

## An Effort to Understand A Mother's Burden: A Matricentric Feminist Approach to *The Lost Daughter* (2021)

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### ABSTRACT

*It is hard to imagine a mother as a woman who goes on holiday alone, loves to chat and dance with strangers, and most sensitively has an affair with a man and abandons her children. Leda Caruso, who is the main character of the film The Lost Daughter, does all these things. She is the opposite of a 'natural mother'. Adapted from Elena Ferrante's novel of the same title, The Lost Daughter is a psychological drama written and directed by American filmmaker Maggie Gyllenhaal. The work, which aims to approach the unspoken aspects of motherhood, develops around Leda's life story. Leda is a forty-eight-year-old academician who has suffered from institutional motherhood throughout her mothering and faced the problem of losing her identity. Employing matricentric feminism as its theoretical framework, the present study aims to provide an analysis of the film The Lost Daughter by looking at the main character Leda Caruso's motherhood experience and perception. The study claims that motherhood has many dark aspects, and it might be a burden for a woman. Matricentric feminism is a groundbreaking and enriching theory that consolidates feminists' arguments about motherhood into a single framework. Introduced by Andrea O'Reilly, matricentric feminism is important because it challenges patriarchal perspective and sustains the discussion about motherhood under a certain feminist title. This perspective eliminates maternal guilt and draws attention to gender inequality in parenting.*

### Atıf/Citation

Erdem, R. (2024). Bir Annenin Yükünü Anlamaya Dair Bir Çaba: Karanlık Kız (2021) Filmine Annelik Merkezli Feminizm ile Bakmak. *KAİDE Dergisi*, 2(2), 215-239.

Erdem, R. (2024). An Effort to Understand a Mother's Burden: A Matricentric Feminist Approach to *The Lost Daughter* (2021). *Journal of KAİDE*, 2(2), 215-239.



**Bu makale iThenticate programıyla taranmıştır.  
This article was checked by iThenticate.**

**Keywords:**

Maggie Gyllenhaal, Maternal Guilt, Matricentric Feminism, Motherhood, The Lost Daughter

## *Bir Annenin Yükünü Anlamaya Dair Bir Çaba: Karanlık Kız (2021) Filmine Annelik Merkezli Feminizm ile Bakmak*

### ÖZ

*Bir anneyi yalnız başına tatile giden, yabancılarla sohbet etmeyi ve dans etmeyi seven ve en can alıcı nokta olarak da bir gönül ilişkisi olup çocuklarını terk eden bir kadın olarak düşünmek zordur. Karanlık Kız filminin ana kahramanı olan Leda Caruso burada bahsi geçen her şeyi yapar. O, 'doğal annenin' tam aksidir. Elena Ferrante'nin aynı isimli romanından uyarlanan Karanlık Kız, Amerikalı film yapımcısı Maggie Gyllenhaal tarafından yazılan ve yönetilen bir psikolojik dramadır. Anneliğin dile getirilmeyen yönlerini ele almayı hedefleyen eser, Leda'nın yaşam öyküsü etrafında gelişir. Leda, annelik etme süreci boyunca kurumsal anneliğin sıkıntısını çekmiş ve kimliğini kaybetme problemiyle karşı karşıya kalmış kırk sekiz yaşında bir akademisyendir. Annelik merkezli feminizmi teorik çerçevesi olarak kullanan mevcut çalışma, ana karakter Leda Caruso'nun annelik deneyimi ve algısına bakarak Karanlık Kız filminin analizini sağlamayı hedeflemektedir. Çalışma, anneliğin karanlık birçok yönünün olduğunu ve anneliğin bir kadın için yük teşkil edebileceğini iddia eder. Annelik merkezli feminizm, feministlerin annelikle ilgili argümanlarını tek bir çerçevede birleştiren çığır açıcı ve zenginleştirici bir teoridir. Andrea O'Reilly tarafından tanımlanan annelik merkezli feminizm, ataerkil bakış açılarına karşı çıkması ve annelik hakkındaki tartışmaları belli bir feminist başlık altında sürdürmesi nedeniyle önemlidir. Bu perspektif anne suçluluğunu yok eder ve ebeveynlik etmedeki cinsiyet eşitsizliğine dikkat çeker.*

**Anahtar Kelimeler:**

Maggie Gyllenhaal, Anne Suçluluğu, Annelik Merkezli Feminizm, Annelik, Karanlık Kız

## Introduction

Motherhood is a notion that many disciplines, from medicine to sociology, dwell on and generate their principles. What makes it possible for the concept to be discussed in such broad disciplines is that, beyond its biological aspect, motherhood is a social phenomenon. Cultural norms and expectations, tradition, religion, history, and policy make motherhood a social issue. However, the social aspect of it mostly transforms the concept of motherhood into a patriarchal institution. "The patriarchal institution of motherhood," Adrienne Rich argued in *Of Woman Born* (1976), "is not the 'human condition' any more than rape, prostitution, and slavery are" (pp. 50-51). Rich believed that "motherhood as institution has ghettoized and degraded female potentialities" (p. 33). According to her, "[i]nstitutionalized motherhood demands of women maternal 'instinct' rather than intelligence, selflessness rather than self-realization, relation to others rather than the creation of self" (p. 59). Betty Friedan, in her *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), put forward that this type of woman, a woman who was not allowed to develop her own identity and fulfill her potential, felt desperate and suffered from the problem of depression. For this woman, motherhood was a trap that consumed her and killed her desires. Against this problematic view, Friedan suggested that: "Even a very young woman today must think of herself as a human being first, not as a mother with time on her hands, and make a life plan in terms of her own abilities, a commitment of her own to society, with which her commitments as wife and mother can be integrated" (p. 365). From the expressions of Rich and Friedan, it is understood that the concept of motherhood is ahead of personal experience. It is a position that has the power to change, control, and limit the whole life of a woman. Thus, it is supported that the notion of motherhood is not only a biological thing but also a social phenomenon, including the ideology of patriarchy as well.

