımların anneliği romantize etmediği, geleneksel toplumsal cinsiyet rollerini yeniden üretmediği, kadınları aile rolleri içine hapsetmediği yönündedir. Aksine, dizilerdeki annelik temsillerinin toplumsal normlara karşı çıkış olarak kodlandığı, kadınların otantik varoluşunu anneliğe indirgediği yönündedir. Çalışmada Netflix'in seçilmesinin sebebi, aynı içeriği benzer zamanlarda geniş kitlelerle paylaşma kapasitesi ve sansürden görece özerkliği, ek olarak dezavantajlı grupların temsil edebilmesidir. Ancak çalışma, tüm bu özelliklerle birlikte, ticari yönlerinin de dikkate alınarak, dijital platformların idealize edilmemesi gerekliliği de vurgular.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Annelik, Kurum ve Feminist Deneyim Olarak Annelik, Netflix, *Hizmetçi*, *Biz Kimden Kaçıyorduk Anne*?

* Asst. Prof., Duygu Onay Çöker, TED University, e-posta: duygu.coker@tedu.edu.tr ORCID No: 0000-0001-5705-8359.

¹ The original title of the series is "Biz Kimden Kaçıyorduk Anne?" but the word "mother" was removed in the English version.

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*I was haunted by the stereotype of the mother
whose love is “unconditional” and
by the visual and literary images of motherhood
as a single-minded identity.*

Adrienne Rich

Introduction

Feminist studies critique the representation of women in media, as they are often represented as passive, confined to traditional domestic roles, or as victims. These studies reveal how media representations are constructed. Media's representation of women employs some strategies from discourses and images to expert selection¹. Media associate men with the rational, scientific, and public spheres; on the other hand, they construct their discourses on women through false equality with men and subject women to symbolic annihilation (Butler and Paisley, 1980; Saktanber, 1993; Gencel-Bek and Binark, 2000; Tanrıöver, 2012; Alankuş, 2012; Aliefendioğlu and Onay Çöker, 2024). Feminist researchers have developed strategies for dealing with these unfair and unethical representations and rights violations in the media, suggesting transforming the politics of representation (Köker, 2012; Mater and Çalışırlar, 2012; Demir, 2012). The media in turn has responded hesitantly to these criticisms, due to the patriarchal structure of language and traditional journalistic and editorial habitus. As media narratives highlighting women's strengths have gained attention and increased viewership, such productions have also become more frequent and widespread. This research focuses on two of these series to analyze representations of women, choosing two different women coming from different cultural backgrounds and socio-economic status, experiencing motherhood/mothering. These series are the U.S. production *Maid* (based on a best-selling memoir by Stephanie Land in 2019) by Molly Smith Metzler (2021), and the Turkish production *Who Were We Running from* (based on a 2007 novel by Perihan Mağden) by Ertan Kurtulan (2023) and they have recently become two of Turkey's most popular and watched TV series on Netflix.

The primary reason for choosing these series is to conduct a comparative analysis, as both focus on motherhood/mothering through different cultural perspectives. These series, despite being produced in vastly different cultural and socio-political contexts, both represent how motherhood serves as a site of resistance and vulnerability. The second reason to focus on these two series is that they ranked among the most-

¹ Hülya Uğur Tanrıöver (2012, p. 167) states that experts are usually chosen from among men, and sources are also selected from men to ensure the reliability of the news.

watched shows in their respective countries during the time they aired, and both were distributed to other countries through Netflix's global distribution (Tudum, 2025). Finally, *Maid* provides a realistic and class-conscious representation of a mother dealing with domestic violence and institutional neglect. However, *Who Were We Running From?* offers a more allegorical representation of a mother escaping an unnamed threat through cultural norms. Therefore, comparing these two series allows for a critical examination of how national narratives and gender ideologies shape the representation of motherhood and female agency in contemporary television. These series focus on the struggles of single mothers within their class structure and the culture they belong to. In the context of motherhood, they have common characteristics, such that both women are represented as strong and experiencing mothering through a feminist perspective, and they are displaced women with their daughters in a non-settled arrangement. On the other hand, the differences in their motherhood are pronounced, which could also be based on class differences. One represents the working class, while the other portrays a mother who has never worked but is wealthy. Therefore, this research comparatively analyzes these series' representations of motherhood/mothering and class.

This research holds a feminist perspective, which accepts questioning the sources of power, concentrating on unequal power relations, revealing them, and making patriarchy visible. Primarily focusing on the representation of motherhood, this research contextualizes the theoretical part through critical motherhood studies, which mainly emerged via the more extensive disciplines of feminist studies. The feminist literature contextualizes motherhood from different perspectives. In her monumental work, Adrienne Rich explains motherhood as an institution and experience (1976). As an institution, the term "motherhood" is solely patriarchal, which is male-defined and controlled. In *Of Woman Born*, Rich (1976) also problematizes two features of modern patriarchal motherhood that are particularly harmful to mothers. These assumptions are that mothering is natural to women and that child-rearing is the responsibility of the biological mother. Therefore, motherhood as an institution is deeply oppressive to women, according to Rich. On the other hand, "mothering" refers to women's experiences of mothering and is defined as centered and potentially empowering to women (O'Reilly, 2008:4-13). As a feminist practice/theory of mothering, it functions as a counternarrative of motherhood (O'Reilly, 2008:4-13). It seeks to interrupt the master narrative of motherhood to imagine and implement a view of mothering, which refers to any practice that aims to challenge and change various

aspects of patriarchal motherhood that cause mothering to be limiting or oppressive to women (O'Reilly, 2008:19). Although the literature review of motherhood reveals Rich's (1976) distinction between institution and experience remains relevant, feminist literature has broad perspectives on motherhood thought.

