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The Deconstruction of Patriarchal Honor in Turkish Cinema: An Analysis of Female Characters Resisting Patriarchy Across Three Genres

Hakan Ün, Burdur Mehmet Akif Ersoy University, hun@mehmetakif.edu.tr

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Abstract

In Turkish society, as in all patriarchal communities dominated by an honor culture, the concept of honor, while holding different implications for men and women, is largely reduced to the strict control of women's bodies. This article examines examples of feminist cinema that challenge the stereotypical portrayal of honor in popular Turkish cinema, which mirror the androcentric values of society. The fiction film *Mine* (1982), the short film *Derin Nefes Al* (Take a Deep Breath, 2012), and the documentary *Bekleyiş* (Expecting a Grain of Sand, 2021) were selected through purposive sampling for inclusion in this study. The study employs qualitative content analysis to examine the female protagonists who resist patriarchal honor codes in the selected long fiction, short fiction, and documentary films produced across different periods.

Keywords: women; body; honour killing; patriarchy; gender; Turkey

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The Deconstruction of Patriarchal Honor in Turkish Cinema: An Analysis of Female Characters Resisting Patriarchy Across Three Genres[1]

Hakan Ün

Introduction

Throughout history, gender values have been a key factor shaping the behaviors of both societies and individuals. Gender roles predate monotheistic religions and have imposed restrictive social norms and values on individuals, confining them within prescribed frameworks. This often creates a conflict between an individual's personal desires and the social behavior patterns expected of them, which significantly impacts their identity. Once these values were integrated into monotheistic religions, gender roles became even more rigid. The concept of honor, the focus of this study, has long been pivotal in molding gender roles and the assigned social positions and behaviors of men and women in many cultures. While the notion of honor carries different meanings for men and women, it is generally rooted in male reproduction and exerting control over women's bodies in this regard. Subsequently, by granting men a domain of power from birth, honor perpetuates power imbalances between the genders. The feminist movement over the last century has highlighted that honor is not merely a social norm but rather a fundamental source of inequality and a violation of freedom. These

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dynamics have created a battleground in societies where patriarchal values are deeply entrenched. This struggle has been expressed in many forms of art, with cinema ultimately becoming instrumental in this resistance.

In popular cinema, which often reflects the dominant values of society, female representations are shaped by patriarchal norms, reinforcing the construction and transmission of gender roles. In contrast, feminist cinema actively deconstructs these stereotypical patriarchal values. Films categorized as feminist cinema have drawn attention to traditional gender values and played a crucial role in questioning social norms. In this regard, it can be argued that cinema has contributed to both the reproduction and critique of gender roles.

This study aims to highlight three films that create a space for resistance against patriarchal values dominating the narrative, character representations, and film discourse in Turkish cinema. To this end, female characters who resist patriarchal values in examples of long fiction, short fiction, and documentary genres were selected through purposive sampling. The ultimate goal is to draw attention to films across different genres that depict women's struggle for liberation against male domination, alongside works that focus on women suffering within the patriarchal value system.

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The literature review first defines the concept of honor, followed by a discussion of the institutions that instruct, control, and discipline individuals within patriarchal society. It also addresses women's movements in Turkey and the resulting research to provide insight into the general perception of honor in society. The article then examines the stereotypical representations of honor in Turkish cinema. Finally, the study's methodology is explained, and the film analyses are conducted using qualitative content analysis.

Honor as a Tool of Patriarchal Control

Almost all cultures value honor, defined as virtuous behavior, good moral character, honesty, and sacrifice, and this ideal is applied equally to both women and men. However, in some cultures, honor carries additional social significance, serving as a central theme around which much of interpersonal life is structured (Vandello and Cohen, 2003, 997). In Turkish culture, the concept of "namus," or honor, is currently defined as an individual's adherence to established moral and social rules. It also involves obeying moral rules regarding sexual conduct and internalizing prescribed gender roles. The Turkish Language Association's dictionary defines "namus," a loanword from Arabic, as "adherence to moral rules and social values within a society, chastity," as well as "honesty, righteousness" (TDK, 2024). The proverbs and idioms in daily language that include the term "namus" demonstrate a strong correlation with control over sexuality, with notable examples including: "namusu iki paralık

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olmak – to be disgraced," "namusuna dokunmak – to tarnish one's honor," "namusuna sinek kondurmamak – to fiercely guard one's honor," "namusunu temizlemek – to redeem one's honor," "namusu temizlenmek – to have one's honor restored," "namusuyla yaşamak – to live with honor," "namus belası – challenges overtaken to protect one's honor," "namus borcu – a matter of honor," "namus cinayeti – honor killing," "namus davası – vendetta over honor," and "namus sözü – one's word of honor" (TDK, 2024). Since these expressions primarily revolve around women's bodies and sexuality, they legitimize death and murder in the name of honor in minds shaped by patriarchy (Kalav, 2019, 213), ultimately leading to honor killings. Moreover, "the idea that women's sexuality becomes visible only after marriage in societies where sexuality is legitimized within the institution of marriage is reproduced not only through Turkish sayings and expressions but also across different cultures and languages" (Kalav, 2012, 154).

The set of rules and way of life in each society has developed over time through lived experiences. These experiences are passed down from generation to generation, with the expectation that new generations will follow these rules throughout their lives and pass the same values on to future generations. As Engels (2001) noted, when societies transitioned to settled life, the organizational need to protect land and livestock led to the emergence of the family

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structure, which in turn introduced the concept of private property. This shift created the necessity to acquire, manage, and pass down property to known heirs, typically along the male line, making patriarchal social structures the dominant norm. Societies and cultures assigned specific roles and responsibilities to men and women, embedding gender roles. “Sexuality, which is organized around the control of women’s pleasure and fertility and fundamentally defined and governed through the patriarchal family structure, has become one of the core dynamics underpinning gender inequality” (Yıldız Tahincioğlu, 2010).