The concept of motherhood has an artistic dimension. Motherhood as a theme has inspired many artworks, and it has been one of the most handled and discussed subjects in art across various cultures and time periods. It is evident that each period and its artists have interpreted motherhood differently, based on their own rituals, beliefs, norms, and expectations. As Mine Özyurt Kılıç points out "[e]very culture has its own myth and own image of motherhood signifying that every culture has its own definition of what a good mother should and shouldn't be like" (2011).

To give some examples, in ancient times, the subject of motherhood appeared in paintings and sculptures, where it was equated with symbols of fertility and life. Belonging to the

Paleolithic era and known as one of the oldest prehistoric sculptures, The Venus of Willendorf was one of the examples of those works, including the meanings of fertility and maternal care. Likewise, there was the mother goddess figure Inanna, associated with mating, fertility, and childbirth of humans and animals, about 4000 BC in Mesopotamia (Özyurt Kılıç, 2011). To praise her mother-goddess, the temple priestess Enheduanna sang a song, and Özyurt Kılıç transmitted that song as follows:

...O wild and rampant, eldest daughter of the Moon,  
 Queen greater than An, who can pay you sufficient homage?  
 Queen of Queens, who in accordance with the spirits  
 were greater than your mother the moment you were born,  
 wise and knowing queen of all the lands,  
 mother of men and animals, I sing your praise... (in Özyurt Kılıç, 2011).

In Christian art, moreover, motherhood stood for sacredness. The portrait of the Virgin Mary and Jesus was an example implying the holiness of motherhood. The work depicted purity, devotion, grace, and maternal tenderness. In a general sense, the first art forms in history, such as sculpture and painting, reflected the idealization of motherhood.

However, in the Renaissance Period, with the rise of reason, artists began to produce more realistic works of art. Therefore, instead of idealization, more realistic approaches towards the concept of motherhood and mothers were seen in art. Clearly, English theater, which was one of the leading art forms of the period, included mother characters that were complex, deep, and multidimensional. In other words, mothers no longer took place only as dutiful, fertile, and sacred ones; instead, they had a strong and realistic connection with life. To give some dramatic examples from the period, William Shakespeare had some significant mother characters such as Getrude (in *Hamlet*), Lady Macduff (in *Macbeth*), Volumnia (in *Coriolanus*), and Titania (in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*). Those characters were full of ambition and lust, and they were also fierce and strong-willed. Those mothers were not defined solely by their fertility or sacredness. Instead of focusing on maternity, they were dealing with complex matters such as policy. It can be easily said that those mother images were far away from the idealized motherhood concept, compared to previous ages; they deeply dived into the matters of real life.

In modern and postmodern times, mothers, motherhood, and mothering were represented in realistic forms as well; moreover, the depiction of the complexities and challenges of

motherhood extensively took place. Feminist modernist author Virginia Woolf, for example, touched upon the idea that mothering restricted women and prevented them from producing art (Suppé, 2022, p. 184). Akin to Woolf's ideas, Sylvia Plath declared motherhood as a reason for the death of creativity (Braun, 2023). Plath's contemporaries, like Anne Sexton, Adrienne Rich, and many other feminist artists, also had similar beliefs. They believed that women's mothering captured the freedom of women; in this condition, women could not find any opportunity to actualize their wishes. The authors supported the idea that this problem appeared because of patriarchal ideology. Patriarchy misused the notion of motherhood for its own benefit, and motherhood became a restriction for women rather than an experience. In the face of this issue, feminist authors, such as Alice Walker and Toni Morrison, tried to establish a feminist criticism in their literature by highlighting the existence of mothers in society and their struggles during their mothering practices. However, on the other hand, as Özyurt Kılıç suggested, some feminist authors, such as Angela Carter, endeavored to build a feminist tradition through the absence of mothers (Özyurt Kılıç, 2017, p. 94). According to Özyurt Kılıç, the absence of mothers was the narrative strategy of Carter to resist against traditional femininity notions and an important step to demythologize the constructed motherhood representations (Özyurt Kılıç, 2017, p. 94). As a matricentric feminist professor, Özyurt Kılıç, in her studies, critically explores the portrayal of literary female characters within the context of motherhood, debating how the maternal role is a powerful determinant to praise or judge them. In her talk titled *Kim Korkar Medea'dan?: Yasada, Edebiyatta ve Sanatta Annelik*<sup>1</sup>, Özyurt Kılıç (2022) addressed the rewritings of *Medea* and argued that the character of Medea was rewritten as a guilty mother many times after Euripides' *Medea* performed in 432 BC; however, she finally gained her voice in Christa Wolf's *Medea* (in original *Medea: Stimmen*, 1996) due to the author's dismantling the stereotype of Medea as a monstrous mother and an irrational woman.

In addition to literature, in modern and contemporary cinema, many works were produced dealing with the concept of motherhood. To list a few of them, directed by Wayne Wang and based on Amy Tan's novel of the same title, *The Joy Luck Club* (1993), for instance, was a drama uncovering the complex relationship between mothers and daughters, delving into the themes of sacrifice, cultural identity, immigration, and the gap between generations. Also, the

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<sup>1</sup> in English *Who's Afraid of Medea?: Motherhood in Law, Literature, and Art*

Spanish film *Volver* (2006) by Pedro Almodóvar concerned the theme of the mother-daughter bond and explored the theme of female solidarity. Additionally, the American drama *Pieces of a Woman* (2020), directed by Hungarian film and theater director Kornél Mundruczó, presented the story of a woman who had a traumatic home birth experience and felt a huge grief after the loss of her child. What is more, the Turkish-made short film *Doğum* (2008), written and directed by Burcu Aykar Şirin and Uygur Şirin, and Turkish comedy *Lohusa* (2024), written and directed by Gupse Özay, demonstrated the struggles of mothers during the postpartum period. At this point, *The Lost Daughter* (2021) by Maggie Gyllenhaal, which is the main work to be explored in this article, can be given as another significant work that handled the struggles of mothers and demonstrated how institutional motherhood disrupted the life of a woman.