The methodology of this research is Feminist Close Reading, which insists that reading is not neutral but a political act. Feminist close reading is a method that critically interrogates gender relations and power structures in texts, revealing how female characters are positioned around themes such as subjectivity, motherhood, poverty, and violence (Moi, 1985; Gilbert & Gubar, 1979). Uncovering gendered dynamics across different texts, traditions, or contexts, this methodology provides a critical comparison that traditional methods might overlook. Since this research explores how motherhood is constructed and challenged across different cultures and how it interacts with various power structures in these contexts, this methodology provides a transformation in our understanding of cultural productions across differences through exposition and challenge. Therefore, applying Feminist Close Reading to this research enables conducting a comparative study that ethically reflects on whose stories will be prioritized, amplifying the perspectives of marginalized voices across traditions. While *Maid* focuses on a poor mother's struggle with state institutions, *Who Were We Running from* takes a more internal approach to examine the intergenerational effects of patriarchal violence. In both cases, this methodology enables an analysis of not only the thematic content but also the ways in which gender relations are constructed aesthetically and structurally within the narrative form (DuPlessis, 1985). Therefore, this study contributes to feminist critiques of digital platforms and broadens the application of feminist close readings in media studies. It might also be an interesting case for understanding the representation of motherhood through two different cultures after 2020, from Netflix, which enables the international flow of content.

Despite its contributions, this study has limitations. It focuses on two series for an in-depth analysis and textual features, neglecting audience reception and the dynamics of meaning-making (Radway, 1984) that occur during the viewing process.

The digital platform chosen for this research, Netflix, a leading content provider and distributor in the film and television industry, enables the international flow of content (Pietaryte and Suzina, 2022; Perkins & Schreiber, 2019). The subscription-video-on-demand platform is available to over 193 million global subscribers in over 190

countries (Pietaryte and Suzina, 2022). Since Platform broadcasting can be relatively independent of censorship and capable of representing disadvantaged groups, it can critique widely accepted traditional established norms, including gender². Netflix also specifies its institutional policy as social movements (me too, black lives matter and queer movements), gender equality, non-heteronormative family representation, and cultural and ethnic plurality (Hallinan and Striphas, 2014; Tryon, 2013; Burroughs, 2018; Jenner, 2018; Lobato, 2019; Matrix, 2021). However, it is important not to idealize digital platforms and ignore their commercial aspects. As Chuck Tryon emphasizes (2013), Netflix provides an on-demand culture and takes shape through its audience. This research specifically chooses Netflix because it simultaneously brings the same content to a large audience living in different countries, allowing us to make a detailed comparison between productions.

Motherhood Theories: Motherhood as Institution and Experience

It is crucial to understand how institution-motherhood, materially and discursively, oppresses mothers and to consider how a theoretical model of empowered mothering may function as a counter-narrative to resist and redefine patriarchal motherhood so as to empower mothers and benefit their children. In detailing the context of patriarchal motherhood and the possibilities of empowered mothering, as well as in signaling new directions for research, this study on maternal theory seeks to reveal the representation of mothering to achieve a more just world.

There are noteworthy works on motherhood and its feminist connotations that deserve to be mentioned. Adrienne Rich's seminal text *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (1976) distinguishes between motherhood as an institution and as an experience. Before this, Betty Friedan (1963), Ann Oakley (1974), Dorothy Dinnerstein (1976), Sara Ruddick (1979), Betsy Wearing (1984), and Sharon Hays (1996) had written on the subject of motherhood. Among the texts on motherhood, Nancy Chodorow's *The Reproduction of Mothering* (1978) examines the foundations of motherhood through psycho-social factors. Other significant works include Susan E. Chase and Mary F. Rogers' *Mothers & Children: Feminist Analysis and Personal Narratives* (2001). Andrea O'Reilly's edited volume *Feminist Mothering* (2020) stands out as it deconstructs

² Bulut argues that despite Netflix's claims of respecting creative freedom and artistic expression, its operations in Turkey are subject to and compliant with state censorship and regulation (2025).

motherhood norms and analyzes how they can be eroded. Additionally, *The Routledge Companion to Motherhood* is notable for being the first to address motherhood studies in a broad context, from queering motherhood to disabled mothers. In the subsequent period, the scope of studies on motherhood has expanded to include literature, culture, art, and media. Élisabeth Badinter, in *The Myth of Motherhood* (1981a), problematizes the concept of the “maternal instinct,” while in *Mother Love: Myth and Reality* (1981b), she argues that maternal love is not instinctive but extraordinarily powerful. There are also collections in early 2000’s called *From Motherhood to Mothering: The Legacy of Adrienne Rich’s Of Mother Born* by Andrea O’Reilly (2004b) and *Mother Outlaws: Theories and Practices of Empowered Mothering* by Horwitz (2004), *Mothering and Feminism* by Amber Kinser (2008), *Feminist Mothering in Theory and Practice, 1985–1995: A Study in Transformative Politics* (2009) and *Feminist Mothering* (2009) by Joy Green, and the anthology called *Feminist Parenting* (2016) by Lynn Comerford et al.