Deniz Kandiyoti (2013) situates Turkey within the framework of classical patriarchy, where authority is held by the eldest male in extended families that trace lineage through the male line. She notes that in this form of patriarchy, “social hierarchies are age-based, with distinct hierarchies for men and women; men and women have separate spheres of activity (which can even be institutionally separated by space); and, ultimately, women’s labor and reproductive capacities are claimed by the male lineage they marry into” (Kandiyoti, 2013, 186). Germaine Tillion (2006) also highlights that the Mediterranean basin, which feature this social structure, has strong kinship ties and endogamous marriages within clans that further reinforce family bonds. Such marriages prevent the introduction of foreign blood into the group and ensure that the family inheritance stays within the clan. In doing so, these families safeguard their lineage and preserve their economic power. As a direct consequence, women who enter

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into relationships or marry outside these predefined options may face death. This historical perspective reveals that control over honor has deep roots. In the patriarchal structure, men hold control over women's bodies. Men, therefore, have perceived many of women's behaviors as dishonorable. An adulterous married woman, a married woman who runs away with another man, a woman who leaves or divorces her husband, a divorced woman who has a relationship with another man, a young unmarried girl who has a relationship with a man, a young unmarried girl who elopes, or a woman who is abducted or raped, whether married or unmarried, is considered to have violated honor codes (UNFPA, 2016, 23). Even seemingly minor actions, such as talking on the phone for too long or requesting a song on the radio, can be perceived as threats to honor (Ceylan et al., 2016, 51).

In honor cultures, women remain under the control of their fathers until marriage and then come under the control of their husbands afterward. Essentially, patriarchal control over a woman's body endures throughout her lifetime. Regardless of age or marital status, women in these societies are expected to safeguard their honor in all circumstances. For this system to persist, women must actively conform to its expectations. This phenomenon is explained by System Justification Theory, which posits that disadvantaged women adapt to the unjust realities imposed by privileged men, viewing inequality as a natural aspect of life. In doing so,

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women find value and security in the roles assigned to them (Sakallı Uğurlu and Akbaş, 2013, 86). This process begins in childhood, as women are socialized to internalize these duties. Women learn that making independent decisions about their bodies is viewed as dishonorable, and that disobedience to the system can lead to violence or even death, ultimately causing them to conform to the values of a patriarchal society. For men, the concept of honor is tied to their ability to protect it, which translates into how effectively they control the women who are seen as embodiments of that honor. Another aspect of male honor involves refraining from viewing a friend's or brother's wife with desire. Since male honor is not associated with the body or sexuality, it is perceived as a matter of character, which is primarily linked to earning an honest living.

As Foucault (2015) points out, sexuality and the meanings and significance attributed to it are shaped by social conditions and formed through concrete power relations. The practice of sexual politics largely depends on institutions (Connell, 2019, 180). In Turkey, these institutions include the family, religion, and the state. Individuals first learn behavioral patterns related to gender roles within the family. In Turkey, concepts of sexuality shaped by gender roles are instilled in children at a very early age. For instance, boys are often encouraged to show their genitals to relatives and neighbors, taking pride in this behavior, while girls are warned that even an accidental glimpse of their underwear during play is something to be ashamed of

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(İlkkaracan and Seral, 2011, 195). The onset of menstruation is a source of shame for girls, necessitating concealment, while boys celebrate their circumcision through grand ceremonies that are widely recognized. While families, school principals, male neighbors, the police, and the law tightly control the virginity of young girls, for boys, virginity is often viewed as a deficiency or a source of shame (Altınay, 2007, 324).

Religion is another institution that significantly influences the practice of sexual politics. The teachings of the three major monotheistic religions emphasize concepts of honor and dishonor, reinforcing values rooted in these beliefs. "Individuals who reinforce their cultural worldview through religion are more likely to uphold the concept of honor" (Sakallı Uğurlu and Akbaş, 2013, 87–88). In Turkey, Islamic principles significantly influence the social order, with the Qur'an and hadiths emphasizing honor as a means of safeguarding chastity and privacy. In Islam, spouses in marriage are deemed permissible for one another (Surah Al-Ma'ārij, 70/29–30); family life is highly valued and encouraged (Surah An-Nur, 24/32), while adultery is explicitly prohibited (Surah An-Nur, 24/2). Women are encouraged to protect their chastity and to wear a headscarf (Surah An-Nur, 24/31). Moreover, safeguarding one's honor is associated with the promise of forgiveness and rewards (Surah Al-Ahzâb, 33/35) (Kuran, 2024).[2]

Another institution that plays a defining role in matters of sexuality is the state. The

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discourse of those in power, along with policies, laws, and sanctions concerning sexuality, exemplifies the state's involvement in this matter. State policies, official rhetoric, actions, and the enforcement of laws significantly influence gender roles. For instance, the reduced sentences for honor killings in the old Turkish Penal Code demonstrated the state's supportive stance on the issue. However, in 2004, an amendment to the penal code abolished the sentence reductions granted for honor killings. Subsequently, either minors, believed to receive lighter sentences, were coerced into committing honor killings, or women were driven to take their own lives. Another example of state policy on this issue is the implementation of state-controlled virginity testing. Parla (2001, 66) explains that "virginity exams, despite the lack of pronounced legal basis, was routinely performed upon women suspected of illegal prostitution and/or charged with 'immodest' behavior; political detainees; girls in state-run dormitories, orphanages, and hospitals; and more sporadically, girls in high schools." Campaigns by feminists and human rights activists led to a 1999 directive mandating that a woman's consent must be obtained before performing a virginity exam. However, it remains uncertain whether these practices have been entirely eradicated. Although the republic regime introduced reforms that included women's rights, such as coeducation, voting rights, and equal rights in marriage, divorce, child custody, inheritance, and property ownership under the Civil Code, as well as political rights and the right to work in the public sphere, women were still largely raised to fit

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into a patriarchal social order (Parla, 2001, 68). According to Cindoğlu (1997, 255), control over women's bodies and sexuality has only changed in form. In this new system, while women are encouraged to pursue independent lives and careers, they are still expected to do so in a so-called virtuous manner. Women are expected to be virtuous wives, devoted mothers, and modest homemakers; in other words, they are to occupy the public sphere as traditional women. Akser (2018, 9) argues that in addition to the creation of a modern Turkish woman image with the modernization project, "the Kemalist rhetoric to emancipate women and to destroy theocratic Ottoman institutions conflict with public patriarchy limiting women's freedom and visibility in Turkish society. This conflict is the most fundamental conflict in Turkish society."