Employing matricentric feminism as its theoretical framework, the present study aims to provide an analysis of the film *The Lost Daughter* (2021) by looking at the main character Leda Caruso's motherhood experience and perception. The study claims that motherhood has many unspoken aspects, and it might be a burden for a woman. This article first presents the theoretical background of the concept of motherhood. It will start to discuss motherhood from the Victorian Period, since the Victorian Period was the term that saw crucial debates on the notion of motherhood. Then, the arguments of feminist scholars and activists from second wave to present will be discussed. In this context, respectively, the allegations of Betty Friedan, Karen Horney, Adrienne Rich, and Nancy Chodorow over the concept of motherhood will be put forward. Hereby, the changing perception of femininity and motherhood from Victorian Period up to now will be clearly revealed. As the last station of the theoretical background, matricentric feminism, coined by Andrea O'Reilly, will be introduced as an umbrella term in the feminist discussion of motherhood. The arguments of these mentioned names will be important reference points in the analysis of the film *The Lost Daughter* (2021).

## **1. The Changing Perception of Femininity and Motherhood**

The Victorian Era (1837-1901) saw many debates on the notions of femininity and motherhood. Those debates were based on patriarchal ideology. In that period, the lives of women were under the control of men and were shaped by men's doctrines. The period defined and labeled women within conservative and traditional limits. In line with this, the Victorian Period produced two types of women: the fallen woman and the angel in the house.

To begin with the fallen woman, that woman portrayal referred to a woman who was a prostitute, or a woman who had a sexual relationship outside of marriage, an adulterer, a victim of seduction, as well as a lower-class woman (Anderson, 1993, p. 2). According to Nina Auerbach (1980), the fallen woman was a mute and enigmatic icon, and she did not have a community because she had a rough nature (pp. 29, 33). That woman image was devoid of virtue and grace, and she had a place neither at home nor in society. She was expelled from everywhere. On the other hand, the angel in the house symbolized the perfect woman. She was an idealized woman who was a devoted wife and mother. Through the image of the angel in the house, the period advised women to be well-behaved wives and selfless mothers. Women were not encouraged for any other roles except for those roles.

The Victorian Period's traditional, patriarchal ideas were broken and reversed by the New Woman movement and the impact of second-wave feminism. To discuss the New Woman movement first, the figure of the New Woman was born in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. It was a woman image challenging traditional gender roles and society's expectations. According to American literary feminist critic Elaine Showalter, the New Woman was "an anarchic figure who threatened to turn the world upside down and to be on top in a wild carnival of social and sexual misrule" (1990, p. 38). Showalter wrote that the New Woman had many new opportunities, such as education, work, and mobility, and she saw that there were alternatives to marriage (1990, p. 39). That is, the New Woman rejected the domestic sphere and aimed to experience life beyond traditional roles. That woman did not want to be a selfless, pure, and pious mother. Instead of maternity, she focused on her education and career. The ideology of the New Woman rapidly separated among women, and many women began to get married at late ages or chose not to marry, and also some of them rejected being mothers. Against that view, Theodore Roosevelt, who served as the 26<sup>th</sup> president of the United States from 1901 to 1909, was angry, and he evaluated that woman type as similar to the soldier who shirked his duty (Matthews, 2003, p. 38). However, against any insult, the ideas of the New Woman did not lose any value; contrary, that woman figure led the emergence of second-wave feminism.

The existence of the New Woman greatly influenced the ideas and objectives of second-wave feminism. Spanned from the late 1960s to the late 1980s, second-wave feminism specifically dwelled on the subjects of wifehood, domesticity, motherhood, mothering, and reproduction. In addition, scholars and activists of second wave worked on psychoanalysis, and

they tried to understand women and mothers from a feminist perspective, liberating women from the male gaze and patriarchal ideologies.

In this sense, firstly, American feminist writer and activist Betty Friedan came up with a work titled *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), in which she elaborated the woman who stuck into the roles of wifehood and motherhood and forgot her individuality. Friedan wrote that “women were defined only in sexual relation to men—man’s wife, sex object, mother, housewife—and never as persons defining themselves by their own actions in society” (p. 15). She declared that the psychiatrists, pediatricians, anthropologists, sociologists, and media experts urged women into those positions, and they decided on behalf of women how to live in that domestic circle. Friedan argued on this subject as follows:

“Over and over women heard in voices of tradition and of Freudian sophistication that they could desire no greater destiny than to glory in their own femininity. Experts told them how to catch a man and keep him, how to breastfeed children and handle their toilet training, [...] how to dress, look, and act more feminine and make marriage more exciting; how to keep their husbands from dying young and their sons from growing into delinquents. [...] They learned that truly feminine women do not want careers, higher education, political rights—the independence and the opportunities that the old-fashioned feminists fought for” (p. 44).

According to Friedan, directing women to be wives and mothers and ignoring their personalities and personal development created a crisis in women’s psychology. Friedan put forward that those women, after a while, felt depression. They hesitated about their intellectual capacity and regarded their identity as unfulfilled. What is more, they saw themselves as the only ones suffering from that problem. Friedan stated that those women could not find any name for their struggle and felt alienated and hopelessly neurotic. She argued that in fact many women had the same problem, but psychoanalysis based on male gaze had not analyzed and named the problem of those women.

Friedan asserted that, interestingly, there was no problem for a woman who had no dream of her own and introduced herself only as a wife and a mother rather than an autonomous being (2001, p. 88). According to Friedan, it was the feminine mystique that permitted and even supported the woman who ignored questions about her identities and answered the question “Who am I?” by easily saying “Tom’s wife...Mary’s mother.” (2001, p. 96). In light of Friedan’s arguments, a woman who did not search for an identity beyond being a wife and a



mother did not feel a psychological problem in her life since the feminine mystique captured the consciousness of the woman and left only domestic issues as norms and standards of life. It was understood that a woman who experienced identity crises and depression in her wifehood and motherhood journey was actually a woman who was aware that the world was not limited to domestic roles and her identity was not limited to being just a wife and mother. In *The Feminine Mystique*, Betty Friedan aimed to urge women to think over their intellectual capacity, and she sincerely believed that “[a] woman cannot find her identity through others —her husband, her children. She cannot find it in the dull routine of housework” (2001, p. 356). That is why she encouraged women to go beyond being wives and mothers and also to think about their intellectual capacity.

