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Examination of the Limitations and Inconsistencies of Different Representations of Women Infiltrating Popular Cinema through the Film *Aile Arasında (Among the Family)*

Popüler Sinemaya Sızan Farklı Kadın Temsillerinin Sınırlılıklarının ve Aykırılıklarının *Aile Arasında* Filmi Üzerinden İncelenmesi

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Abstract
Popular cinema constructs a fictional world that both reflects and reinforces societal perceptions of women's roles. Films play a crucial role in both depicting and legitimizing women's position in society by representing their roles within their narratives. In recent years, Turkish popular cinema has produced numerous films centered on women and their stories. A closer examination of these films reveals that female characters are frequently portrayed as strong, economically independent individuals who are also sensitive to gender and human rights issues. However, despite the depiction of these women as independent, their narratives remain constrained by the conventions of popular cinema. A striking example of this limitation is the persistent association of female protagonists' ultimate aspirations with marriage. In other words, while these films place women at the center of their narratives, their stories are largely confined to the theme of marriage, thereby restricting women's broader representation. Contemporary Turkish popular cinema continues to exhibit the characteristic features of classical narrative cinema -

Öz
Popüler sinema, kadınların rollerine ilişkin toplumsal algıları hem yansıtan hem de pekiştiren kurgusal bir dünya inşa etmektedir. Filmler, anlatılarında kadınların rollerini temsil ederek onların toplumdaki konumlarını hem tasvir etmede hem de meşrulaştırmada önemli bir rol oynamaktadır. Son yıllarda Türk popüler sineması, kadınları ve onların hikâyelerini merkeze alan çok sayıda film üretmiştir. Bu filmler daha yakından incelendiğinde, kadın karakterlerin sıklıkla güçlü, ekonomik olarak bağımsız ve aynı zamanda toplumsal cinsiyet ve insan hakları konularına duyarlı bireyler olarak tasvir edildiği görülmektedir. Ancak, bu kadınlar bağımsız olarak tasvir edilmelerine rağmen, kadınların hikâyeleri popüler sinemanın gelenekleri tarafından kısıtlanmaya devam etmektedir. Bu sınırlamanın çarpıcı bir örneği, kadın kahramanların nihai arzularının ısrarla evlilikle ilişkilendirilmesidir. Başka bir deyişle, bu filmler kadınları anlatılarının merkezine yerleştirirken, hikâyeleri büyük ölçüde evlilik temasıyla sınırlı kalmakta ve böylece kadınların daha geniş temsilini kısıtlamaktadır. Günümüz Türk popüler

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commonly associated with Yeşilçam- by reinforcing, rather than challenging, the institution of marriage. This study examines Aile Arasında (Açıktan, 2017), a film that foregrounds female characters within its narrative. Written by Gulse Birsel, one of Turkey's most prominent female screenwriters, the film presents female characters with diverse identities. This research explores how women of varying backgrounds are represented in the film and how their perspectives on marriage are constructed within the storyline. By doing so, this study seeks to illuminate the limitations and contradictions inherent in a popular film that ostensibly prioritizes women's stories. The analysis reveals that while the film portrays female characters who transcend traditional gender roles, it simultaneously reproduces the very norms that the patriarchal structure deems appropriate for both women and men. The film conveys a message to the audience that the expectations of of patriarchal society remain valid and persist across different social groups and lifestyles. A closer reading further highlights how the film emphasizes the enduring significance of social norms, even for characters who might otherwise be considered "marginal."

Keywords: *Popular Cinema, Turkish Cinema, Gender, Family, Women in Turkish Cinema.*

sineması, evlilik kurumuna meydan okumaktan ziyade onu pekiştirerek, Yeşilçam'la özdeşleşen klasik anlatı sinemasının karakteristik özelliklerini sergilemeye devam etmektedir. Bu çalışma, anlatısında kadın karakterleri ön plana çıkaran Aile Arasında (Açıktan, 2017) filmini incelemektedir. Senaryosunu Türkiye'nin önde gelen kadın senaristlerinden Gülse Birsel'in kaleme aldığı filmde, farklı kimliklere sahip kadın karakterler yer almaktadır. Bu araştırma, farklı geçmişlere sahip kadınların filmde nasıl temsil edildiğini ve evliliğe bakış açılarının hikâye içinde nasıl inşa edildiğini incelemektedir. Böylece bu çalışma, görünürde kadın hikâyelerine öncelik veren popüler bir filmin doğasında var olan sınırlamaları ve çelişkileri aydınlatmayı amaçlamaktadır. Analiz, filmin geleneksel toplumsal cinsiyet rollerini aşan kadın karakterleri resmederken, aynı zamanda ataerkil yapının hem kadınlar hem de erkekler için uygun gördüğü normları yeniden ürettiğini ortaya koymaktadır. Film, izleyiciye ataerkil toplumun beklentilerinin farklı sosyal gruplar ve yaşam tarzları arasında geçerliliğini koruduğu ve devam ettiği mesajını vermektedir. Daha yakından okunduğunda, filmin, "marjinal" olarak değerlendirilebilecek karakterler için bile toplumsal normların kalıcı önemini nasıl vurguladığı daha da belirginleşmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Popüler Sinema, Türk Sineması, Toplumsal Cinsiyet, Aile, Türk Sinemasında Kadın.*

Introduction

A narrative emerges through the interplay of various elements, events, and entities, forming a coherent whole that transcends its individual components. Within a narrative, events interact dynamically and unfold in a discernible sequence (Chatman, 2008:19). Narratives can be broadly categorized into fictional and non-fictional forms. While fictional narratives -such as stories and films- depict events that have not occurred, non-fictional narratives -such as letters and memoirs- recount real life experiences (Jahn, 2012: 50).

Narratives serve as a fundamental mechanism for understanding and interpreting human experiences, relationships, and broader social realities. As a representational practice, the narrative forms the foundation of cultural life, shaping and mediating perceptions of reality. Consequently, narratives are inherently ideological. In this regard, cinema, as a dominant mode of popular storytelling, constructs an ostensibly a "objective" perspective by obscuring the underlying power dynamics and conflicts related to class, gender, and race within social interactions. The process of producing narrative forms that offer imaginative or structural resolutions is, in itself, an ideological act (Abisel, 1994:125-126). From its inception, cinema has functioned as a visual representation of social structures, akin to a hieroglyph, encoding and reflecting socio-political hierarchies (Bischoff, 2011: 11). Thus, cinematic narratives not only depict reality but also actively shape and reinforce dominant ideological frameworks.