One of the significant studies on motherhood in Turkish literature is Aksu Bora’s (2001) research, *“The Transformation of Motherhood Identity in the Turkish Modernization Process.”* Bora argues that for feminism in Turkey to be grounded in local dynamics, the “private” domains, such as motherhood, must be politicized. In 2009, *Amargi* published a special issue discussing motherhood. Elif Ekin Akşit (2013) explores how nationalist and modernization projects in the Ottoman Empire and the Turkish Republic often highlighted the qualities associated with motherhood. She refers to these qualities as “cultural banks,” which played a crucial role in envisioning new communities, promoting state ideology, and linking this role directly to mother tongue education and an idealized domestic sphere. Nükhet Sirman (2020) argued that motherhood in Turkey functions as an institution that is as powerful as the state itself.

Starting with Adrienne Rich’s highlight of motherhood (1976) as an institution and experience would be useful. Her crucial distinction between motherhood as an institution and mothering as an experience made way for a paradigm shift in understanding feminist mothering. After Rich’s highlight, motherhood studies continue to grow. However, Rich’s book is recognized as the leading and most important book about motherhood (Hallstein, O’Reilly, Giles, 2020:1). Her book was not an attack on the family or on mothering, except as she writes, defined and restricted under patriarchy (1976:8). She explains motherhood as a patriarchal institution that is defined and controlled by men and oppressive to women. On the other hand, mothering is defined by

women and can potentially empower women. "The term mothering refers to women's lived experiences of childrearing as they both conform to and/or resist the patriarchal institution of motherhood and its oppressive ideology." (Hallstein, O'Reilly, Giles, 2020:2). According to Green, "Narrowly established and institutionalized patriarchal rules and expectations attempt to dictate familial and child-rearing roles, responsibilities, and relationships among women, children, and men." (2009:67-68). Mothering, on the other hand, offers a potential empowerment for mothers. This perspective attributes agency to mothers, values mothers' labour effort, and emphasizes female-defined and women-centered experiences of mothering. Therefore, creating an interest in and the space to explore the wide range of women's experiences of child-rearing within the institution of motherhood (Green, 2009:37-38). Green explains mothering as both political and a way to mother against motherhood (2009). Unlike previous feminist theorizing about motherhood, which often viewed mothers as dupes or victims of patriarchy, feminist mothering allows for the agency and autonomy of mothers within the patriarchal institution of motherhood. In the end, the institution of motherhood and its reproduction constitute a social process encompassing both economic and power relations and a structure informed by multiple ideologies. However, all these discussions cannot ignore that motherhood also involves a system of emotions, experiences, and even a utopia (Sirman, 2020:549). As long as approaches persist that define and complete women through motherhood, it will remain a contested domain within feminist theory (Tuğrul, 2018).

This study examines two of Turkey's most popular TV series and explores the representation of mothers who are required to leave their homes. By amplifying the voices of mothers often marginalized by their communities due to factors such as their independence, authenticity, class, and resilience, highlighting the social inequities present in society, this study also reveals the empowered and creative responses of motherhood. This study focuses on how mothering from diverse cultures and backgrounds challenges traditional patriarchal norms. It analyzes the similarities and differences between the mother characters in Turkish and American contexts. Despite the limited options for escape presented to women in both societies, the mothers in these series resist societal expectations of motherhood and forge their identities through their experiences.

Method

*It is only because Demeter has autonomy and
independent resources
that she can protect Persephone*
(Crittenden, 2010: 241).

The methodology of this study is Feminist Close Reading, which considers the texts as not “a transparent medium which only carries the author's ideas” but gives attention to questions such as gender, race, or class and aims to change how gender is represented (Mills, 1995:11). This method examines texts to reveal how they reflect, reinforce, or challenge power structures. As Rachel Blau DuPlessis explains, “Feminist Close Reading locates points at which narrative and language work to reinforce or challenge conventional sexual politics” (1985:5). It builds on the traditional technique of close reading, which involves a detailed focus on language, structure, imagery, and form. Different from traditional close reading, which often aims to isolate the text from its historical or political contexts to focus on its formal qualities, Feminist Close Reading insists that gender, power, and historical context cannot be separated from textual meaning.

By employing a feminist and critical perspective, this approach asks how texts construct, challenge, or normalize ideas about gender, sexuality, embodiment, and identity. Asking critical questions and concentrating on aspects of texts can tell the reader more about the text. “Whose voices are heard, and whose are silenced?”, “How are women, queer people, and other marginalized subjects represented?”, and “How does language encode social hierarchies or possibilities for resistance?” might be questions. As Toril Moi suggests in *Sexual/Textual Politics*, “Feminist criticism must begin by asking not just what a text means, but how it produces meaning—especially how it constructs gendered subject positions.” (1985:3-5). The central aim of this approach revolves around the examination of gender-specific language, metaphors, and imagery. It also pays careful attention to the implications of silences, omissions, and marginalizations. This methodology provides a critical lens that effectively challenges conventional beliefs concerning bodies, sexuality, reproduction, family dynamics, and labor issues. Moreover, it emphasizes the necessity of understanding the intersections with race, class, colonialism, and various power structures as fundamental contexts to consider.