In addition to Betty Friedan, Karen Horney made an important breakthrough in the field of psychoanalysis with her seminal work, *Feminine Psychology* (1967). She criticized that, like all branches of science and all valuations, the psychology of women was also considered from the perspective of men (1967, p. 56). She found this situation dangerous, because the view of men in the field was reinforcing traditional patriarchal ideas. Therefore, there was a need to approach psychoanalysis from a feminist perspective. Karen Horney filled this blank in the field, and she became the leading figure in feminist psychoanalysis. In her works, she studied cultural expectations and social norms by emphasizing the impact of gender. Additionally, Horney dwelled upon the theories of Freud, and she challenged Freud's penis envy theory by reversing it to womb envy. According to Horney, it was the son who was curious and envious of the bodily function of the female sex. She argued that: “When one begins, as I did, to analyze men only after a fairly long experience of analyzing women, one receives a most surprising impression of the intensity of this envy of pregnancy, childbirth, and motherhood, as well as of the breasts and of the act of suckling” (pp. 60-61).

What is more, Horney changed the meanings of mothering and motherhood. To clarify, in *Feminine Psychology*, she rejected the angelic and purifying side of motherhood and set forth that motherhood and the mothering process could create difficulties in women's lives, as well as that the woman might not have a motherly attitude:

“Disturbances such as neurotic anxiety or functional weakness of labor may set in during delivery. In other women, nursing becomes difficult, from the extremes of complete failure of breast feeding to nervous exhaustion. Or we may not find the proper motherly attitude toward the child. We may see instead those irritated or

overanxious mothers who cannot give the child real warmth and are inclined to leave him with a governess” (p. 75).

It was seen that Karen Horney, with her studies in psychoanalysis, brought a different understanding. She freed women from the traditional motherhood circle. She refused the image of a natural mother who was self-sacrificing, docile, strong, energetic, and always joyful. Horney normalized the possibility of the difficulties some women experience in mothering. She accepted that the concept of motherhood included complexities. What is more, a mother was not deficient or culpable if she experienced and could not overcome maternal struggles. Horney first gave importance to the mother’s individuality and mental health, rather than centralizing and trying to solve mothering problems quickly.

Shortly after Karen Horney’s contribution to feminist psychoanalysis with her book *Feminine Psychology*, American feminist poet and essayist Adrienne Rich published *Of Woman Born* in 1976. In this work, Rich handled motherhood as an experience and as an institution. By saying experience, she referred to the biological aspect of motherhood, personal experience in nurturing, and the empowering features of motherhood. On the other hand, by saying institution, Rich intended to say that the notion of motherhood included cultural expectations and roles, and motherhood could be a ground for oppressing women. Rich believed that motherhood had a social function rather than a physical one. That is why she largely touched upon institutional motherhood in *Of Woman Born*. She wrote that as mothers, women were idealized, and they were also exploited (p. 17); this duality toward women originated from the ideology of institutional motherhood. Rich asserted the perspective of institutional motherhood as: “Institutionalized motherhood demands of women maternal ‘instinct’ rather than intelligence, selflessness rather than self-realization, relation to others rather than the creation of self. Motherhood is ‘sacred’ so long as its offspring are ‘legitimate’—that is, as long as the child bears the name of a father who legally controls the mother” (p. 59). It was understood that motherhood was a tool of patriarchy to shape and define the life limits of a woman. Thus, Rich problematized patriarchal ideas within the concept of motherhood and developed a feminist perception towards the experience of motherhood.

Another important feminist work in the field of motherhood studies was Nancy Chodorow’s *The Reproduction of Mothering* (1978). In the introduction chapter, Chodorow started her discussion by saying “women mother” (p. 3), and this argument was the central focus of her. Chodorow criticized that women were always the ones who took a role in the mothering

process; it was hard to see fathers taking on roles in childcare. The father was not the child's primary parent. If there was no biological mother or the biological mother did not take on a parenting role, in this case, other women, rather than the father, took their place (p. 3). That is, Chodorow criticized the non-equal childcare, saying that raising children was a burden left only to women and as men did not play a significant role.

Furthermore, in *The Reproduction of Mothering*, Chodorow put forward general aspects of science as to mothering. She articulated that scientists claimed mothering was an instinct of women; therefore, they mothered. She explicitly wrote that:

A second argument for women's mothering, put forth by psychoanalysts and assumed by many others—gynecologists and obstetricians, social scientists, physiologists and physiological psychologists—is that women have a mothering instinct, or maternal instinct, and that therefore it is 'natural' that they mother, or even that they therefore ought to mother. These accounts sometimes imply that it is instinctual that biological mothers mother, sometimes assume that mothers will parent better than fathers or men for biological reasons, sometimes assume that because children need to be cared for biological mothers naturally care for them, and sometimes argue that women 'need' to mother (pp. 21-22).

According to Chodorow, women's mothering was not related to their nature or instinct. She believed that "[g]irls are taught to be mothers, trained for nurturance, and told that they ought to mother. [...] They 'identify' with their own mothers as they grow up, and this identification produces the girl as a mother" (p. 31). In short, through her work, Chodorow challenged the idea that mothering was the task of women and that mothering was the nature of women. In *The Reproduction of Mothering*, she aimed to draw attention to how the childcare process was gender-based, although it was the responsibility of both parents.

Until now, from Betty Friedan to Nancy Chodorow, the contributions of various feminist psychoanalysts and activists to the subjects of motherhood and mothering have been introduced. It has been comprehended that these names objected to traditional patriarchal motherhood understanding. In this context, it can be easily affirmed that Betty Friedan, Karen Horney, Adrienne Rich, Nancy Chodorow, and many other feminist scholars, activists, and theorists in motherhood studies have worked to reverse patriarchal motherhood ideology. They have taken down restrictive, judgmental, and degrading statements towards women, and they also have not accepted the idea that women have to be wives and mothers.