Films, as encoded representations of social discourses, construct cinematic narratives that not only reflect a reality external to the cinematic space but also facilitate the transfer of meaning across different discursive planes (Ryan & Kellner, 2016: 33). As Öztürk (2000: 15) highlights, films function as integral components of a broader system of cultural representations, contributing to the formation of social reality and reinforcing social institutions by shaping people's perceptions of both what the world is and how it ought to be.

Popular cinema, in particular, refines and amplifies the captivating power of representation (Pezzella, 2006:19). Through its ability to conceal its fictional nature, popular cinema presents an illusion of real-time and space, employing a combination of narrative structures, character development, plot construction, visual elements (such as color, lighting, and camera techniques), editing strategies, and auditory components (including music and sound) to craft a seemingly authentic depiction of reality (Gültekin, 2018: 3). However, popular cinema has been widely criticized as an ideological apparatus that perpetuates existing power structures and reinforces dominant ideologies. Critics argue that through its adherence to conventional narrative structures and its ability to foster audience identification, popular cinema functions as a mechanism of ideological reinforcement, subtly sustaining socio-political statusquo (Topçu, 2004: 157-158).

Cinema not only shapes how social reality is perceived through its representational forms but also reinforces traditional representations, particularly those deemed appropriate for women (Ryan and Kellner 2016: 33). In this regard, cinema plays a significant role in the reproduc-

tion of patriarchal ideology, establishing a relationship that ideologically constructs and directs the subject. Specifically, the narrative structures of films are often shaped by the expectations of patriarchal society, aligning with the perspective of sexist discourse (Mulvey, 1975).

Popular cinema, as a production process, actively constructs and perpetuates widespread fears and anxieties in a manner that serves existing power structures. Thus, the ways in which cinema articulates concerns regarding economic, class, social, and sexual transformations hold cultural significance. The structural framework of popular films necessitates an examination of how dominant power structures - including the masculine perspective that prevails in cinema- are polished and maintained (Kırel, 2014: 122). Moreover, as a visually aesthetic, powerful, and entertaining medium, cinema embeds dominant ideologies in ways that do not overtly impose pressure on society. Patriarchal ideology is reproduced within artistic forms, especially in cinema, both explicitly and implicitly (Tekin, 2021: 3). Through films, the behaviors, values, and attitudes of patriarchal social structures are presented as normative realities, reinforcing the cultural system imposed on audiences (Kabadayı, 2004: 12).

While popular texts are often discussed as containing oppositional elements, it remains crucial to maintain a justified skepticism regarding their alignment with dominant ideologies (Kırel, 2014: 122). In recent years, Turkish popular cinema has witnessed an increasing number of films centered on women and their stories. Unlike many other mainstream productions, these films commonly feature female protagonists who are depicted as strong and economically independent. This study aims to explore the extent to which such portrayals diverge from traditional gender norms while simultaneously aligning with them. Within this framework, the research examines how women from diverse backgrounds are represented and how their perspectives on the institution of marriage are constructed in the film *Aile Arasında* (Açıktan, 2017).

To analyze such representations, the study employs the method of critical discourse analysis (CDA). As a methodological approach, CDA enables a deeper examination of the implicit meanings and ideological underpinnings of cinematic narratives (Uçar, 2021:153). It is a significant research method in the social sciences, providing insights into the linguistic manifestations of social inequalities, ideological constructs, racism, poverty, and many other forms of discrimination. It reveals how hegemony influences language and highlights the ways in which marginalized groups -such as women, refugees, and minorities- are represented within communicative structures. Additionally, CDA exposes the ways in which prejudice, racism, marginalization, and sexism are em-

bedded within discourse, offering a framework for addressing issues of injustice and inequality (van Dijk, 1993: 253).

According to Fairclough (1995), CDA is an interdisciplinary analytical approach that examines the political and social functions of discourse. He argues that there are no fixed rules governing CDA and emphasizes the interpretive flexibility it allows researchers. Fairclough (1995) further posits that texts are produced and interpreted within certain social, ideological, or political frameworks, making it possible to uncover embedded meanings and ideological assumptions.

In this context, the present study applies critical discourse analysis to investigate the representation of women and the construction of gender roles within the narrative structure of *Aile Arasında* (Açıktan, 2017). In this context, the study examines how women and families are represented and how gender roles are established within the film narrative.

Family and Gender

The family serves as the primary framework in which an individual's memory is shaped in society. Memory is constructed and represented through the spaces, objects, and images that surround the individual, fostering a sense of belonging within the family, group, or community in which they live. As a social unit, the family interacts with the broader society, playing a crucial role in shaping the individuals' experiences, impressions, and identity through their relationships with others (Oral & Erus, 2018: 216). Consequently, the family into which an individual is born constitutes the fundamental structure where personal memory and social perception develop, influencing behavior patterns and shaping one's worldview.

Various social, socio-economic, and moral factors have contributed to the emergence of different family structures and relationship dynamics across diverse historical and geographical contexts. While no a single, fixed family structure exists within a given society, family models evolve over time in response to changing socio-cultural and economic conditions (Kağıtçıbaşı, 1990). The family is a dynamic social institution whose structure and functions are subject to continuous transformation.

Beyond its evolving nature, the family fulfills several essential functions: It ensures the continuity of the human species, serving as the primary socialization environment for individuals, provides emotional fulfillment for its members, and facilitates the intergenerational transmission of cultural norms and values. The family carries out crucial biological, psychological, economic, and legal functions. Therefore, it can be defined as a social institution responsible for the renewal of the population, the preservation of traditional culture, the socialization of children,

and the provision of economic, biological, and psychological wellbeing (Öztürk & Bıkmaz, 2007).

Within the tradition of classical family sociology, the family is regarded as a fundamental institution essential to every society. Its perceived necessity is directly linked to the functions it fulfills. The nuclear family model, consisting of a husband, wife, and children, is often considered the most compatible with modern industrial society, as it plays a crucial role in sustaining the economic system and regulating social relations (Ecevit, 1993: 12). As the foundational institution of the patriarchal order, the family simultaneously reflects and reinforces social structures. Serving as an intermediary between the individual and society, it assumes a regulatory function in case where political and institutional mechanisms prove insufficient, thereby ensuring the continuity of the social order (Millett, 2011: 60).