The gains made by women's and feminist movements in the 19th and 20th centuries, such as the right to education, voting, and employment, shifted toward a focus on human rights after the 1960s (Hamzaoğlu and Konuralp, 2019, 60). During the political bans following the military coup in Turkey in the 1980s, the military regime did not view women's movements as a political threat, thereby fostering an environment conducive to the movement's development. Women's demands for 'equality, freedom, and solidarity' naturally positioned the feminist perspective at the forefront of the struggle for democracy (Atakav, 2013). As Gürbilek (2014, 22) notes, Turkey mirrored the history of Western societies during that period, with the

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transformation of private life into public discourse viewed as evidence of Turkey's westernization. Many issues that were once considered "private" and kept concealed were introduced into the public arena for the first time in the 1980s, making sexuality and private life persistent topics of public discussion. With the liberalization of market-driven macroeconomic policies during this period, a new set of proposals emerged for women, characterized as a "liberal gender ideology." Consequently, sexuality was no longer defined as a taboo, as it had been in Kemalism or traditional Islamic discourse. Chastity and purity were no longer presented as an asset, and women's liberation was depicted in films as the freedom to form both emotional and sexual relationships with men. However, within this new gender ideology, women's sexuality was still defined by and understood through the lens of men (Cindoğlu, 2011, 121). Although women made contributions to the establishment of a democratic political structure during this period, they were unable to transform the patriarchal society.

From this period onward, various studies in Turkey have concluded that values associated with honor, rooted in patriarchal norms, remain widespread. The findings of these studies indicate that men place significant importance on women's premarital sexuality and virginity, and women's premarital sexual activity is deemed inappropriate. Furthermore, men are generally unwilling to marry women who are not virgins (Sakallı-Uğurlu and Glick, 2003, as cited in Sakallı Uğurlu and Akbaş, 2013, 79). In contrast, it can be concluded that "society

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perceives men's sexual activity positively with the idea, or excuse, that 'he's a man,' with no issues pertaining to premarital sexual activity, while women are expected to maintain their virginity" (Gezici Yalçın and Tanrıverdi, 2018, 152). A man's first sexual intercourse, unlike a woman's, is considered a gain, a source of pride, and a right rather than a "loss" of value. However, when it comes to marriage, men often choose wives who align with patriarchal values instead of seeking experienced women or sexual satisfaction (Ozansoy, 2022). Other studies indicate that values of honor are not necessarily linked to conservatism or education. "There is no significant difference in the understanding of women's honor between those who live in conservative environments and those who do not" (Emre Müezzin et al. 2023, 75). Additionally, "various studies involving university students suggest that young, educated populations in Turkey may hold positive attitudes toward honor and honor-based violence" (Ceylan et al., 2016, 51). Furthermore, society considers "honor-based violence more acceptable than economically driven violence, and religiousness is associated with violence against women" (Sakallı Uğurlu, 2016, 46). In addition to these findings, various restrictive and directive discourses surrounding women's sexuality continue to constrain women by exerting a disciplinary effect on their bodies and minds. The belief that personal and family honor is linked to women's sexuality shapes women's sexual experiences and compels them to discipline themselves (Ellialtı, 2012, 385).

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Research indicates that the concept of honor is not limited to collectivist tribal cultures or confined to conservative, less educated segments of society. Although often regarded as a primitive social tradition specific to Middle Eastern societies, honor-related practices continue to persist today, albeit in disguised forms, across various segments of society in many parts of the world. Historically, the concept of honor "dates to ancient Greece and Rome and continues to be a vital social value in Western culture, as well. This is most clearly visible in the tradition of dueling" (Bağlı, 2008, 147). While that was primarily a test of men's honor, "the Western/European practice of burning witches in the Middle Ages, along with the later use of chastity belts in the 17th and 18th centuries" (Abdo, 2006, 63), can be interpreted as attempts to control the female body. Today, it can be argued that the unnoticed psychological pressures and crimes of passion are merely different manifestations of the same concept[3]. The fact that honor killings "have traditionally existed in Spain, Portugal, Italy, and France shows that this practice has local roots beyond Muslim societies" (Moghaizel, 1986, as cited in İlkkaracan, 2011, 30).

Representations of Honor in Turkish Cinema

Appealing to the masses, popular cinema often adheres to the dominant norms of society in nearly every country. The content of cinema reflects the beliefs, attitudes, and values of its time, thereby reinforcing the dominant ideology (Güçhan, 1993).

The Yeşilçam era in Turkey marked a peak in cinema, characterized by a substantial increase in film production and audience numbers. This era lasted from the 1960s to 1980s and mostly produced popular movies. During this period, melodramas dominated film production. Melodramas often create a world of moral polarization by establishing a conflict between good and evil. They focus on the drama of heterosexual relationships, glorify the institution of family, and portray men and love as necessities for women (Akbulut, 2012, 16). Nearly all films from this period upheld traditional values, depicting Western values as a threat to these traditions. The economic and technological advancements of the West were desirable; however, its value system was to be avoided (Çelik, 2011).

According to Abisel (2005), there were two types of representations of honor during this period. The first type was productions rooted in the traditional patriarchal view of women's bodies, while the second centered on men earning money through hard work.[4] In terms of female representations, a woman's chastity appears to determine the family's honor. Young girls are expected to protect their virginity, married women must remain loyal, and widows are destined for loneliness. Relationships between women, whether married or single, and men will lead to complications. A married woman's place is in her home. If the father is absent, the male child will protect the family's honor. If that child is the eldest brother, his authority is

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unquestionable. Virginity and honorable relationships are essential for girls. Any violation of these rules, whether intentional or unintentional, will be met with punishment. Fathers may attempt to kill their daughters, or even succeed in doing so, to protect their honor or uphold tradition. These films endorse honor killings and offer the audience a sense of purification through the act. Even women themselves often prefer death to dishonor. In contrast, father figures in portrayals of wealthy families often remain indifferent to the family's honor.

"In many films, sexuality and love are portrayed within conservative codes. Sexuality is legitimized through marriage, and honorable women are expected not to engage in sexual relationships before marriage. In melodramas, women are often depicted as honorable and wrongfully accused, spending their entire lives awaiting exoneration to prove their innocence" (Kırel, 2005, 179). In summary, this type of cinematic approach can be described, using Mulvey's (1975, 11) terms, as patriarchal and male-centered, where the dominant male gaze projects its fantasies onto a suitably shaped female figure. Melodramas are structured around the concept of "being a woman," producing and reproducing the meanings of womanhood while significantly reinforcing dominant gender norms (Akbulut, 2008, 353). Theater owners, who determine "what the audience wants," along with the state censorship board (Abisel, 2005, 101), played a key role in shaping this particular perspective in cinema.