This feminist effort has developed itself over the years and continued to add new studies every day. One of these studies is Andrea O'Reilly's *Matricentric Feminism: Theory, Activism, and Practice* (2016). This present paper will henceforth focus on this theory and suggest that matricentric feminism is the gathering of all feminists who work on the concept of motherhood.

## 2. Matricentric Feminism: A Feminist Theory for Mothers and the Concept of Motherhood

“We think back through our mothers if we are women”

Virginia Woolf- A Room of One's Own

The fourth wave of feminism is a contemporary movement that arose in 2010s and continues to evolve. Some matters of this wave are harassment and violence, body positivity and autonomy, homophobia, climate justice, economic inequality, religious struggles, and the concept of motherhood. For each issue, feminists produce unique policies and foster activism. In line with this, matricentric feminism is a new concept that emerged in the fourth wave of feminism. It is a quiet new, groundbreaking, and enriching multidisciplinary approach. The term was coined first by Andrea O'Reilly, who is a Canadian professor of Sexuality and Women's Studies at York University, with the publication of her book *Matricentric Feminism: Theory, Activism, and Practice* (2016). In the introduction chapter, O'Reilly mentioned that Virginia Woolf's advice towards women about having a room of their own created a passionate concern in her to do feminism as a mother and do mothering as a feminist (p. 1). O'Reilly believed that “mothers need a feminism of their own” (p. 1). Since “mothers are oppressed under patriarchy as women and as mothers” (2019, p. 15), mothers need a feminist approach that covers their needs and concerns. At this point, O'Reilly brought the ideas of feminist scholars, theorists, and activists dealing with the concept of motherhood together and defined their feminist concerns about motherhood as ‘matricentric feminism’.

Andrea O'Reilly defined matricentric feminism in her article titled *Matricentric Feminism: A Feminism for Mothers* as feminism which positioned mother's needs and concerns for their empowerment (p.14). O'Reilly underlined that this new title in feminism did not replace traditional feminist ideology. It is to stress social, economic, political, cultural, and psychological problems of mothers and women who face maternal issues. O'Reilly believed that mothers, mothering, and the concept of motherhood itself deserved serious and sustained scholarly interest. At this point, she put forward the principles and aims of matricentric

feminism. Accordingly, matricentric feminism considers mothering as work which is significant and valuable to society; however, mothering should not be the only responsibility and task of mothers (2016, p.7). O'Reilly recognizes mothering as a form of labor. She believes equal responsibilities in parenting, and in her literature, the word 'mothering' is beyond sex. In addition, matricentric feminism challenges patriarchal oppression (2016, p.7). It aims to empower mothers and build social justice for them. What is more, matricentric feminism considers mothering and motherhood as a cultural structure (2016, p.7). It demands to explore the variety of maternal experiences. Finally, matricentric feminism seek to establish an autonomous, independent, and legitimate scholarly maternal theory (2016, p. 7). This invites scholars to center the experiences and challenges of women within the feminist context of motherhood. In conclusion, matricentric feminism focuses on the problems of mothers and issues related to motherhood and the mothering process. It brings together the works of feminist scholars and activists dealing with the concept of motherhood.

### **3. "I'm an unnatural mother": The Analysis of *The Lost Daughter* (2021)**

*"Motherhood has a pen name: guilt"*

Elif Shafak- Black Milk

Written and directed by Maggie Gyllenhaal, *The Lost Daughter* is a 2021 psychological drama. The film is adapted from Elena Ferrante's novel of the same title, and it mainly aims to handle the unspoken and dark aspects of motherhood through the main character, Leda Caruso. The film explores the themes of motherhood, identity, femininity, abandonment, and maternal guilt and regret. To give a brief synopsis of the film, Leda Caruso, a middle age literature professor, travels alone to a Greek island. The only expectation of her during this solo vacation is to find peace and focus on her readings. However, this holiday uncovers the character's unsolved traumas. In the island, Leda meets with a young mother named Nina. She and her chaotic family life deeply influences and carries Leda to her own motherhood journey. Through the flashback technique, Leda as a very young mother is showed overwhelmed because of the tiring responsibilities of motherhood. Her husband Joe does not take an effective role in parenting and partnership. The loneliness of the character both in raising children and in relationship urges her to leave her husband and little daughters. Leda keeps this memory hidden as her maternal guilt; however, it breaks out when she finds the same struggles in Nina. In the

film, the character Leda both tries to connect and heal her own maternal wounds and also endeavors to keep Nina away from the darkness of motherhood.

To look closer at the film, the audiences of *The Lost Daughter* might think of watching horror or thriller film, particularly due to its opening scene. The film masterfully builds a sense of tension and fear, keeping the audiences on edge. This atmosphere is created through music, setting, and color choice. To illustrate, the main character, Leda<sup>2</sup> (Olivia Colman), appears at night with her white dress with blood on it and a dull expression. It is seen that there is a wound in her umbilical area. Leda staggers and walks towards the sea, which this view might bring into mind suicide. However, when she stops, she suddenly faints on the beach, and the suicide scene that the audiences imagine do not come true. In these moments, the audiences neither get any idea or clue about who Leda is nor why she has that wound. The audiences only see a lonely woman who is overtired and so close to death. As a first impression, it might be thought that she is guilty, insane, and harmed by someone.

The opening scene is significant to get some ideas about the notion of motherhood that the director Maggie Gyllenhaal wants to display. By constructing the film from the character's terrific moment first, the director mainly aims to make audiences focus on the darkness more. Gyllenhaal shows physical and emotional tiredness of the protagonist, and this reminds the internal struggles and conflicts of a mother that often remain hidden and crushed under the idealized motherhood image. Also, through this scene, Gyllenhaal shortly summarizes motherhood journey. She implies that at the end of the maternal path, a woman is just lonely, nameless, overtired, unclean, and nearly dead.