Structural functionalist theorists, who analyze both developed and developing societies, argue that the differentiation of gender roles is necessary for maintaining social stability (Erdoğan, 2008:127). However, according to the critics of this approach such as Gittins (1991: 148-151), the family is not merely a biological or social unit but an ideological construct shaped by relationships and ways of cohabitation. Family ideology does not necessarily reflect the actual relationships between individuals; rather, it presents an idealized image that appears real by mirroring certain aspects of people's lived experiences (Gittins, 1991: 148-151). This ideology is based on two fundamental assumptions: the nuclear family as the normative model of cohabitation and a gender-based division of labor. These assumptions are often perceived as desirable and naturalized within societal structures. Within this framework, women are primarily associated with the private sphere, positioned as mothers and homemakers, while men are assigned the role of breadwinners, actively participating in the labor force within the public sphere (Beechey, Abbott, Tyler, & Wallace 2005:157). Therefore, family ideology reinforces gendered roles and responsibilities, shaping societal perceptions of what is deemed appropriate for men and women.

Although there is no single, universally accepted definition of gender, the term generally refers to "roles and learned behavior patterns formed in line with the expectations of society for men and women" (Ecevit, 2003: 83). The concept of gender was introduced to sociological literature by Ann Oakley, who distinguished between sex and gender. Oakley argued that while sex refers to biological differences between males and females, gender denotes the socially constructed inequalities between men and women, which emerge in parallel with biological distinctions (qtd. by Marshall, 1999: 98). While individuals are biologically

born male or female, their gender identity is socially constructed through the internalization of culturally prescribed roles and expectations (Terzioğlu & Taşkın, 2008: 63). Although biological sex is an innate characteristic, femininity and masculinity are shaped through the socialization process, reflecting broader cultural and ideological frameworks (Hepşen, 2010:14).

According to feminist perspectives, while sex is a biological categorization based on the male-female binary, gender refers to how individuals are positioned within cultural, religious, economic, and ideological frameworks (İlbuğa, 2018: 295). Feminist theorists, acknowledging that social roles are culturally transmitted, critically examine the values, norms, and expectations imposed on women and men by society. Feminist discussions on the status of women focus on the distinction between sex and gender.

Gender, which constructs identities through the body, functions as an institutionalized social system that differentiates men and women and legitimizes inequality on the basis of these distinctions (Ridgeway, 2001: 637). Gittins (1991: 42) further asserts that the family, by definition, is an institution structured by inequality and primarily governed by the authority of the father. Within this framework, the father or husband assumes the role of the head of the family or tribe, reinforcing patriarchal dominance. From this perspective, patriarchy operates as hierarchical system of power based on gender and age, playing a central role in shaping family structures.

Gender roles are ascribed to men and women in every culture, shaping expectations regarding appearance, behavior, and interpersonal relationships (Cheng 1997: 296). In patriarchal societies, femininity is predominantly defined and reinforced through the notion of "home," regardless of variables such as age, education, or class. While a woman's connection to the domestic sphere and housework is central to her identity, the nature of this relationship varies according to class, status, generation, and educational background. The domestic space, where femininity is constructed, simultaneously functions as a site where gender inequality is reproduced. Consequently, the family -women's first site of communication and socialization- plays a key role in shaping their self-identification. Housework, as a shared experience among women, forms the foundation of feminine identity, reinforcing the exclusion of men from domestic responsibilities and legitimizing homemaking as a woman's obligation and duty (Bora, 2011).

Simone de Beauvoir (1981: 57) similarly argues that in patriarchal societies, the home is designated as the women's domain. She asserts

that within patriarchal systems, women derive their social validation from their domestic roles, which primarily involve managing household chores, providing food, and overseeing family wellbeing.

Understanding the relationship between the family and patriarchy is essential for analyzing the positions and roles of women, men, and children within family structures. Moreover, examining family structures, their transformations, and the cultural values associated with them provides critical insights into the distinct challenges different societies face within the private sphere. Various channels facilitate the critique of family structures, and the inequalities embedded within them, with cinema serving as a particularly influential platform. Through cinema, numerous critical perspectives have emerged concerning family structures and women's roles within them. Cinema has explored the traditional family model, its evolution, and the shifting role women within it, with Turkish cinema offering significant reflections and representations on these themes.

Family and Women in Turkish Cinema

Expression in popular cinema plays a major role in preserving and maintaining the patriarchal social order. While men are positioned as decision-makers and governing agents, women are depicted as subordinate subjects – passive, governed, and observed. Traditional cinema reinforces male dominance by incorporating patriarchal cultural, social, and moral values by constructing and perpetuating specific representations of masculinity and femininity (Akbulut, 2008: 19-20).

The relationship between film and social history can be understood as a discursive encryption process wherein cinematic representations are intrinsically linked to the broader social structure. Films exist within the "totality of the system of cultural representations," constructing social reality through codes that manifest in the forms, figures, and depictions of everyday life, which are then embedded in cinematic narratives. These cinematic representations are derived from the cultural context of the society in which they are produced, simultaneously shaping and being shaped by both social life and institutions. In this sense, cinema functions as an arena of cultural representation, directing collective thought by defining social reality and prescribing its interpretation. As such, it becomes a key component of the cultural representation system that ensures the continuity of social institutions (Kellner & Ryan, 1997: 34-44).

Popular genres function as cultural instruments of social communication, reflecting both private and public arrangements. Therefore, they serve as frameworks for understanding certain social behaviors or roles within different types of social interactions (Atayman & Çetinkaya,

2016: 130). Traditional popular film genres rely on reflection to reaffirm the perceived ideality of the existing social system. Rather than adopting a critical stance, these genres tend to be integrative, striving to construct a common social reality. Popular cinema constructs a fictional world by reproducing societal structures, particularly regarding the roles and responsibilities of women. Films play an important role in both confining women to restricted roles in society and reinforcing these roles. In particular, melodramas functions as a means of softening ideological contradictions and social conflicts, particularly within the private sphere and the family (Künüçen, 2001: 58).