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By the 1980s, new productions started to adopt a more realistic perspective on women, alongside the traditional portrayals prevalent in Yeşilçam. The stereotypical binary of good versus bad began to break down, as characters like devoted mothers, loyal wives, homemakers, virgins, living embodiments of honor, seductresses, homewreckers, or demonic vamps were increasingly replaced by realistic representations of women as individuals. Films from this period feature realistic female characters who work, think, engage in sexual relationships, and occupy diverse roles, embodying a range of positive and negative traits (Kuyucak Esen, 2010, 181). This shift in themes can be attributed to the post-1980 military coup, which led to the censorship and banning of politically and socially realistic films, prompting filmmakers to redirect their focus from political issues to personal narratives. Despite significant changes in narratives and character representations, films continued to objectify women, portraying them as having limited choices in a patriarchal society, and ultimately prompting women to question whether they can act independently (Atakav, 2013).

"The concept of 'honour' is a recurring motif in Turkish films: there are countless narratives that treat the concept as an integral part of representing womanhood or relationships between men and women. Since the 1990s there has been an increase in the number of films

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that attempt to critique the concept as well as the practice of so-called honour-based violence" (Atakav, 2013, 109).

As the number of female directors in Turkish cinema increased from the 2000s onward, the number of films centered on women also rose. This shift prompted a deeper scrutiny of female representations and brought greater visibility to women's issues. Gürkan and Biga (2022) note that women characters in films directed by women are often relegated to secondary roles, failing to take the lead in their own liberation and narratives. This representation continues to suppress women's identities, further reinforcing male dominance. The authors argue that a feminist perspective is essential for women directors to portray women as independent subjects who can express their own identities and challenge the patriarchal order with the intention of eradicating it.

Method

This study examines selected films in Turkish cinema that challenge and deconstruct traditional patriarchal narratives surrounding honor. Three films were selected through purposive sampling. The selected films are from different periods and genres, the female characters in these films meet the aforementioned criteria, and the films approach the issue of oppression in the name of honor from different perspectives. These films are: *Mine (1982)*, a feature-length fiction film directed by Atıf Yılmaz, a pioneer of the new representation of

women in Turkish cinema post-1980; *Derin Nefes Al (Take A Deep Breath, 2012)*, a short film directed by Başak Büyükçelen that tackles the highly debated issue of virginity tests in the 1990s; and *Bekleyiş (Expecting A Grain Of Sand, 2021)*, an autobiographical documentary directed by Aslı Akdağ that tells the story of a single woman who chooses to raise her child without a father. The qualitative content analysis method is employed to examine the narratives and female characters in these films.

Mine's Search for Freedom

Mine lives in a small town by a lake in Anatolia. She is forced into a marriage with Cemil, a much older stationmaster. Regardless, Mine fulfills the expectations placed upon her by the institution of marriage within the patriarchal order and maintains a respectful yet distant relationship with her husband, Cemil. The men of the town, however, are captivated by Mine's beauty, occasionally harassing her. One day, Teacher Perihan's brother, the author İlhan, visits the town. From the very first moment, Mine and İlhan catch each other's attention. Mine is deeply affected by the writings in the books İlhan has signed for her. In İlhan's words, Mine discovers a reflection of her own life and emotions. Though overwhelmed by emotions she has never encountered before, she keeps her distance from İlhan. Soon, the townspeople, including women envious of her beauty and men consumed by desire, begin to pair Mine with İlhan. Already disturbed by the townspeople's gossip and insinuations, Mine begins to be affected by

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their judgment. Arguments escalate with her husband, with whom she already struggles with communication problems. One evening, a group of young men from the town plots to rape Mine, using the pretext of catching Mine with İlhan. However, when İlhan does not arrive as expected, the young men attempt to rape her anyway. Escaping in a hysterical state, Mine goes to İlhan's house and asks to be with him. As the townspeople gather outside the house, ready to lynch them both, Mine takes İlhan's hand, and together they walk through the crowd.

The town depicted in the film is located somewhere in western Anatolia. While not strictly traditional and closed, the concept of honor remains present. Families in town, both men and women, sit together, chat, and eat. However, a woman socializing or forming friendships with men outside of marriage, or even women shopping alone, is considered problematic. In patriarchal societies, "rules of sexual behavior restrict women's access to public spaces, and these restrictions parallel the socially accepted roles of women, which are confined to the private sphere and revolve around marriage, childbearing, and homemaking" (İlkkaracan and Seral, 2011, 197). Mine conforms to the ideal of a woman in a patriarchal society. She does not have a job, spends most of her time at home, and occasionally stands by the window, a liminal space between the private and public spheres (Yetkiner, 2014, 156). She rarely ventures out in public alone, sets the table for her husband Cemil, and maintains a distant relationship with others. Mine's entrapment within the patriarchal system begins with her family. Her mother, a

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widow, remarries to survive with a male authority. Later, Mine's stepfather arranges her marriage to Cemil while she is still in high school. Mine internalizes these patriarchal values, as demonstrated by her statement during an argument with her husband: she protects her chastity for herself, not out of fear of him. Throughout the film, Cemil commands Mine with warnings such as "Don't lift your gaze," "Don't be late," "What are you doing there?" and "Enough with standing by the window." When Mine disappears into the crowd, Cemil panics and searches for her frantically. His frustration with her grows due to her widely recognized beauty and the rumors circulating about her. "In patriarchal societies, the concept of honor not only serves as a tool for controlling women but also provides the basis for punishment in any mishaps in social life" (Köseoğlu, 2023, 88). Assuming he has control over Mine's body as his right through the marriage contract, Cemil tries to have sex with her without her consent and does not hesitate to resort to violence. He does not understand that forcing himself on his wife without her consent constitutes rape; instead, he perceives it as his right.

Mine occasionally takes sleeping pills and suffers from headaches and various minor ailments. Her use of medication and her ailments are actually the symptoms of her confinement: the confinement imposed on her by a patriarchal society that constantly surveils her. Oppressed

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by the male gaze, Mine has transformed her honor into "a tool of self-discipline that directs and reshapes her public relationships, daily life, and behavior" (Kalav, 2019, 232).