The film, which arouses suspense with its first scene, continues with Leda's first arrival on the Greek island alone for a holiday. Even though the audiences now see Leda with full of simile and childlike joy, initial tension still remains. This darkness is not expected; since the Greek island is chosen as the setting, it can be thought that a movie will be watched reflecting

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<sup>2</sup> The character's name is highly symbolic. Leda is a well-known figure in Greek mythology. She represents beauty, sexuality, reproduction, and fertility. Leda is the mother of Castor, Pollux, Clytemnestra, and Helen. She becomes a mother as a result of the seduction of Zeus, who appeared as a swan. Leda has such extraordinary children, and it is thought that it is the symbol of the complexities and challenges of motherhood.

Leda, as a mythological figure, has been studied by many artists, such as William Butler Yeats (in the poem 'Leda and Swan'), Hilda Doolittle (in the poem 'Leda'), and Aldous Huxley (in the poem 'Leda'). Finally, she has appeared also in the story of Elena Ferrante with the character's struggles in her motherhood journey.

the warm atmosphere and dialogues of people during their holiday. However, the movie is far from the warm atmosphere of Greece with its choice of plot, music, color, object, and close shot. To illustrate, when Leda first arrived in her apartment room, she was startled by the light of the lighthouse and the voice coming from the sea. Moreover, in the morning, flies bother her. The fruit on the table is rotten, although it looks very delicious on the surface. Also, a group of teenagers and a family spoil the joy and tranquility of the beach. While these things are happening, the camera follows Leda in narrow areas, and it looks like she is stuck and followed by someone. These scenes can be interpreted as representations of the unexpected dark and annoying sides of motherhood. To clarify the meanings of these elements, through the use of close shots and annoying sounds and objects that follow Leda, the burden of motherhood that chases the character everywhere and in every condition is emphasized. Just as a mother could not escape from the annoying and suffocating responsibilities of motherhood, Leda also could not hide from the bothersome objects, people, and events that surround her throughout the film.

To elaborate on Leda's motherhood story from her youth, it is shared that Leda (Jessie Buckley as young Leda) is so lonely in her mothering process. She cares for the entire responsibilities of her children, stays at home, and her husband Joe (Jack Farthing) is related to the outside. Nancy Chodorow, in *The Reproduction of Mothering*, analyzes the spatial dynamics that shape the differing roles of women and men within the context of motherhood as follows: "Because of their child-care responsibilities, women's primary social location is domestic. Men are also involved with particular domestic units, but men find a primary social location in the public sphere" (1978, p. 9). However, mothering cannot be the sole responsibility of women, and childcare should not lock her up at home. While explaining the principles and aims of matricentric feminism, O'Reilly warns the reader against the issue that "the essential task of mothering is not, and should not be, the sole responsibility and duty of mothers" (2016, p. 7). As Chodorow and O'Reilly support, mothering is essentially beyond sex. It cannot be the primary role and mission of women. The father must be involved in mothering. However, in the story of Leda, it is seen that Leda is the only person taking responsibility for children. This situation, being the only responsible one in mothering, creates problems for Leda's life. She is crushed under the weight of motherhood each day. And this weight, sometimes directly and sometimes metaphorically is reflected in the film.

Maggie Gyllenhaal builds the film by applying the flashback technique. The audience frequently goes back to Leda's youth and turns back to her adulthood. Through this technique,

it is learned that when her daughters were six and four, Leda had an affair and abandoned her children. It is also informed that Leda left her lover after a while and turned back to her children. Although she has a good connection with her children now, she still feels the burden of the past. Without doubt, Leda's abandonment of her children is a filthy mark and pain in her life. Just like the spot on the white dress and the wound on her stomach that the audience sees at the very beginning of the film, abandoning children is a hurtful act, and it dirties the purity of motherhood. It is revealed that the guilt felt throughout the film comes from Leda's abandonment of her children.

Adrienne Rich in *Of Woman Born* (1976) argues that a mother is received as a woman who is nourishing, beneficent, pure, asexual, and sacred, even by the most independent ones (Rich, 1995, p. 51). This woman is a natural mother who can find joy in spending all day with her small children and whose maternal love is, and should be, self-sacrificing (Rich, 1995, p. 40). Furthermore, as to maternal love, Elisabeth Badinter in *Mother Love* (1981) discusses that mother love is assumed to be a kind of maternal instinct rooted in the very nature of a woman, regardless of when and where she lives (p. xx). According to Badinter, people maintain to believe that mother love is absolute, and a mother who does not love her children is, in spite of the most open-minded intentions, still considered abnormal (pp. xxii- xxiii). In light of these arguments, looking at the story of Leda, it is seen that Leda breaks the blessed motherhood image by leaving her home; therefore, she is not fit to be in the category of a pure, natural mother. Obviously, Leda regards her children and husband as a threat to her independence. From her perspective, home does not respond to joy; it is a kind of prison. Her nature does not include instinctive motherhood. Instead of maternal desires, her nature urges Leda to protect her independence.

To look much closer at Leda's motherhood experience in her youth, it is seen that she is not only physically but also psychologically alone in sharing the responsibility of mothering. As it was mentioned before, the audiences always see Leda in childcare and see Joe in caring for life outside of home. In the film, it is shown that this situation is experienced by many mothers. To illustrate, when Leda and her nuclear family come to the cottage for a short holiday, they meet with a hiking couple here. In this meeting, Leda learns that the male hiker (Nikos Poursanidis) left his wife and children and took the journey with his lover standing next to him, and the mother is taking care of the children on her own now. Throughout their conversation, the man, in his sentences, draws a picture in which he positions himself as an adventurous and



independent person and his old wife as a prisoner trapped in the duties of motherhood. The act of the man disturbs Leda, but at the same time, she feels a great jealousy against him. In fact, in that picture, Leda exactly wants to be like that male hiker, who is away from the responsibilities of children and domestic life. This difference between Leda and the male hiker comes from the non-equal and gender based parenting roles. As a man, he can easily leave her home behind and follow his dreams. No one is curious about his fatherhood, and no one blames him because of his choice. However, Leda as a woman cannot even effectively care with her work. Although she is so passionate young academician, her roles in mothering do not allow her to do her studies. It is expected from her to prioritize her family. It can be said that the meeting of the hikers and Leda in the cottage serves as a microcosm of societal dynamics. Even though the characters share very brief and confined moment in a small place, crucial themes, such as freedom, parenting responsibility, inequality in parenting, gender roles, can be detected. The cottage thus is a symbolic space that societal expectation and personal desires are uncovered.