When analyzing the representation of women in cinema, distinct patterns emerge across different historical periods. In Hollywood films of the 1920s, women were increasingly eroticized. By the 1930s, cinematic narratives had shifted towards emphasizing motherhood, portraying women as the primary bearers of responsibility for raising well-adjusted and happy children. The 1940s, in turn, saw the rise of melodramas centered on a dichotomy between the "seductive woman" and the "matronly" woman (Akbulut, 2008: 82-83). According to Christine Mohanna (2000: 21), these gender roles remained largely unchanged until the 1970s, with men consistently depicted as successful, ingenious, and powerful, while women were primarily defined through their relationships with men.

In Turkey, fictional narratives about gender were initially shaped through theater in the early years of the Republic. Over time, however, cinema -particularly melodrama- became the dominant medium for constructing representations of femininity within a system controlled by masculine domination. These films reinforced the perceived normality and inevitability of patriarchal values while simultaneously delegitimizing alternative lifestyles. For a certain while, Turkish cinema defined the meaning of "being a woman" through popular films, situating female characters within the ideological framework and power structures of the patriarchal order.

The ideological representation of women in popular Turkish films often portrays female suffering as an inevitable consequence of fate, customs, or malevolent factors. Women in these narratives are frequently depicted as pitiable figures, yet their ultimate validation comes from submission. An “ideal woman” is characterized by her willingness to endure hardship, displaying patience, and self-sacrifice. If she adheres to these virtues without committing major transgressions, she is rewarded with small emotional victories, culminating in marriage as the ultimate prize. Conversely, if a woman is positioned as the main source of a man’s

unhappiness, she is deemed deserving of severe punishment, including death (Abisel, 1994: 126-127).

From the early Republican era to the 1950s, women were significantly influenced by the broader social transformation initiated during these periods. Women in the public sphere were expected to embody a Western and enlightened appearance. While the early Republican reforms facilitated changes in women's visibility and roles in society, these transformations remained largely confined to the upper classes, and women's participation in the public sphere was allowed to the extent that it did not disrupt their primary domestic responsibilities. Therefore, traditional gender roles within the family remained largely intact. The social changes of this period were also reflected in cinema, where, despite the emergence of modern female images, the dominant narrative continued to emphasize that a woman's primary duty was to be a good wife and mother (Ataman, 2002: 66-67).

In Yeşilçam cinema, two female archetypes emerged. The first was the idealized woman -honest, loving, devoted to her home and children, inherently good, and unconditionally forgiving, even in the face of injustice. The second was the "femme fatale" – a figure who weaponized her sexuality and disrupted the sanctity of the home and was often portrayed as a destructive force (Abisel, 2000). Accordingly, women in Yeşilçam films were typically represented in binary opposition, existing at two extremes. Moreover, although idealized female characters in these films appeared modern in terms of their clothing, mannerism, and speech, they were simultaneously depicted as paragons of honor, loyalty, and innocence, reinforcing the traditional moral codes of Turkish society (Ekici, 2007: 54).

Since the early years of Turkish cinema, women have been represented within the framework of a patriarchal ideology. While male characters are consistently portrayed in a position of superiority, female characters are predominantly evaluated through the lens of "honor." Women in Turkish cinema are generally depicted ad submissive and non-rebellious, with the only acceptable justification for defiance being the violation of their honor and chastity. In addition, gender relations in these films are characterized by inherent inequality; women are placed in subordinate positions, lacking the same level of agency or authority as men (Kasap, Dolunay, & Solman, 2018: 632-633).

The 1960s witnessed the rise of many influential actresses who left a lasting impact on Turkish cinema. The female characters of this period exhibited a complex interplay between femininity and masculinity, shrewdness and naivety. The emergence of the "masculine woman" archetype became a recurrent motif in films of this period. However, de-

spite these evolving character portrayals, the dominant narratives continued to reproduce a male-dominated cultural framework. Stories frequently adhered to conservative codes that reinforced and perpetuated patriarchal norms, shaping the representation of women within the cinematic discourse (Kırel, 1993).

Although the 1960s saw the rise of social realist cinema, which predominantly focused on economic and social issues, these films rarely challenged traditional gender roles either. Instead, they largely retained conventional portrayals of women and men, failing to critically engage with the power dynamics embedded in gender relations.

Between 1960 and 1970, Turkey experienced rapid industrialization, leading to increased migration from rural to urban areas. This transformation brought discussions on various social notions, including unionization, labor strikes, land ownership, and urbanization (Daldal, 2005: 58). During this period, people from the emerging middle classes found themselves oscillating between modernity and tradition, while seeking a redefined national identity. Despite these societal shifts, women -whether in rural areas or urban settings- remained economically and socially constrained. Rural women, who worked both in domestic spaces and in the fields, and urban women who were employed in factories or in the informal sector lacked economic and social autonomy. Even women from upper and middle-class backgrounds, who held significant professional or economic positions, were still largely dependent on men, despite their apparent equality with their husbands in terms of career and financial status (Özkan, 2012: 80).

Parallel to these social changes, Turkish cinema of the 1960s and 1970s reflected an ambiguous portrayal of women, positioning them between urban and rural identities. Female characters were frequently depicted as caught between tradition and modernity. Films of this period generally portrayed women as silent, fatalistic figures -ideal wives and self-sacrificing mothers. These portrayals included women abandoned by their husbands, fathers, or brothers; women constrained by traditions and moral values; marginalized women, such as prostitutes and nightclub performers; women whose primary aspiration was marriage; those struggling with poverty; and victims of domestic violence. Regardless of class, female characters were often defined by societal expectations of womanhood, shaped by a male-dominated and authoritarian perspective. Therefore, the films of this period not only reflected but also reinforced prevailing social values and ideological structures. Themes of “submission to fate and self-sacrifice” were prominently de-

picted, positioning these ideals as desirable and widely accepted within the cultural framework (Künüçen, 2001: 57-58).

In social realist films, regardless of the specific social issue being depicted, the central narrative axis remains the family. Initially, families are portrayed as "normal," without clear distinctions between urban and rural settings. However, as the films progresses, these families encounter crises such as economic hardship, migration, or the presence of the "other woman." These disruptions pose a threat to family unity, yet by the film's conclusion, a female character is typically sacrificed, resolving the crisis and restoring the "normal family" structure. Through this cycle of crisis, sacrifice, and reunion, such films reinforce family ideology, and, by extension, the patriarchal social order (Yeşildal, 2010: 216).