The absence of children prevents Mine from transitioning into the sacred role of mother, the next gender role traditionally expected of women after marriage. Cemil, however, does not express a desire for children. This is discussed in a conversation among the town's women: "Soil like that needs raking every day. Or birds will snatch the seeds." In societies like this, childlessness is often attributed to either the man's or the woman's impotence, which further intensifies the men in town's objectification of Mine as a desired figure. Society expects men to relentlessly pursue sexual opportunities and believes that it is in men's nature to be sexually active regardless of their marital status or age, leading all the men in town to fantasize about Mine. All men hope to provoke a divorce between her and Cemil, with the young ones plotting to catch Mine with İlhan and the town's wealthiest widower, Contractor Tarık, attempting to seduce her with gifts. In this context, it can be argued that the town's concept of honor serves various purposes. The men, as agents of patriarchal domination, violate their own values by hitting on or proposing marriage to Mine. They fall into the hypocrisy of "looking at another man's woman," as they themselves put it. At the same time, they claim to be protecting the town's honor by spying on Mine, using this pretext to justify their harassment as a moral duty, thus granting themselves a sense of impunity. Even the town's mayor, the closest representative

of the state, remains silent in the face of the young men's attempted rape, complicit through his inaction. He seeks to brand Mine as dishonorable. Thus, the townspeople aim to label Mine as a fallen woman, employing the threat of dishonor to exert pressure, and even resorting to rape as a means of enforcing the concept of honor as both a shield and a weapon.

By the film's conclusion, Mine stands up against patriarchal oversight and the control of honor. She liberates herself from the constraints of societal expectations and begins to focus on her own desires. She demonstrates the strength to break away from the socially imposed concept of honor and pursue her own desires. Teacher Perihan plays a significant role in Mine's journey to discover her individuality. Mine and Perihan meet at a school art exhibition. While everyone else is preoccupied with eating and drinking, Mine immerses herself in the books. Perihan gives her books, and Mine, who could not complete her studies, makes an effort to read on her own. Perihan constantly advises Mine to stand tall in society. Mine expresses, "I always feel like I'm being watched. I can't escape this feeling." Perihan reassures her, "I've gotten used to it. I hardly care anymore." She also warns her, "If you don't resist, they'll take away even your smallest freedoms and your most innocent desires. They won't even let you breathe." Perihan's role as a teacher is significant in guiding Mine to discover her inner voice. In Turkey, teachers played a pivotal role in instilling new ideologies in the population as part of the Republic's

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project to create a modern society. The Westernization efforts that began in the Ottoman Empire intensified during the Republic era. Among those sent abroad for education were educators who returned with Western values and integrated them into the national curriculum. Teachers received modern education in larger cities and were sent to towns and villages to lead the mission of transforming society through education. In that context, Perihan embodies modern societal values that prioritize the individual and individual choice, standing in contrast to the decaying values of the town. Mine gathers the strength to escape the archaic social order she is trapped in, thanks to Perihan's support.[5] This turning point represents the individual gaining independence and breaking free from society's values. Mine dares to transcend the stereotypical role assigned to women, which confines her sexuality to reproduction, keeps her passive in sexual activities, and forces her to silently accept her fate. Having escaped the attempted rape by the young gang, Mine rushes to İlhan in a hysterical state, yearning to be with him. She removes the white dress she wears throughout the film, a symbol of purity and goodness. Then, Mine and İlhan become intimate. This is implied to be Mine's first consensual experience, allowing her to discover her own sexuality. At this point in the film, shaped by the tension between Mine and the townspeople, she is neither portrayed as a villain nor punished. Instead, she walks proudly, declaring her defiance against their hypocritical values of honor. The next morning, as she and İlhan leave the house together, the society expects her to lower her head in

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shame and be punished for "adultery" or "betrayal" by the agents of patriarchal control. Instead, she holds İlhan's hand in front of everyone. By doing so, she demonstrates that personal moral values, rooted in respect, love, and friendship, are superior to primitive and rigid societal values. In the sight of Mine taking İlhan's hand, Cemil believes he has failed in his duty to control her. He feels that his honor has been tainted and that he has been disgraced in the eyes of society. Eventually, he lowers his head and walks away. The film ultimately reinforces the message that women can achieve liberation by taking control of their own destinies and resisting patriarchal authority.

This film not only initiated a shift in the portrayal, discourse, and characterization of women in Turkish cinema during the 1980s but also resonated with popular culture. Türkan Şoray, who portrayed Mine, was the people's star of the Yeşilçam era. Her boyfriend at the time, businessman Rüçhan Adlı, nicknamed her "Sultan," and their relationship resulted in the establishment of the "Türkan Şoray Rules." These rules included non-nudity clauses, such as prohibiting nightgowns and any on-screen kissing (Büker and Uluyağcı, 1993, 37–43). In her role as Mine, Şoray "broke free from her 'rules' and boundaries, appearing before the audience as a 'new' Türkan Şoray" (Özgüç, 1988, 51). This transformation and renewal not only allowed

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Şoray to act more freely as an actress but also liberated her from the audience's perception of her as a "taboo" (Scognamillo, 2003, 295).

One particular critique of the film upon its release was that Mine portrays yet another 'traditional woman' in the story of 'modern liberation of the Turkish woman' by simply moving from under one man's wings to another. Critics argued that Mine's liberation journey had her "escaped from her stepfather's guardianship, then from her loveless husband, only to surrender herself to an 'enlightened' writer" (Cindoğlu, 2013, 112). In response to the criticism that Mine simply sought refuge with another man while fleeing male domination, the film's director, Atıf Yılmaz, replied, "That's not true. It was a transitional element. Had the woman undergone a drastic change that had no counterpart in the real world, it would be nothing but propaganda" (as cited in Esen, 1985, Kuyucak Esen, 2019, 51). Ünsal Oskay (2014, 24) also disagrees with that interpretation, arguing that the sexual identities of Mine and İlhan are blurred alongside their trampled and battered social identities. He views their relationship not as that of a man and a woman but as one between two broken individuals confronting a brutal and merciless world together. Atakav (2013) considers Mine as the beginning of women's search for identity across all segments of Turkish society during the 1980s. Emerging alongside the feminist movement of the time, this highly successful film contributed to a new understanding of female sexuality and marked the introduction of individualism into 1980s Turkish cinema by addressing the

concept of female identity. Dubbed the director of "women's films" following Mine, Atıf Yılmaz (Scognamillo, 2003: 382–384) focused on women's issues. While advocating for the "Women's Liberation" movement, he boldly portrayed women's social and sexual freedom (Onaran, 1995, 15–16).