In addition, Leda and the male hiker share the same energy as to escaping from the duties of children and domesticity, but they cannot create a solid connection with each other. Instead of the male hiker, the dialogue between the female hiker and Leda develops. The female hiker (Alba Rohrwacher) does not have a maternal background; nevertheless, she quickly senses Leda's depression caused because of institutional motherhood. During their conversation, she alerts Leda to the possibility of a life without overwhelming parental obligations. Due to the female hiker, Leda awakes and faces how her life has been occupied, and she has lived under the obligations of her maternal title for a long time. Although the female hiker appears for a very short time in the film, her impact is remarkable. Clearly, with the help of her, Leda no longer ignores the voice that Betty Friedan speaks of: "I want something more than my husband and my children and my home" (2001, p. 60).

As the burden of motherhood rises, Leda is forced to make a choice between her motherhood and her autonomous being. She feels that it is not possible to both sustain her maternal duties and have a personal sphere since motherhood as an institution kills her independence and individuality. This problem, the in-betweenness of women, is touched by Adrienne Rich in *Of Woman Born*. Rich debates that, specifically, an educated young woman's life is surrounded by choices. According to her, this woman is always expected to sacrifice for some things, and it is not allowed for her to obtain two options together. Rich writes that: "She

struggles to create an autonomous self and make inescapable decisions either/or: motherhood or individuation, motherhood or creativity, motherhood or freedom” (1995, p. 160). Similarly, in the story of Leda, patriarchal constraints do not allow her to be a mother and an individual at the same time. Struggling to protect and decide on her true identity, Leda has to choose either to stay at home with her household or to be an independent person without her children and husband.

While Leda deals with the problem of identity conflict, her husband Joe does not experience any struggle related to his fatherhood experience or an identity crisis. It is Leda who suffers from the burden of parenthood and identity problems. It is understood that Leda and Joe are not aligned in their approach to parenting. They do not equally sharing the duties of raising children. That is why Leda emotionally falls down when she mothers. Essentially, she is quite restless about this occasion, and to alleviate some of the burden from her shoulders, Leda shares her worries with her husband and demands his help. She feels overwhelmed and expects that by revealing her feelings, they can work together to find solutions to parenting challenges. However, Leda's worries are not answered by her husband. Joe disregards Leda’s anxiety, and he never shares the same concerns about parenting as she does. It must be mentioned here that Leda never considers herself a good enough mother, despite her close interest and her hard work to raise her daughters in a better way. According to Rich, these worries occur because of institutional motherhood. In *Of Woman Born*, Rich shares her personal detection of maternal guilt as follows: “I would begin to understand the full weight and burden of maternal guilt, that daily, nightly, hourly, Am I doing what is right? Am I doing enough? Am I doing too much? The institution of motherhood finds all mothers more or less guilty of having failed their children” (1995, p. 223). Likewise, Leda also experiences the self-doubt problem that comes with motherhood. She feels herself guilty and inadequate. It is underscored that women have little spaces in society because of rigidity of traditional gender roles. They try to fit themselves in parenting roles with a great effort. However, they are never found enough in mothering. On the other hand, the same expectations and accusations are not reflected to fathers. As a matter of fact, it is hard to witness men to feel themselves guilty and inadequate because of their position in fatherhood.

Leda, who undertakes the burdens of her academic studies, housework, child care, and her husband, both literally and metaphorically, has difficulty creating *a room of her own*. Her study room is filled with the toys of her little children. And every special detail about her is

broken by her children. For example, when Leda gives the doll she played with during her childhood to her daughter; her daughter harms it without thinking. This situation is received by Leda beyond financial and memorial damage, and she responds with great anger. Symbolically, it is damage that targets Leda's whole life. Behind this anger, it is possible to see sacrifice, exploitation, and losing identity. By giving damage to Leda's doll, the daughter harms Leda's past. According to Rich, "mother-love is supposed to be continuous, unconditional. Love and anger cannot coexist. Female anger threatens the institution of motherhood" (p. 46). Orbach and Eichenbaum also suggest that "[Women] find their own anger ugly. They are ashamed of it, find it hard to express, and fear, it will hurt others. Thus women often swallow their anger and either turn it back on themselves in one way or another or express it indirectly" (p. 150). In the film, the audience sees that, with each passing day, Leda finds it harder to swallow this anger anymore.

In the film, Leda as a young mother is seen literally as a happy person for once when she leaves her home for an academic conference. Before leaving home, she fulfilled all the responsibilities of a *natural mother*. She prepared meals for children and distributed them according to a daily schedule. She left her phone number to call in case of any emergency to her temporary childminder, as well as the numbers of the daycare, the doctor, and the grandparents. When Leda arrives at the conference, the audiences of the film witness that Leda returns to a happy woman who does not have the heavy burden of domestic duties. This academic conference becomes a chance for Leda to see what kind of life she will sustain if she breaks the circle of domestic life. Finally, she decides that she can no longer stand her children and husband, who harm her personal space and kill her individuality. Finding a solution to leave her home, Leda eliminates the fear that motherhood will swallow her whole life. Although her choice will create another problem in the future, she is quite confident and happy at that moment.

In Leda's adulthood, the concept of motherhood is mostly discussed through the experiences of another mother. This person is Nina (Dakota Johnson), suffering exactly from the same mothering problems as the young Leda. In the film, she becomes a reminder for Leda to turn back and confront her motherhood story. These two women come across on the island, and both of them have the burden of motherhood on their shoulders. It is so ironic that the Greek island, as a holiday place, becomes a meeting area for two wounded mothers. Instead of resting and having fun, they think about their sorrowful motherhood journey.