As a methodology of a fundamental critique, it focuses on how texts are written and how women are represented or described in texts (Mills, 1995:12). Therefore, to problematize the dominant discourses of motherhood and criticize the patriarchal structures of the term,

applying Feminist Close Reading to the series is highly productive. It is essential to analyze texts carefully regarding systematic language choices, which may help the reader become aware of how language choices may serve the interests of some people to the detriment of others. It is crucial to help increase consciousness of the complex relationships between language and power, particularly of how language contributes to the domination of some people by others (Fairclough, 1989). Thus, feminist close reading as a critical analysis of language helps the reader become aware of the ideologies surrounding motherhood/mothering and intertextual contexts such as race, ethnicity, and class, all of which can be oppressive. In the context of *Maid* and *Who Were We Running From?*, this involves examining how motherhood is performed, narrated, and made either visible or invisible in relation to broader structures through these intertextual areas. This methodology regarding this series allows us to reveal the often invisible emotional and physical caregiving through repetitive visual motifs. It also emphasizes the patriarchal institutional language in welfare, public office, hotels, and legal documentation on motherhood. Environments like hotels and public streets symbolize the mother's exile from societal norms. A feminist close reading reveals how both series construct motherhood within broader systemic contexts, highlighting both explicit representations and the marginalization of women's struggles and experiences.

Analysis and Discussion

While feminist mothering is as unique as those who practice it, it is also an area of study, according to O'Reilly, and it is fundamental to understanding, as well as theorizing, the lived experiences of mothers, mothering, and motherhood. She emphasizes that feminist mothering is also a significant element of motherhood studies, maternal theory, and feminist theory because feminist mothering has the potential to redefine motherhood and undermine and transform patriarchal culture at large (2020:20). This paper adopts themes within feminist mothering to analyze the representation of motherhood in Turkish and the US series applying Green's three central concepts within feminist mothering: (1) understanding, troubling, and opposing the institution of motherhood, (2) viewing (feminist) mothering as an empowered and political act; (3) practicing matroreform (2020:38).

Since motherhood is not natural or biological, it is fundamentally a cultural practice. Therefore, its meaning varies with time and place. Motherhood has been redesigned in response to changing economic and societal factors. Ruddick writes that it is crucial to analyze the

experience or practice of mothering as distinct from the mother's identity (1979, p.531). "It is the practice of mothering that makes one a mother, not a biological or social imperative [and] [t]herefore, the title of 'mother' is not strictly limited to biological mothers, or even women." (LaChance, 2010:727).



Image 1: One Dollar Store, *The Maid*, Maddy and Alex, Episode 1, Season 1, Netflix, 2021.

Both series represent single and powerful women as mothers. The mothers in the selected series both problematize and criticize their own mothers from the patriarchal motherhood system, and through their own routines of motherhood, they practice the exact opposite. In *Maid*, Alex is a young, single mother determined to create a better life for her 4-year-old daughter, Maddy. After fleeing her abusive boyfriend, Sean, she does everything she can to survive. Alex takes low-paying jobs as a maid and stays in shelters as she struggles to earn enough to provide a stable home for herself and Maddy.

Who Were We Running From follows a mother-daughter duo who are on the run, trying to escape from the mother's painful past. The mother is a stern and determined woman, often dressed in black, who goes by no specific name. Her daughter, a young woman who dresses and behaves like a child, is nicknamed "Bambi," inspired by a children's book. Bambi appears to have an unhealthy attachment to her mother. Although she is an adult, she resembles a child in both appearance and behavior, wearing colorful dresses, sporting ponytails, carrying rainbow-colored bags, and playing with dolls



Image 2: *Who Were We Running from?*, Episode 3, Season 1, Netflix, 2023.

Understanding, troubling, and opposing the institution of motherhood

The first theme, “understanding, troubling, and opposing the institution of motherhood”, emphasizes that the institution of motherhood is constructed through patriarchal ideology. According to Rich, “institutionalized motherhood demands of women maternal ‘instinct’ rather than intelligence, selflessness rather than self-realization, relation to others rather than the creation of self” (1976:274–275). Similarly, in *The Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood* (1996:97-131), Hays argues that institutionalized motherhood incorporates “an ideology of intensive mothering” that believes mothers, not fathers, should spend an enormous amount of time, physical and emotional energy, and money raising children. This oppressive structure values the ideology of intensive mothering, and this mothering requires “a woman’s love and self-sacrifice for her children over any other interest or responsibility she may have” (Hays,1996:97-131). The ideology of intensive mothering then reproduces that men are superior in their profession in public space while women are in the domestic sphere with their children.