Nazlı's Honor and Resistance

Nazlı, a young high school student, walks home in her school uniform. She enters her apartment building and checks her mail while waiting for the elevator, but she cannot find what she is looking for. When the elevator does not arrive, she runs up the stairs and unlocks the door to her apartment. She smiles at her father, who is waiting at the entrance. Without saying a word, he slaps her across the face. In the next scene, Nazlı is lying on a stretcher in a medical center. A gynecologist examines her, instructing her to take deep breaths. Once the examination concludes, the doctor opens the door to inform Nazlı's parents that their daughter is still a virgin. Nazlı, in tears, struggles to get dressed. On the way home, her father talks to her mother about a man at work while Nazlı sits silently in the back seat. Later that night, as Nazlı lies in bed, she pulls down her underwear. Taking deep breaths, she reaches down to touch her vagina. She grimaces and grips the bedsheet tightly. At that moment, her father enters the room and speaks to her in a quasi-friendly manner. Nazlı pulls her bloody hand from beneath the sheet, causing her father to halt mid-sentence.

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The short film *Derin Nefes Al* (Take a Deep Breath) focuses on Nazlı, a young high school girl, and the control her father exerts over her honor. Nazlı's family lives in a big city and likely belongs to the upper-middle class, presenting themselves as non-conservative. "Virginity for an unmarried woman is one of the most important issues in many cultures, and this is applicable to both the more traditional segments of Turkish society and modern metropolitan areas" (Cindoğlu, 2011, 115). Nazlı's father works for a large company, but no information is given about her mother's occupation. Her parents named her Nazlı, which means "coy, feigning reluctance, flirtatious, playful" (TDK, 2024b), traits commonly associated with women in patriarchal societies. According to Nazlı's father, a woman must act coyly around men, play hard to get, and not yield too easily. After presumably reading a letter addressed to his daughter, Nazlı's father feels compelled to control her body, leading him to physically punish her as a form of discipline. Dissatisfied and panicked, he feels the need to verify her virginity. Ultimately, as a patriarchal figure, his masculinity and fatherhood are intrinsically tied to the concept of honor. He perceives his daughter's interactions with men as a direct threat to his honor. Had Nazlı lost her virginity, the family would suffer a loss of both respect and power. The family's rush to subject her to virginity testing highlights her father's lack of trust in her.

For centuries, female virginity has held special significance, particularly in traditional

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patriarchal societies. Unmarried women are expected to remain pure and untouched until their wedding night. A virgin bride symbolizes not only a woman's purity but also her loyalty to her family. Thus, the intact hymen of an unmarried woman was seen as material evidence of her purity (Cindoğlu, 1997, 253). In cases where virginity was lost, surgical procedures could be performed prior to the wedding to create an artificial hymen, ensuring that the woman would bleed on her wedding night. According to Cindoğlu (2011, 131), "women's resort to virginity operations and tests can be understood as a strategy to navigate premarital sexual desires while contending with the patriarchal expectations of their families and society."

In the film, bodily control is enforced in the hospital. In Turkey, virginity testing, aside from forensic cases, occurs in private hospitals and clinics. The depiction of virginity examinations in modern clinical settings highlights the continued control over women's bodies in a world that has evolved, transformed, and prospered, yet still clings to patriarchal values. As Mernissi (2011, 101) notes, "this strange practice, a typical application of 'modernization' in which the latest technologies are used to meet the ancient demands of the patriarchal family, is the most concrete manifestation of the centuries-old lack of understanding that has shaped relations between the sexes." A hymen examination, performed by a physician to determine whether a woman has engaged in sexual intercourse, serves as a mechanism of control over

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female sexuality. During this invasive process, a woman is forced to expose an intimate part of her body to another person, often without her consent. This violation is often perceived by the woman as a profound affront to her dignity (Şahinoğlu Pelin, 1999, 256). Research conducted in Turkey revealed that despite the psychological trauma caused by such examinations, at least half of the women subjected to these tests were brought in unwillingly, coerced by social pressures (Frank et al., 1999). The typical profile of women subjected to virginity tests includes metropolitan women in their late teens or early twenties, often from the lower-middle class, with low-status job experience and employed in low-income occupations such as office work, sales, or nursing. Women from upper economic classes or those in high-status, high-income professions typically do not seek out such services from doctors (Cindoğlu, 1997, 256).

The issue of virginity testing gained public attention in Turkey in the early 1990s following a series of tragic incidents. These tragic incidents included cases where female students committed suicide to escape virginity tests, and one instance where a father demanded a postmortem virginity test on his daughter's lifeless body (Parla, 2001). Such events eventually prompted a series of legal reforms. Nevertheless, the social structure, deeply rooted in concepts of honor and shame, continues to perpetuate virginity control and gender-based violence as central societal norms in Turkey (Awwad, 2011). Virginity testing remains a significant social issue in many countries, including Afghanistan, Egypt, Iran, Jordan, Palestine, South Africa,

Turkey, and Uganda. However, reports suggest that it is also practiced in certain communities in countries such as Canada, the Netherlands, Spain, and Sweden (Zayed et al., 2022). In 2018, the World Health Organization, along with the United Nations Human Rights Office and UN Women, issued a joint statement formally condemning virginity testing and called for its abolition as a violation of human rights. Despite this, virginity testing remains a widespread practice in many parts of the world (International Association of Forensic Nurses, 2022). The World Health Organization defines virginity testing as a human rights violation, considering it a form of gender-based discrimination and violence prevalent in many societies and cultures. Furthermore, virginity testing is recognized as traumatic, painful, and degrading (WHO, 2018, as cited in International Association of Forensic Nurses, 2022).

The role of doctors in performing these tests is also highly contentious. The gynecologist in the film interacts with Nazlı in a detached and clinical manner, issuing only commands such as “take a deep breath” and “don’t tense up.” The phrase “take a deep breath,” which gives the film its title, is employed not only during painful medical procedures but also before engaging in strenuous physical activities or diving underwater. It encapsulates moments that precede pressure, struggle, or discomfort. Nazlı must take a deep breath; her body is about to endure pain, and so is her dignity. Once the examination is over, the gynecologist instructs the nurse

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to tell Nazlı that she can get dressed, and the nurse relays the message to her. The gynecologist, despite being right beside Nazlı, chooses not to address her directly and instead communicates through the nurse. Both Nazlı's mother and the nurse, subjugated by patriarchal authority, passively follow the commands they receive. It can be concluded that, as compliant figures within the system, these characters have submitted to patriarchal dominance. The gynecologist in the film also seems to serve as an agent of patriarchal surveillance. His willingness to perform the examination implies he does not consider it unethical or a violation of human rights. By relaying commands to Nazlı through the nurse, the gynecologist further implies that, by undergoing the test, Nazlı is already viewed with suspicion regarding the protection of her honor. Despite confirming that Nazlı is a virgin, he still fails to acknowledge her as a dignified individual. As Cindoğlu (1997, 259–260) found in her research, doctors, as professionals, and medicine as an institution are not separate from the societal environment in which they operate. Instead, like their patients, they are products of the prevailing social system[6]. Furthermore, "during the said test, he/she [physician] plays the role of someone whose scientific and technical knowledge is being exploited. In this process, the physician becomes responsible for the cause of physical and mental to the very person he/she was supposed to be protecting against ill-health" (Şahinoğlu Pelin, 1999, 258).