In alignment with Yeşildal's (2010) argument, Abisel (1994) also emphasizes that Turkish cinema consistently treats the family as an institution that must be protected, glorified, and promoted. Films commonly associate individual fulfillment with the formation of a happy home and the act of child rearing. The unity and solidarity within the family are represented as fundamental indicators of societal stability, and characters are expected to make sacrifices to maintain this order. If the continuity of the family is interrupted - whether temporarily or permanently- those who remain are depicted as having a duty to uphold family unity. This effort is consistently validated and supported within the cinematic narrative, ultimately leading to the restoration of family integrity, even in the face of personal loss.

Within these films, not only marriage and family formation are portrayed as ideal life goals but also the father is represented as the head of the house and the ultimate authority figure, while the mother assumes the role of self-sacrificing caretaker. Accordingly, cinema reinforces the binary of the "active controlling man" and the "passive, controlled woman," reflecting and perpetuating gender hierarchy upon which social life is structured (Abisel, 1994). Women are not depicted as autonomous individuals but rather as figures whose significance is defined in relation to men. Their voices and agency are suppressed in favor of patriarchal narratives, with their identities being reduced to symbols that serve the needs of the dominant social order (Kaplan, 2000:18).

Until 1980, gender-based portrayals dominated Turkish cinema, with women consistently depicted in traditional roles, often with a strong emphasis on their visual appeal. In some films between 1968 and 1980, significant emphasis was also placed on the idea that women needed to undergo physical transformation to gain societal and male acceptance. Female protagonists who migrated from rural areas to urban centers were portrayed as fundamentally different from the "cultured, well-

mannered, educated, and wealthy" women of the city. As a result, they were alienated by other characters due to their rural backgrounds. Within these narratives, women were expected to shed their rural identities and conform to urban femininity to attract the attention of the male protagonist. These films not only reinforced prevailing gender norms but also reflected broader societal attitudes of the time. In a society where the expectation of change was imposed on women rather than men, cinematic representations mirrored and legitimized this social reality (Kaymaz Mert, 2022: 11).

Within the narrative conventions and production conditions of Yeşilçam cinema, a predominantly asexual image of women also emerged. However, following the crisis in Yeşilçam cinema in the late 1980s, a few art films began to explore alternative perspectives on female representation. This period, which served as a transitional phase leading to the emergence of the New Turkish Cinema, marked a shift in cinematic portrayals of women. Instead of the binary opposition between the "good" and the "bad" woman, filmmakers increasingly consolidated these characteristics within a single female character. Consequently, films of this era moved beyond the literary trope of the chaste virgin or desexualized women, offering more nuanced and realistic representations of femininity (Kunt, 2013: 88).

Following the military coup of September 12, 1980, nearly all political activities in Turkey were banned, and freedom of thought and expression were severely restricted (Tekeli, 2017: 270). This climate of repression extended to cinema, leading to significant shifts in film themes and representations (Evren, 2014: 335; Kırvaşıoğlu, 2016: 205-206). Despite these restrictions, the feminist movement, which had been revitalized globally by the 1980s, also found expression in Turkey. Led by women activists who had previously participated in leftist movements before the coup, feminist discourse gained traction through publications and discussions on the social positioning of women. Although the political environment did not allow for overt political engagement, it nonetheless crated a foundation for the development of feminist thought (Elmacı, 2001: 193).

This period, often referred to as "women's cinema," brought women's issues to the screen in a more realistic manner. However, traces of traditional patriarchal discourse remained evident within cinema. Even though the narratives centered on women, masculine discourse and language continued to dominate cinematic representation (Bilge & Sönmez, 2010; Doğan, 2013; Ekici, 2007). The typology of female characters in Turkish cinema underwent significant changes after the 1980s,

with women increasingly depicted as objects of desire. The structure and of these films often revolved around the male protagonists pursuing and ultimately possessing these women – sometimes through love, other times through coercion. Although the methods "possession" varied, the male gaze remained a defining feature of Turkish cinema, shaping how women were viewed and portrayed on screen (Özarslan, 2015: 43).

Post-1980 representations of women in Turkish cinema can be categorized into two dominant frameworks. In the films that maintained the traditional Yeşilçam aesthetic, women continued to be depicted within the binary opposition of "good" and "bad" women. However, a new perspective also emerged, challenging these simplistic categorizations. These films depicted women as individuals capable of independent thought, rebellion, sexual desire, and professional ambition. In addition to these traits, however, women were still expected to fulfill their traditional roles as nurturing mothers, reflecting the persistence of gendered expectations in cinematic narratives (Esen, 2016:181).

With the emergence of the feminist movement in the 1980s, gender issues began to be critically examined on the big screen. However, despite the rise of "women's films" as a subgenre in Turkish cinema, these films were almost exclusively directed by men, as Suner (2006: 294) notes. These films centered on female protagonists and highlighted gender discrimination, societal challenges, and violence that women from diverse backgrounds (Suner, 2006: 294). Post-1980 women's films were categorized into two main groups: those that explored women's experiences and femininity, and those that sought to provide a realistic critique of women's issues, particularly their roles in the labor market (Esen, 2000: 43).

The 1980s marked another shift in female representation in Turkish cinema. Actresses no longer required voice dubbing, and their natural voices became part of their on-screen personas. Women's voices, both figuratively and literally, became more prominent in public discourse. During this period, prominent actresses such as (in *Mine*) and Hülya Koçyiğit (in *Bez Bebek*, *Kurbağalar*) challenged traditional gender roles by advocating for economic and sexual autonomy. Similarly, Müjde Ar's *Ah Belinda* illustrated the dichotomy between domestic and independent woman (Öztürk, 2011: 664).

In the 1990s, the rise of auteur directors led to significant changes in female representation. Female characters increasingly turned into *femme fatales*, yet there was little diversity in terms of their occupations, social status, or relationships. Unlike the previous decade, women struggled to find meaningful representation in cinema, which had become deeply entrenched in a patriarchal narrative structure. The domi-

nant cinematic framework not only limited the depth of female characters but also reinforced existing gender roles, ensuring their ideological legitimacy (Yaşartürk, 2018: 519 and Elmacı, 2011: 196).