In the narrative of *Maid*, following Alex, a young mother whose quest for independence is hindered by various systemic challenges, including domestic violence, the welfare system, and economic uncertainty. It is

crucial to focus on the scenes that represent Alex's interactions with institutional bureaucracy, such as her experiences with the shelter, the court system, and the challenges of custodial structures. This exploration is essential for understanding, critiquing, and questioning the institution of motherhood. Her journey illustrates what O'Reilly (2004b) identifies as the "motherhood mandate," where societal institutions impose expectations on mothers to prioritize self-sacrifice through limited support systems. The bureaucratic challenges that Alex encounters resonate with Rich's critique of how motherhood can serve to discipline and restrict women (1976). For instance, the scenes representing the shelter and social services illustrate how institutional frameworks regulate and scrutinize single mothers. Alex seeks refuge in a domestic violence shelter and navigates the bureaucratic welfare system. The narrative represents Alex as both vulnerable and resilient. Alex challenges dominant ideologies of motherhood that are tied to marriage and economic stability. The first scene that should be focused on happens in court to advocate for custody of her daughter. In court, the shadow of financial instability creates a courtroom atmosphere heavy with gendered judgment. In this context, Alex's economic situation undermines her credibility and status as a mother. Another scene focuses on Alex during her work as a house cleaner, where surreal and fragmented imagery visualizes her dissociative moments. These depictions reveal the often invisible and exploitative nature of care and emotional labor.



Image 3: Thief, *The Maid*, Maddy and Alex, Episode 5, Season 1, Netflix, 2021.

The text draws on Arlie Hochschild's theory of "emotional labor" (1983), emphasizing the psychological burdens of gendered, low-wage work. Emotional labor is often expected disproportionately from women, who are socially conditioned and professionally required to display warmth, patience, and empathy. Alex embodies emotional labor not only in her low-wage cleaning job but also in her relationships with her daughter, her abusive partner, and authorities. She frequently feels compelled to conceal her exhaustion to present herself as "grateful". Alex's journey represents motherhood as an act of resistance, resonating with Ruddick's concept of "maternal thinking" (1979). This idea takes caregiving as both political and ethical. As Alex's relationship with Sean evolves, she is forced to pause her ambitions for a graduate degree due to his controlling behavior. This situation urges her to reflect on her father's struggles with alcoholism and violence. Alex's mother also fails to recognize Sean as an abuser. Alex challenges this perspective, arguing that Sean's control on her is unacceptable. She also highlights the need to confront these issues to regain her autonomy within her complex family dynamics.

In *Who Were We Running From?*, the mother strategically extricates herself and her daughter from conventional institutional frameworks, ultimately presenting an alternative yet equally complex vision of motherhood. Her emotional isolation echoes the cultural fantasy of the ideal mother, as described by Jacqueline Rose (2018), a fantasy that ultimately collapses under the burdens of trauma and societal disillusionment. Although the unnamed mother seeks to reject patriarchal structures, her approach simultaneously undermines her child's subjectivity, illustrating how maternal resistance can inadvertently perpetuate control in a different guise. In the series, the nameless mother rejects her own mother's patriarchal beliefs and the expectation of a perfect family. Nevertheless, she remains profoundly influenced by her mother's traumatic legacy, contributing to her demise. Despite her struggles, she perceives her mother as an adversary. This oppressive patriarchal framework and her mother's rigid control have enveloped her in deep despair. The depictions of the nameless mother facing hotel evictions and encounters with male authority figures, particularly in the critical final scenes, deserve special attention.



Image 4: *Who Were We Running from?*, Episode 1, Season 1, Netflix, 2023.

The mother and daughter are perpetually on the move frequently faced with evictions from various temporary shelters. This scenario represents the instability and social invisibility experienced by a mother who actively challenges traditional domestic roles. Her decision to avoid being settled resonates with feminist critiques that argue motherhood is often shaped by state authority and institutional oversight (Rich, 1976; O'Reilly, 2008). She responds with noticeable suspicion or aggression towards male hotel managers, police officers, or medical personnel. This research reads her reactions as not an individual pathology but rather as resistance to systemic gendered structures. The mother meets a violent end after a standoff with authorities, symbolizing the system's rejection of a non-normative maternal figure. This reclaims maternal defiance as a political statement rather than a pathological one.



Image 5: *Who Were We Running from?*, Episode 3, Season 1, Netflix, 2023.

Feminist Mothering as an Empowered and Political Act

Second Theme, viewing (feminist) mothering as an empowered and political act, means that while mothering is often viewed as a private and apolitical act within the dominant patriarchal paradigm, feminist mothering is recognized as political and culturally significant, as Green highlights (2020, p. 36-50). In this context, "empowered" or "free" mothering, in Smith's words (2003:168-241), can only become a reality through the dismantling of patriarchal motherhood. Empowered mothers are better equipped to protect and advocate for their children. They can create meaningful and lasting societal changes through social and political activism, as well as by the way they raise their children (Smith, 2003:168-241). Bernard (1974:46) explains that empowering mothers means fostering authenticity and critical consciousness, enabling them to gain control over their lives and make informed decisions. Crittenden (2010:120) argues that children flourish when their mothers have sufficient income and authority to invest in their well-being.