On the drive home, Nazlı's father engages in casual conversation with his wife as if

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nothing has happened. The wife listens silently. He talks about a successful man who recently retired. He explains how the man plans to buy land with his pension money and mentions that his son-in-law owns a gallery. The father's primary focus at this point is on successful men. From this conversation, it becomes clear that he inwardly hopes Nazlı will one day marry a wealthy and successful man. To him, the traumatic experience Nazlı has just endured is of no consequence. Nazlı, forcibly subjected to a virginity test, is acutely aware that her body, autonomy, and privacy have been violated without her consent. She recognizes the cruelty of the control exerted over her in the name of honor protection and the profound humiliation it inflicts upon her. As she struggles to compose herself in the presence of her mother, the nurse, and her father, Nazlı feels the weight of her degradation. She sheds tears as she dresses, overwhelmed by the humiliation of her experience. Therefore, in an act of defiance, Nazlı takes her own virginity that her father has so zealously guarded, reclaiming her body on her own terms. By asserting her autonomy, she dismantles her father's hold over her honor, stripping him of his authority and preventing him from subjecting her to further degradation through repeated virginity tests. In this powerful act, Nazlı reclaims her dignity and secures her personal freedom. This act also signifies her rejection of the patriarchal mindset that expects a future husband to value her solely for her virginity. Ultimately, Nazlı rebels not only against her father but also against the broader patriarchal framework that seeks to commodify her virginity as a

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possession to be handed over to a future husband.

Nazlı's character also embodies the archetype of the "silent woman," a recurring motif in Turkish cinema. Throughout the film, Nazlı remains voiceless. Her silence is broken only by her sobs. In her study of the representation of silent women in films from the 1990s, a period known as New Turkish Cinema, Güçlü (2010, 83) finds that the majority of these films fail to convey or reflect female perspectives or desires. Instead, they often reinforce control over the female body through its eroticization or victimization. The silent female character is reduced to an instrument of the male narrative, becoming either an erotic object or a figure of suffering, created to satisfy the male gaze or validate male dominance. The fact that these films are primarily created by male filmmakers indicates a filmic language shaped by patriarchal perspectives. However, in feminist cinema, silence serves a different purpose, going beyond the mere dramatization of female oppression. "Silence can also be a deliberate choice, serving as a form of resistance and a rejection of the male-dominated language of society. Women convey what cannot be articulated within the language of a patriarchal world through their silence. 'Muteness' thus becomes a form of expression" (Suner, 2006, 201). Nazlı's silence differs from the silent female characters of 1990s cinema. In this short film directed by female filmmaker Başak Büyükçelen, the portrayal of a silent woman aligns with the principles of feminist cinema. Nazlı's silence does not signify failure, helplessness, or passivity in the face of life. On

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the contrary, her silence embodies resistance, as she uses it to defy the oppressive male language, ultimately achieving her desires through quiet resilience.

Aslı's Decisions

The documentary *Bekleyiş* (Expecting a Grain of Sand) portrays filmmaker Aslı Akdağ's personal journey through her pregnancy, lending an autobiographical quality to the film. The narrative begins with Aslı discovering she is pregnant. She reveals the news to her mother and brother. Aslı is unmarried, and the father of her child lives in Berlin. Aslı also informs the father about her pregnancy. He suggests that she move to Germany while she is pregnant. She then starts learning German to prepare for a potential relocation. However, Aslı soon realizes that the child's father shows little interest in taking responsibility for the baby, leading her to decide to stay in Turkey. After moving into a new home, she announces her pregnancy on social media. As she prepares for the birth of her child, later named Aren, she grapples with societal expectations while remaining resolute in her own decisions.

The film opens with footage of Aslı as a teenager, accompanied by her adult voiceover reflecting on her younger self. She offers advice to the little girl she once was, recognizing that she, too, had unknowingly lived according to the expectations imposed upon her. As she

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explains, it was not until she grew up physically, while the child within her continued to question everything, that she could set aside those expectations and prepare herself for what she describes as her greatest journey. That greatest journey is her pregnancy. Aslı is an intellectual, upper-middle-class woman in her late thirties who balances careers in law and filmmaking. For educated and responsible individuals like her, the decision to have a child is a difficult one. This challenge is further complicated by her decision to have a child out of wedlock in a society that could still be considered conservative. The film opens with a storyline featuring a pregnant woman and a distant couple. This part of the story recalls the openings of popular fiction films. In her study of films depicting pregnancy and pregnant characters in Hollywood cinema, Oliver (2012) observes that pregnancy has become a metaphor for other types of transformation in romantic comedies, a genre that traditionally relies on transformation in one or more characters to ensure a couple's reconciliation.

> Pregnancy is the means through which both the male and female characters grow and mature as individuals, and thereby become suitable partners and parents. By turning what is usually an unwanted pregnancy into a wanted baby, these characters learn to want each other. They come to love each other as they prepare themselves to love the future baby (Oliver, 2012, 9–10).

In this sense, Hollywood narratives frequently reinforce conservative family values. In the documentary *Expecting a Grain of Sand*, Aslı stays in touch with Aren's father, and they discuss their future together. While Aslı attends language courses and plans to settle in

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Germany, disagreements arise between them, leading her to ultimately decide to give birth to Aren in Turkey. Thus, the film's narrative diverges from conventional storylines of couples maturing and reuniting. Aren's father is never seen in the film; his identity and background remain unknown. The audience learns about him solely through Aslı's conversations. Yet, even in these exchanges, his presence is entirely absent from the film. When Aslı travels to Berlin, Aren's father is conspicuously absent from every location she captures on film. Whether at the airport, in bars, on the streets, or on buses, Aren's father is never present as a subject. A recurring non-diegetic sound of a ringing, unanswered phone accompanies these scenes. Thus, Aslı's scenes in Germany depict an absent partner and father. As will be discussed later, Aslı ultimately rejects the figure of a man who evades responsibility and takes on the burden of raising her child without a father. Following this, the film explores the conflicts Aslı faces with society after deciding to have a child out of wedlock in a conservative culture.