The 2000s ushered in a period of economic and political transformation, bringing new developments in social policies, particularly regarding women's rights. Increased efforts were made to improve women's economic status, strengthen social security, and combat gender-based violence (Tekin, 2021: 54). During this time, popular culture, influenced by globalization, played a significant role in shaping politics, economics, arts, media, and cinema. As the film industry became commercially viable, a new generation of directors emerged, leading to an increase in film productions. While poverty had been a central theme in the 1990s cinema, the post-2000 era expanded this focus to include ethnic, economic, and political marginalization. The concept of "otherness" evolved to encompass deprivation and systemic exclusion, which became central themes in drama and comedy films. This period also saw the rise of auteur directors like Zeki Demirkubuz, who explored themes of alienation and isolation in films such as *Bekleme Odası* (2003), *Kıskanmak* (2009), *Bulantı (2015)* (Maktav, 2001: 186; Mutlu, 2019: 143).

Suner (2006: 291-292) underscores the male-dominated nature of Turkish cinema, noting that despite the increasing visibility of gender discourse, female representation remained limited. She argues that both mainstream and art-house films primarily centered on male protagonists and narratives told from a male perspective. Consequently, women were often depicted not as autonomous individuals but as objects of male desire, with their presence on screen being justified only through patriarchal roles assigned to them.

However, in recent years, romantic comedies have emerged as a counterpoint, offering films that place female protagonists at the center of their narratives. While these films appear to celebrate women's independence, they ultimately reinforce traditional gender roles by linking female happiness to marriage. Güçlü (2017: 188) observes that many of these films focus on themes of finding a husband, despite portraying their female characters as free-spirited and intellectual. In the final analysis, Güçlü (2017: 206) argues that such films merely serve as "documents of anxiety" that neutralize the perceived threat posed by single, independent, critically engaged women to the patriarchal social structure.

Representation of Women in the Movie *Aile Arasında*

The movie *Aile Arasında* (Açıktan, 2017) follows the events that unfold occur when Emirhan, a young man from a traditional family in Adana, and Zeynep, who lives with her mother and friends in Cihangir, decide to get married, bringing together two vastly different families. The film presents women from different ages and socio-economic backgrounds, juxtaposing a conventional traditional family structure with an unconventional, non-traditional family dynamic.

One of the central characters, Solmaz, is a nightclub singer who has raised her daughter alone. Despite portraying herself as an independent and self-sufficient woman, Solmaz expresses her longing for a conventional family life in the film's opening scene by singing the song *Evli, Mutlu, Çocuklu* (Married, Happy, with Children). This contrast highlights the internalized societal expectation that a woman's fulfillment is ultimately tied to family life.

Solmaz is deeply hurt by her long-time partner Neco, leaving her, yet she remains hopeful for his return. Her statement, "We are family, I know you will come back, and we will see each other face to face," reflects the deeply ingrained notion that within the family, a woman is expected to be forgiving, even in the face of a man's mistake. Despite embodying an independent female character, Solmaz has waited twenty-one years for Neco to marry her reinforcing the idea that a woman's ultimate aspiration is to establish and preserve a family unit. She reiterates this belief by insisting, "He will not leave his family, he will return, I know he will come back." This perspective underscores the film's portrayal of family as an institution that should not be easily abandoned. Even if flawed, the family remains an essential and irreplaceable structure in Solmaz's worldview. Had Neco returned, she would have forgiven him, demonstrating how the ideal of family takes precedence over personal grievances.

Solmaz, through her lifestyle, clothing, and manner of speaking, presents a character that deviates from the norms of patriarchal society. However, despite her unconventional appearance, she consistently emphasizes her adherence to traditional values and insists that she leads a "normal" life. Her awareness of societal norms becomes evident in her reaction to a misunderstanding with Fikret during their first encounter, when she believes he perceives her as a "woman of easy virtue" and responds with indignation.

In the patriarchal social order, women are traditionally expected to manage both men and the household. Although Solmaz and Fikret are not married, she takes on a nurturing role in helping him establish a new life. She not only assists him in furnishing his home and organizing

his living space but also influences his appearance, guiding him to adopt a more suitable dressing style through shared shopping trips. Thus, while Solmaz's character appears to exist outside the conventional patriarchal framework, she still embodies and reinforces many of its values.

Solmaz is determined to present a respectable family image to Emirhan's conservative family. She believes that Fikret is the most appropriate figure to assume the role of a father and makes concerted efforts to persuade him. Before Emirhan's family arrives, significant preparations take place in the household—furniture is rearranged to reflect a traditional family home. This effort aims to create the perception that the two families share similar values and social standings.

This narrative reflects a recurring theme in Turkish cinema: the idea that men and women can only marry when they are perceived as socially and economically equal. Socio-cultural and financial parity between spouses is presented as a fundamental prerequisite for marriage and family unity. If this equilibrium is not achieved, the relationship is depicted as unsustainable, either failing to materialize or being destined for dissolution. This trope, particularly prominent in Yeşilçam films, continues to manifest in contemporary popular cinema. As highlighted in the theoretical framework, cinema serves as a system of cultural representation that sustains and reproduces prevailing social values, acting as a mirror to society. In patriarchal societies, individuals are generally expected to marry partners of similar socio-economic and cultural backgrounds. The prevailing belief is that, without such equality, the continuity of the family institution cannot be maintained. In the film, while Solmaz attempts to present her family as equal to Emirhan's, Emirhan's family, in turn, questions whether Solmaz and her household truly align with their own social standing.

Throughout the film, Solmaz attempts to present her family as a "rooted, traditional family with strong values" in order to gain acceptance from Emirhan's conservative family. However, at times, she momentarily steps out of this constructed image and reveals her true self. For instance, during Zeynep's henna night, she spontaneously takes over the singer's performance, only realizing afterward that her actions were inappropriate within the traditional setting. Additionally, Solmaz resents any remarks about her lifestyle and appearance. Just as she reacted to Fikret's assumption that she was a "woman of easy virtue" during their first encounter, she similarly confronts Haşmet Bey, Emirhan's father, during the wedding shopping when he criticizes Solmaz and her friend Leyla's clothing as inappropriate according to Adana's traditions.

In these moments, Solmaz's independent identity surfaces—she resists external judgments and asserts that, despite living outside traditional social norms, she maintains her own sense of morality and dignity.