In the context of Green's "Feminist Mothering as an Empowered and Political Act" (2020), the character of Alex in *Maid* should be closely examined through the lens of maternal agency and choice. When Alex chooses to leave Sean and seeks refuge at a domestic violence center,

she embodies a powerful assertion of autonomy over victimhood. This decision directly challenges the entrenched patriarchal belief that mothers must suffer in abusive relationships for the sake of family cohesion. Her actions embody resistance and self-determination. Her work and survival as maternal labor are another context here. While she performs domestic work in affluent homes, she concurrently grapples with the challenges of securing adequate childcare and stable housing. This duality of her labor not only serves economic needs but extends into the realm of maternal care as well. Therefore, the representation politicizes maternal sacrifice and reveals how class and gender intersect in the undervaluing of mothering. Another context is breaking generational cycles, revealing Alex's dialogs with her own mother about her instability and decision to provide her daughter with a different life, which are conscious and transformative.



Image 6: See Glass, *The Maid*, Maddy and Alex, Episode 3, Season 1, Netflix, 2021.

Alex's aim transcends merely reproducing trauma; instead, she seeks to disrupt its cycle, reimagining motherhood as a pivotal avenue for political change. In the final, the process of rewriting the maternal narrative encapsulates her journey in composing her admissions essay, wherein she confidently asserts her voice as both a mother and a writer. In these instances, language and self-expression emerge as powerful instruments of empowerment. She articulates her personal narrative, fiercely reclaiming authorship of her maternal identity while simultaneo-

usly challenging the prevailing stereotypes surrounding the “unfit” single mother. Through this, she not only enriches her own story but also contributes to a broader dialogue on the complexities of motherhood.

In *Who Were We Running From?*, on the other hand, the mother’s defiance against institutional control is evident when she chooses not to register her child in school, deliberately avoids hospitals, and consistently flees from any institution. By doing so, she avoids subjecting her daughter to state surveillance and patriarchal institutions, which serves as a radical assertion of her maternal autonomy. Her actions challenge the notion that “good motherhood” must conform to institutional validation. The protection as a political defiance is represented through the mother’s frequent relocation to protect her daughter, living outside societal norms. The movements represent a crucial challenge to the existing systems that fail to safeguard the marginalized. The mother embodies a form of resistance against societal structures that unjustly penalize women who diverge from traditional norms. Breaking the silence and secrecy also represents the tension that allows a feminist reading of intergenerational trauma. The mother’s attempt to hide patriarchy from her through silence is flawed but rooted in a politicized form of mothering that prioritizes safety over transparency. Her death signifies the harsh consequences of challenging patriarchal views on motherhood and represents her role as a mother of a political statement.

Green’s (2020) first two themes, (a) “understanding, troubling, and opposing the institution of motherhood” and (b) “feminist mothering as an empowered and political act,” have an intersecting structure, encompassing each other. Both emphasize the importance of the mother staying true to her *authentic* existence. Ruddrick defines authentic motherhood as “involving independence of mind, the courage to challenge dominant values, honesty about the realities of motherhood, and staying true to oneself as a mother” (1979:112). Focusing on maternal authority and autonomy, Ruddrick also refers to one’s confidence and ability to assert power within the household (111-112). Maternal inauthenticity, on the other hand, as Ruddrick (1979:111-112) expressed, is a “repudiation of one’s own perceptions and values,” leading mothers to relinquish authority to others. Mothers lose confidence in their own values and their understanding of their children’s needs. In a patriarchal culture, women who conform to traditional expectations of motherhood are considered “good” mothers, while those who are mothers outside or against these norms are labeled “bad” mothers. However, Rich (1976) argues that to become empowered mothers, they may need to embrace the role of “bad” mothers or “mother outlaws.”

These concepts involve defining and determining one's own life and mothering practices, including the refusal to relinquish or dismiss personal perceptions and values. Maternal advocacy and activism emphasize the political and social dimensions of mothering, which can manifest through anti-sexist child-rearing practices or other forms of activism. Additionally, they challenge conventional notions of motherhood, family dynamics, child-rearing, and activism. O'Reilly explains (2020:20), "There is no universal experience of motherhood. Patriarchal motherhood is neither natural nor inevitable. And since the patriarchal institution is socially constructed, it can be challenged and changed.". Therefore, the way to challenge socially constructed motherhood is related to empowered and authentic motherhood. In both series, which represent two different cultures, the characters are candidates for being seen as *bad mothers* in the eyes of society. In this sense, the perception of series is similar. They represent mothers who do not return to their homes, not raise their children in the so-called safe family, where psychological violence prevails. Alex perseveres under challenging conditions to build a better life for herself and her daughter, aiming to pursue a professional writing career. Similarly, the unnamed mother leaves her family home to maintain her authenticity after giving birth. Both narratives highlight the importance of authenticity in motherhood.