From the moment Leda first saw Nina, Leda feels empathy for this young mom and tries to support her emotionally, just as the female hiker did in the past for her. When these two women get into touch, Leda makes an effort to heal her memories from her own mothering process, and she also tries to protect Nina from the same motherhood difficulties. It is seen that whatever Leda wanted to protect in the past but could not, she wants to protect those things in Nina now. To illustrate, when Nina loses her daughter on the beach, Leda finds the child and eliminates the anxiety of Nina. It is showed that Leda as a young mother also experienced the same in her own mothering process, and now as an experienced mother, Leda wants to help Nina in her mothering journey. In addition, she gives Nina some advice about motherhood. This advice does not foster institutional motherhood but sheds light on the unspoken sides of mothering. In their conversation, Leda frequently highlights the importance of selfhood and speaks about her dissatisfaction, anger, and desires.

Furthermore, Leda indirectly becomes Nina's role model. To illustrate, when Nina's sister-in-law Callie (Dagmara Domińczyk) commandingly tells Leda to change her spot on the beach so that her family can be together, Leda refuses Callie's demand. Callie and her family cannot understand Leda's behavior and react in a negative tone. As Maureen Murdock expresses, "[w]hen a woman begins to assert herself, she is often seen as disagreeable, ugly, and a bitch, as no longer willing to smile, swallow feelings, numb out, and please" (p. 110). Leda is regarded as an immoderate woman by the family. However, she is only a woman who rejects an unlikeable offer. This view catches Nina's attention, and she sincerely appreciates Leda's bravery. It must not be overlooked here that this beach scene is important for Leda's personal development when it is thought for their own benefits her children and husband have seized everything she had in the past. So, Leda, as an adult woman, appears as one who protects and takes care of her own plans, and also who inspires a young mother with her strong stance.

After this first spark, a beautiful friendship bond is established between Leda and Nina. However, this bond is broken when it is revealed that Leda has taken the doll of Nina's daughter. By doing it, Leda childishly tries to take back every piece that was taken from her. At that moment, the only problem for Leda is that the doll is dirty; worms and wolves come out of it. Leda meticulously tries to save the doll from them, but while doing so, she becomes afraid and frightened. It is almost identical to the fear she has experienced in order to protect her individuality at her young age. In the past, like worms and wolves covering the doll, domestic life and its crushing responsibilities surrounded Leda's life. Cutting domesticity off was

difficult and frightening at first, but she managed to leave them. She tries to do the same thing again through that doll. The doll carries the meaning of individuality and protection of identity for Leda.

But what she did is not interpreted correctly by Nina. Without giving Leda a chance to explain why she hid the doll, Nina cuts off communication with Leda, and the audience never sees these two women together again. Before leaving from Leda, Nina stabs the hatpin into Leda's umbilical area. Given by Leda to Nina before, the hatpin becomes a symbol of the damage of institutional motherhood. Just as institutional motherhood destroys the lives of women, Nina, as the following figure of institutional motherhood, also harms Leda through that way. It can be argued from the separation of these two women from each other that Nina will also fall into the same traps of institutional motherhood because Nina breaks the opportunity of togetherness. Also, regarding the symbol of doll, it should be noted that Nina finds Leda's efforts selfish; therefore, she interprets individuality in motherhood as egoistical. So, Nina portrays a mother image that follows traditional doctrines in mothering. She is ready to sacrifice herself and is not aware of the importance of individuality in parenting. However, from Friedan to O'Reilly, matricentric feminists argue that the mother figure like Nina is captured by institutional motherhood. She is deceived by the phantom of the natural mother, who is docile, affectionate, and devoted but does not have an independent identity.

At the end of the film, the audiences see Leda on the beach in the morning, which is the continuation of the opening scene of the film. Leda wakes up to the waves hitting her face on the beach where she slept all night. She hesitantly touches the wound made by Nina through the hatpin, seeming to have forgotten how the wound formed. Without going anywhere, she calls her daughters, and while talking on the phone, Leda smiles and at the same time sheds tears. Through the character's gestures, it is understood that Leda makes peace with all the mistakes she has made and accept her motherhood experience with all her faults and virtues. Leda finally reaches the idea that motherhood both includes joy and difficulties. It is not true to be ashamed or to feel guilty because of the challenging nature of motherhood.

### **Conclusion**

In this study, *The Lost Daughter*, written and directed by Maggie Gyllenhaal, has been analyzed through the lens of matricentric feminism. It has been argued that Leda has suffered from traditional patriarchal ideas during her mothering process. She has taken on the parenting role alone, and while mothering, she has had to sacrifice her personal sphere many times. It has

been seen that the emotional and physical burden of motherhood has been an unbearable and crushing responsibility for her. From a matricentric feminist point of view, it can be interpreted that the problem in Leda's life is that mothering has been left as an essential task for her, and it has been expected of Leda to leave everything that belongs to her. Therefore, instead of empowering, motherhood has created anxiety and fear for Leda. Under these conditions, in order to protect her identity, Leda has cut her maternal bond, which makes her feel guilty for the rest of her life. However, this guilt has been tolerated at the end of film. Leda has been displayed as a mother who accepts all her flaws and strengths in her motherhood story. As a result, *The Lost Daughter* suggests that motherhood includes many good but also many unspoken dark sides. The story of Leda underscores that this is the nature of motherhood journey.

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<b><i>Etik Kurul İzni</i></b>	<i>Bu çalışma için etik kurul izni gerekmemektedir. Yaşayan hiçbir canlı (insan ve hayvan) üzerinde araştırma yapılmamıştır. Makale Aile Araştırmaları alanına aittir.</i>
<b><i>Çatışma Beyanı</i></b>	<i>Makalenin yazarları, bu çalışma ile ilgili herhangi bir kurum, kuruluş, kişi ile mali çıkar çatışması olmadığını ve yazarlar arasında çıkar çatışması bulunmadığını beyan eder.</i>
<b><i>Destek ve Teşekkür</i></b>	<i>Çalışmada herhangi bir kurum ya da kuruluştan destek alınmamıştır.</i>

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