Solmaz's character, lifestyle, and worldview stand in contrast to traditional patriarchal values. While she embodies the persona of an independent, self-sufficient woman, she simultaneously longs for a conventional family structure and wishes for her daughter's happiness through marriage. Throughout the film, she continuously seeks to present her household as a "normal family" to Emirhan's relatives. This portrayal aligns with a recurring pattern in recent Turkish popular cinema, where independent female characters are aware of patriarchal expectations and, despite their progressive lifestyles, still internalize traditional norms. When examined closely, the film subtly reinforces the idea that individuals who live outside societal conventions ultimately share and adopt traditional values, suggesting that they are not as "abnormal" as they initially appear.

One of the most unconventional characters in the film is Behiye, a trans woman and Solmaz's close friend and colleague. Behiye is not a figure commonly seen in Turkish popular cinema, making her presence significant. She shares a deep bond with Solmaz both in their professional lives and daily routines, representing an alternative form of kinship based on mutual support rather than biological ties. The mansion where Solmaz, Behiye, and the other characters reside serves as a haven for those marginalized by society individuals who defy the rigid structures of traditional family life yet come together to create their own sense of belonging. This unconventional "family" consists of a nightclub singer (Solmaz), a trans performer (Behiye), Zeynep (a tattooed young woman whose parents were never married), Fikret (a timid man dominated by his wife), and Leyla (a naïve and slow-witted character).

Within this chosen family, solidarity and mutual respect prevail. The film portrays these characters as standing together against external threats and prejudices. For instance, when Fikret struggles with how to address Behiye, Solmaz advises him to simply refer to her as a transgender person, emphasizing the importance of respectful language. However, *Aile Arasında* (Açıktan, 2017) also highlights the limitations of this acceptance while the characters support each other within their immediate circle, their interactions outside the group are shaped by broader societal expectations. Behiye, for example, is introduced as Zeynep's "aunt" during the wedding proceedings (engagement, henna night, and wedding), and her identity as both a nightclub singer and a trans woman is deliberately concealed. Instead, she is transformed into

a “respectable” mature lady to fit into the framework of the traditional family gathering.

While the film presents a progressive depiction of solidarity among marginalized individuals, it also reinforces their status as societal "others." Their difference is not entirely erased but is instead carefully managed to align with prevailing cultural norms. Thus, despite its moments of inclusivity, *Aile Arasında* (Açıktan, 2017) ultimately reflects the broader societal tendency to tolerate diversity only when it is made palatable within traditional frameworks.

As Akkaya and Dinler (2021: 387) observe, Behiye is depicted primarily as an elder figure whose sexuality is largely ignored, allowing her to be accepted “within the family” framework. The film makes little reference to the struggles Behiye may have faced as a trans woman, aside from her discomfort when Haşmet Kurt and his family discover her identity. By the film’s conclusion, the secrets both families have concealed are revealed. Haşmet Kurt, initially portrayed as a victim of infidelity, ultimately joins Solmaz’s family and comes to accept Behiye.

Behiye’s character is presented not in terms of her differences or the challenges she faces as a trans woman, but rather as a "lady" who assimilates into the cultural values of society. Throughout the film, she is positioned as a supportive figure, stepping in to resolve conflicts or protect others. Whether acting with grace or “fighting like a man” when necessary, Behiye is consistently portrayed as a morally upright individual.

The film’s depiction of Behiye is significant, as it provides representation for LGBTQ+ individuals, a group often ignored or ridiculed in Turkish popular cinema. However, while her character offers visibility, the film does not challenge traditional values or patriarchal norms. Behiye’s everyday struggles as a trans woman are largely absent from the narrative. Instead, she is integrated into the family as a respectable “aunt,” sharing aspirations similar to those of the other female characters. The recurring motif of the song *Evli, Mutlu, Çocuklu* (Married, Happy, with Children*)* which serves as a thematic refrain throughout the film—reinforces the film’s emphasis on conventional family ideals and, by extension, the limits of Behiye’s representation.

Fikret’s wife, Mihriban, is introduced as a housewife who spends her days watching television and appears disengaged from life. She seeks a divorce from Fikret due to his financial struggles, reinforcing the traditional patriarchal notion that a woman’s “place is in the home.” However, Mihriban is also portrayed as a dominant and manipulative figure, particularly in her decision to expel Fikret from their home. Her charac-

terization aligns with the trope of the "cunning woman" who exerts control over men.

Mihriban's adherence to patriarchal social norms is evident in her respect for family elders and her commitment to maintaining familial hierarchy. For example, after Fikret leaves, she calls him to request that he sign a financial document to settle his debts. In patriarchal societies, honoring elders and fulfilling their expectations is considered essential for preserving social order. Mihriban's actions reflect her internalization of these values.

However, while Mihriban's character embodies patriarchal codes, she also deviates from traditional gender roles. In conventional narratives, women are expected to manage the household and make sacrifices for their families. As noted in the theoretical framework, traditional Turkish cinema often conveys the idea that a woman who does not conform to expected gender roles deserves punishment. This sentiment persists in contemporary Turkish cinema, as illustrated in *Aile Arasında* (Açıktan, 2017). Mihriban does not fulfill societal expectations of a devoted wife; instead, she rejects her marriage and expels her husband. Consequently, her fate is sealed at the end of the film when a chandelier falls on her head—a symbolic punishment for her defiance. The film thus reinforces the idea that women who deviate from submissive, dignified roles face social exclusion or retribution.

The theme of family and the importance of "building a home" is emphasized throughout the film. Solmaz, despite her unconventional household arrangement, presents her friends and daughter Zeynep as a "normal family" to Emirhan's relatives. The contrast between the two families is stark Emirhan's family is depicted as a upper class, conservative household from Adana, with deep-rooted mafia connections. Haşmet Kurt, the patriarch, repeatedly stresses their adherence to traditional values and often criticizes Solmaz and her friends for their appearance and behavior. Similarly, Emirhan's mother, Mükerrem Kurt, expresses her disapproval of Solmaz and her social circle, consistently making cutting remarks about them.

However, as the narrative unfolds, the film critiques the hypocrisy of Haşmet Kurt's family. While initially portrayed as an upstanding and honorable household, it is later revealed that Mükerrem was unfaithful to Haşmet, and Emirhan's biological father is someone else. In Turkish cinema, the concept of "honor" is frequently linked to women's sexual behavior. Haşmet's reaction upon learning the truth reinforces this patriarchal ideology he initially rejects Solmaz's family, declaring, "We are a decent, honorable family. We cannot take a girl from people like you." However, by the film's conclusion, he joins Solmaz and her friends, posi-

tioning himself as a victim while Mükerrem is excluded. As Akkaya and Dinler (2021: 392) point out, this shift reveals the hypocrisy of societal moral codes, demonstrating that Haşmet's family is not as morally superior as they claim to be.