***Practicing Matroreform*³**

The third theme is practicing matroreform. According to Green, matroreform is the act, desire, and process of reclaiming the power of motherhood. It represents a progressive movement aimed at developing a new approach to mothering. Matroreform seeks to establish new rules and practices for motherhood by creating alternative, non-patriarchal family structures that empower both mothers and children. This involves educating children about the patriarchal society, fostering respectful, equitable, and non-hierarchical relationships between

³ Green describes matroreform as a process through which feminist mothers seek to redefine the role of motherhood to align more closely with feminist values and objectives (1994). According to Green, matroreform is defined as "The deliberate transformation of motherhood, carried out by feminist mothers, to challenge and revise dominant patriarchal norms and practices associated with mothering" (Green, 1994, p. 150). She highlights that feminist mothers actively reconstruct motherhood in various ways, such as challenging rigid gender roles in parenting, empowering both mothers and children, and reflecting feminist ethics like autonomy, mutual respect, and social justice. This process is often experienced and negotiated rather than formally theorized, meaning matroreform serves as both a practical strategy and a conceptual framework.

parents and children, and engaging in anti-sexist parenting along with the gender socialization of children. A key strategy of matroreform within feminist mothering is to intentionally educate children about how patriarchal and other oppressive systems influence the world, how societal structures are designed to privilege certain groups over others (Green, 2004:31-42). As Green (2020:40) explains, this includes but is not limited to patriarchal systems, as well as racist and white supremacist frameworks that perpetuate discrimination against people of color. Through a feminist upbringing, children are empowered to identify, analyze, and challenge discriminatory attitudes and behaviors rooted in heterosexism, homo/transphobia, racism, classism, ableism, and other forms of oppression. By creating a new form of motherhood through unique experiences, promoting a non-patriarchal alternative family structure, and teaching children new ways of relating that empower both them and their mothers, the importance of non-sexist and equal relationships is highlighted. At the same time, children are made aware of the oppressive nature of the male-dominated world.

Maid, could be read as a maternal journey through its matroreformative process. Alex left her house, which she had experienced domestic abuse and poverty. She asserts her autonomy and creates a new maternal identity grounded in choice, care, and justice. She rejects both her partner's control and her mother's instability, and this represents a conscious break from intergenerational trauma, which is a core tenet of matrilineal reform. She teaches her daughter about equal relationship, she will show her that the family structure is not sacred, that psychological abuse can always be nearby, and that they do not have to submit to it. The series presents a discourse that reflects the importance of freedom and the value of self-realization, which Maddy can derive from her mother's choices. At the end of the series, she chooses to write her story and seek education, making a model of feminist consciousness and empowerment. This reimagining of motherhood aligns with Green's (2020) call for transformative maternal praxis.



Image 7: Snaps, *The Maid*, Maddy and Alex, Episode 10, Season 1, Netflix, 2021.

In the Turkish series, it appears at first to conform to the “devoted but unstable” maternal figure. However, through a matroreform reading, it reveals deeper background. The audience listens to the mother from the perspective of her daughter, Bambi. She explains what she had learned from her mother about their fullfill their potential. Audience understands this from the act of them destroying the car, which represents the father's car, together. The idea of family holds no significance for them; what truly matters is the connection between the mother and daughter in the moment they share. In the narrative that stays true to the dialogues of the book *Bambi*, it is important that the mother opts for the approach of a child-centered book instead of the language of familial sanctity. Although the structure in Turkey provides a limited feminist maternal support system, and her choices are blocked by secrecy, control, and isolation, her maternal still acts challenge the normative codes of motherhood, particularly those tied to state-defined “ideal” mothering.

After seeing similarities in these series, it is essential not to overlook the class differences. Class and gender are inextricably linked in feminist theory, particularly in how they shape women's access to power, care, and autonomy. The Kalmanovitz Institute for Labor and the Working Poor⁴ defines class through various dimensions: societal hierarchy (income and opportunities), economics and politics (whose interests are prioritized in legislation and voting behaviors), and culture (with working-class individuals placing greater value on the common good

⁴ Situated at Georgetown University (Buzzanell, 2020:163)

and daily life). In her chapter titled “Poor and Working-Class Mothers” Buzzanell (2020:362-371) highlights that for working-class mothers, a key defining trait is employment in hourly-wage jobs under strict supervision. Economically, poor mothers are characterized by household income rather than individual earnings, alongside factors such as access to resources, quality of life, relative poverty, and structural issues like housing, healthcare, and time constraints (Buzzanell, 2020:362). These mothers usually are single mothers with low-income employment, of young age and low educational levels all contributing to poverty (Brady and Burroway, 2012:719). According to Buzzanell (2020:362), the United States has the highest rates of single mothers living in poverty among eighteen Western democracies. Buzzanell’s explanation of working-class mothers is crucial: “Single motherhood often is associated with poverty and working class” (363).

In Turkey, the discussion of women's poverty tends to focus on factors like labor force participation and education, rather than on the challenges of single motherhood. Significant contributing factors include household inequalities (Yaşar, 2013:231) and unpaid family labor (Alptekin, 2014: 27). Yıldız Ecevit states that poor and single mothers, if not a male-headed household model, face disproportionate hardship in accessing employment, housing, and childcare (Ecevit, 2007). The neoliberal restructuring of welfare services since the 2000s has exacerbated inequality in Turkey. Buğra and Keyder (2006) argue that social policy has increasingly depended on family and charity based support, placing the burden of care on women, particularly mothers. This situation is especially challenging for working-class mothers, who are forced to stretch their limited resources to meet both their children's needs and society's expectations for ideal maternal devotion. Güler (2019) notes that poor mothers who do not adhere to societal norms of mothering are more likely to be viewed as negligent or immoral, leading to state intervention or public criticism. Consequently, motherhood in Turkey is a highly classed experience where the responsibilities of care are unevenly distributed, and social respectability is influenced by both gender and social class. Despite the number of single mothers in Turkey rising to 1.8 million in 2022 (Tüik, 2025) the unnamed woman in *Whom Were We Running From* comes from an upper-income background, does not work, and relies on her family inheritance. This highlights a significant difference in the portrayal of motherhood between the two narratives: although the unnamed woman may face financial difficulties as her inheritance dwindles, she and her daughter do not belong to the working class.