Despite the presence of independent female characters in the film, they still exhibit a deep-seated desire to conform to traditional norms. This is particularly evident in Zeynep's character. Living in the same mansion as Solmaz, Behiye, and Leyla, Zeynep is introduced as a free-spirited individual with a modern appearance and lifestyle. However, she is hesitant to introduce Emirhan to her unconventional family, fearing that his conservative parents will judge her upbringing. She actively tries to bridge the gap between the two families, yet Emirhan's brother, Kahraman, dismisses her as unsuitable due to her tattoos and fashion choices. Once again, the concept of "honor" dictates suitability for marriage, reinforcing patriarchal expectations.

Although Zeynep is portrayed as an independent woman, she ultimately adheres to traditional marriage rituals and strives to gain acceptance from Emirhan's family. Her longing for a father figure, which she projects onto Fikret, further reflects an internalized attachment to traditional family structures. Thus, despite being framed as a modern and liberated character, Zeynep retains traditional values at a psychological level.

Marriage serves as a central theme throughout the film, shaping the aspirations of multiple female characters. Solmaz's unwavering belief that Neco will eventually propose after twenty-one years, Zeynep's excitement over Emirhan's marriage proposal, Leyla's constant anticipation of a proposal, and Behiye's support for her friends' dreams all reinforce the notion that marriage is a primary goal for women. The mansion in which the women live together becomes a space where discussions about marriage dominate their lives.

Leyla, in particular, embodies this idealization of marriage. Working in a beauty salon, she is portrayed as naïve and slow-witted. She frequently misinterprets public marriage proposals, believing they are directed at her, and remains hopeful that she will soon receive one herself. Through Leyla's character, the film highlights the societal expectation that women should aspire to marriage as their ultimate fulfillment.

Another representation of women within the traditional family structure is Gülümser, Kahraman's wife. Gülümser is depicted as a woman struggling with psychological distress, which she attempts to numb with medication. Her character is defined by a delayed perception of events, a constant smile, and an unwavering submission to patriarchal authority.

Living within an extended family structure, Gülümser fulfills the roles expected of a dutiful wife. When Kahraman commands her to move from a seat, she obeys without question. Unlike the more rebellious female characters, Gülümser embodies the archetype of the ideal wife one who conforms to societal expectations, does not challenge male authority, and navigates her life without resistance. Her name, meaning "one who always smiles," serves as a metaphor for her passive acceptance of the patriarchal order.

While *Aile Arasında* (Açıktan, 2017) introduces strong female characters, they remain tethered to traditional social expectations. Whether through Behiye's assimilation, Mihriban's symbolic punishment, Zeynep's internalized conformity, or Leyla's fixation on marriage, the film ultimately reinforces patriarchal norms. Despite moments of critique, the overarching narrative suggests that women must negotiate their independence within the confines of traditional family values.

Conclusion

This study examines how female characters with diverse identities are represented in the film *Aile Arasında* (Açıktan, 2017) and how their perspectives on marriage are portrayed. While the film presents female characters in roles that seemingly transcend traditional gender norms, it simultaneously reinforces these roles through its underlying discourse.

Solmaz, Behiye, Zeynep, and Leyla are depicted as independent, self-sufficient women who navigate life by supporting one another. However, despite the solidarity within their "artificial family," they conceal their differences from the outside world to gain social acceptance. Solmaz hides her profession from Emirhan's family, while Behiye is introduced as an elder relative, with her transgender identity deliberately obscured. This suggests that although these characters' worldviews and lifestyles exist outside traditional social norms, they still feel compelled to conform to societal expectations in order to be accepted. In this sense, *Aile Arasında* (Açıktan, 2017) reinforces conventional social norms and gender roles through a subversive reading, presenting independent female characters who, rather than challenging patriarchal structures, ultimately conform to them.

From the beginning of the film, the theme of family is consistently emphasized in the dialogue. Although the central characters do not conform to the conventional family structures prescribed by the patriarchal social order, they express a deep longing for it. Despite positioning themselves outside traditional norms, Solmaz and her unconventional family perform social rituals related to marriage, reinforcing the idea that true happiness is attainable only through forming a traditional family. Solmaz, in particular, seeks to ensure that her daughter, Zeynep,

achieves the stable family life she herself was unable to create. As a result, the film conveys the message that the patriarchal social structure remains valid and persists across all segments of society, regardless of lifestyle or personal choices. A closer reading of the film suggests that even individuals who might be considered "marginal" ultimately internalize and uphold social norms.

The characters Mihriban and Mükerrem, who initially embody traditional social values, are punished and excluded when they deviate from these norms—echoing the narrative patterns of classical Turkish cinema. Their exclusion serves to reinforce the patriarchal order rather than challenge it, illustrating how the film ultimately upholds traditional gender roles.

The film's opening and closing scenes further reinforce this message. It begins with the song *Evli, Mutlu Çocuklu* (Married, Happy, with Children) symbolizing the characters' collective dream and concludes with Fikret's marriage proposal to Solmaz. Despite the various challenges they face, the characters ultimately achieve their idealized family structure, aligning with the expectations of traditional society and culminating in a conventional "happy ending."

Overall, *Aile Arasında* (Açıktan, 2017) centers on the traditional family structure and wedding rituals. Rather than critiquing the patriarchal order, it humorously reconciles with it. Engagements, wedding preparations, and marriage proposals are depicted through satire, yet the film does not critically interrogate the gendered dynamics embedded in these traditions. Instead, traditional gender roles are perpetuated through humor. While Solmaz's strong personality, the theme of women's solidarity, and the film's lighthearted take on the traditional family structure provide some positive elements from a feminist perspective, these aspects are not explored in depth, and the film stops short of making a strong statement on gender equality.

Ultimately, *Aile Arasında* (Açıktan, 2017) reflects the broader characteristics of popular cinema, illustrating its reluctance to engage in bold or transformative representations of women. While gender issues surface throughout the narrative, they remain mere glimpses—"leaks from the cracks" rather than a direct challenge to the status quo.

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