Both series offer rich narratives that explore the entanglement of classed experiences of motherhood, survival, and social judgment, demonstrating what Skeggs (1997) terms the “symbolic violence” faced by working-class women whose identities are shaped and constrained by institutional and cultural class logics. Coming to parenting styles, research shows that poor and working-class mothers differ in parenting (Bluestone and Tamis-LeMonda, 1999:881-893). Bakker and Karsten (2013) note that working-class mothers often refrain from intervening in school matters. Due to working second and third shifts, they frequently coordinate schedules with partners or other adult and teenage family members to share responsibilities.

In this regard, *Maid* explores the complexities of feminized poverty through the story of Alex, a single mother navigating the challenges of care and cleaning work, which are often marginalized and racially perceived (Glenn, 1992). Alex’s journey to a better future for her and her daughter as she works as a maid represents working-class mothers. She cleans lavish homes for low wages, facing relentless challenges like bureaucratic barriers that hinder her access to assistance. With a meager \$18 at the start, a ticker tracks her diminishing savings as obstacles mount, including collapsing from exhaustion during her first job and losing her car in an accident with her toddler inside. The audience realizes that Alex’s mother cannot take care of her daughter and that she has no one to entrust her child to. The culture of poverty hinders mothers’ efforts to practice feminist parenting. Without invoking the ideology of maternal strength to comply with the system’s demands or using the stereotype of a woman who sacrifices everything for her family, the production represents the challenges Alex faces and how she struggle dealing with them. The series highlights that classed motherhood involves not only economic instability but also moral judgment. Alex is labeled “at risk” not due to her choices, but because of the systemic issues tied to poverty and domestic violence. This narrative emphasizes the connection between economic conditions and societal perceptions, urging viewers to recognize these critical issues. However, despite these hardships, education remains crucial for Alex, who strives to enroll her daughter in a quality kindergarten and return to university.

In contrast, *Who Were We Running From?* introduces a nameless mother who seems to free herself from societal limitations via financial independence. Nonetheless, her class status remains precarious as her financial resources diminish, leading to an unpredictable lifestyle in hotels alongside her daughter. Although she avoids state surveillance and the stigmatization of poverty, she ends up creating her own form of control over her daughter. From a feminist materialist viewpoint, her

story highlights the limitations of economic escape; while she evades direct poverty stigma, she cannot avoid societal punishment for rejecting normative motherhood. Her descent into criminality and mental distress echoes Federici's (2012) concept of the "pathologization of non-normative mothers" within capitalist societies that commodify care while criminalizing those who do not conform to idealized femininity. When considered together, these two narratives illuminate class as a compelling factor that profoundly influences the social visibility of maternal figures. In *Maid*, the challenges connected to class are unmistakably apparent, systematically regulated, and overtly oppressive; conversely, in *Who Were We Running From?*, class dynamics are more nuanced and hidden, yet they continue to play a significant role in the governance and punishment of motherhood. Both series powerfully reinforce feminist critiques regarding how motherhood, situated within the framework of capitalism, constitutes a classed and gendered form of labor, constantly subjected to economic exploitation and cultural discipline (O'Reilly, 2004a).

Conclusion

The series represents mothers' challenges without leaning on stereotypes of maternal sacrifice, highlighting their resilience in the face of adversity. In both productions, the experiences of mothering reveal more similarities than differences. Regarding Green's three concepts (2020), this study shows that the mother characters' autonomy creates a new maternal identity grounded in choice, care, and justice. Representing the instability and social invisibility of a mother who defies traditional domestic roles, this series views mothering as a chance for independence rather than dependency. The series rejects traditional gender norms, avoids romanticizing housewife roles, and does not adhere to the ideology of family sanctity or the stereotype that children need both a mother and a father. Instead, they define women by their rights and freedoms, presenting them as symbols of resistance. Idealized family images are downplayed, emphasizing that women lead lives independent of their roles as mothers. Therefore, it should be stated that the primary contribution of this study is the enhancement of awareness concerning empowering representations of women through motherhood in media.

The absence or rejection of domestic spaces in both narratives serves as a feminist critique of what Adrienne Rich (1976) describes as the patriarchal institution of motherhood, where women's reproductive labor is regulated and moralized within the confines of heterosexual family life. As these women navigate peripheral spaces, such as shelters,

hotels, and transient housing, they reveal how single motherhood, when separated from institutional recognition, is often viewed with suspicion and lacks structural support. This situation reflects Nancy Fraser's (2013) critique of care systems, in which the privatization of responsibility disproportionately impacts women, especially those who are single mothers living in poverty. These representations offer a compelling commentary on the institutional neglect. Moving forward, it should be postulated that the imperative for empowering representations of women and motherhood as a social role should be a focal point for further research.

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