The film also incorporates statements from conservative political figures that gained media attention. It references remarks made by Bülent Arınç, then Deputy Prime Minister in 2014, who inquired, "Where are our girls whose faces would blush with modesty when we looked at them? Where are those symbols of chastity and decency?" It also cites statements from conservative commentator Ömer Tuğrul İnançer during an iftar program aired in 2013 on

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the state television channel TRT: “It goes against our morals to announce pregnancy with a drum roll. Women should not be walking around with such bellies. It is not aesthetically pleasing at all. After the seventh or eighth month, or even after six months, a woman can get into her husband’s car to take a breath of fresh air, but that’s about it.” These two statements are presented consecutively in the film, as though Aslı is watching them on television. In the political figure’s public speech, women are expected to feel shame under the gaze of men, driven by an impulse to protect their honor. The other commentator’s words, on the other hand, promote a notion of bodily discipline, suggesting that pregnancy, by evoking thoughts of sexuality, should not be publicly visible. According to this rhetoric, pregnant women should not venture out alone; they may only do so under the supervision of their husbands. These statements encapsulate the conservative political establishment’s perspective on gender roles. From a Foucauldian perspective (2015), the discourse of state officials and supporters of the regime regarding sexuality, along with their attempts to dictate and judge societal norms, reflects an imposition of power over sexuality. In both statements, women’s gender roles are defined within the context of shame and honor. As these comments flow, Aslı is shown walking along an endless underground line, her compressed reflection visible beneath the low ceiling. In the next scene, she stands in the center of a confined composition with deep perspective, looking around. These remarks from 2013 and 2014 merge with the film’s timeline, and Aslı’s

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depiction in enclosed spaces suggests that she remembers these statements and feels discomfort on behalf of herself and the women she represents.

The absence of Aren's father in the film is a key aspect of Aslı's struggle. In a patriarchal society where the concept of honor prevails, the idea of having a child outside of marriage is inconceivable. Aslı frequently faces remarks from both acquaintances and strangers about the necessity of a paternal figure in her child's upbringing. A taxi driver, for instance, remarks that the father will inevitably be required to shoulder the responsibility. Others insist that the child must be loved by both its mother and, especially, its father. A curtain seller asks whether her husband will like the curtains she has chosen for the bedroom and inquiries about his whereabouts. At the bank, she is informed that her identification card indicates she is unmarried despite being pregnant, to which Aslı responds by asserting that such a situation is, technically, possible. In general, Aslı refrains from disclosing her circumstances to strangers, allowing the audience to observe society's deeply embedded values as they manifest through the discourse of those channeling such values. Within her family, it is primarily her grandmother who expresses a desire to see her engaged and married. Although her grandmother's wish to see her in a wedding dress remains unfulfilled, she still loves and accepts her granddaughter. Similarly, her uncle initially reacts with frustration at Aslı's decision not to marry but eventually comes

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to accept her circumstances. Aslı's friends also live in the metropolitan area and share a similar social status. However, some friends display reactions that surprise and sadden her. This reveals that values stemming from honor, while often unspoken, continue to persist even among the urban and relatively affluent demographic. Though Aslı does not encounter overt physical or verbal aggression, it is likely that her decision to have a child without a father is met with disapproval. Some of her friends, for instance, refuse to attend the party that Aslı plans to host. In the seventh month of her pregnancy, Aslı considers announcing the news on social media. Although her close friends are aware, some relatives, despite knowing, have refrained from extending congratulations. Aslı hopes that her public announcement will encourage them to reach out. One close friend warns her that the post will likely invite a flood of inquiries and comments, particularly regarding the identity of the father and the conspicuous absence of a wedding. The friend asks if Aslı is ready for such reactions. At this point, Aslı has come to terms with the situation regarding Aren's father and feels ready to make the announcement. She shares a photo on Facebook. In turn, she receives a mixed response; some express support, while others make her feel uncomfortable. In a vlog she records for Aren, Aslı expresses her frustration at the incessant questions like "Where is he?", "Why don't we see him?" and "What does he do?" She also voices her concern that her child will face similar questions in the future. As Aren will grow up in a society that holds these same values, Aslı worries that he, too, will

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be subjected to invasive inquiries while socializing. It is perhaps for this reason that, at the end of the film, Aslı offers Aren the following advice: “I hope that at every stage of your life, you live for yourself, not for others’ expectations.” Aslı resolutely stands by her decision, feeling no compulsion to rely on male authority or adhere to archaic codes of honor. For her, a man’s mere presence is not essential. She rejects the persistent idea, reiterated by a neighbor during a housewarming visit, that “a man’s jacket should hang on the wall, a man should take care of the house, and the child should recognize the father figure.” She also dismisses her neighbor’s seemingly well-intended suggestion to find a father figure for her child.

For Aslı, the institution of marriage must involve mutual responsibility from both partners. The arrangement should not place the burden solely on the woman. Balance, dialogue, and shared responsibility are essential in relationships. Aslı’s reflections on these matters arise from observing her own family. She has critically evaluated her parents’ experiences and questioned their choices. Through her dialogues with her mother, it becomes clear that her mother initially conformed to patriarchal norms and aligned with traditional values. However, after engaging in conversations with Aslı, she begins to question these norms and adopt new perspectives. Though Aslı encourages her mother to embrace the consciousness of being a free woman, her mother attempts to balance this newfound awareness with the responsibilities she

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was taught. When Aslı was younger, she would discuss these issues with her mother, urging her to find the strength to leave her father and file for divorce. Yet her mother thought of her children and community, having internalized the belief that "once married, one cannot return to her father's home." Consequently, she did not divorce her husband. The problems in her marriage arose from Aslı's father's behavior. He had not shared the responsibility of childcare with Aslı's mother, leaving her alone shortly after childbirth to go on vacation and spending some nights away from home. Aslı recalls her father's constant refrain: "Never trust a man." It appears that her father had relationships with other women during the marriage, and he used to instruct Aslı to always be suspicious of men. The absence of an honor code imposed on the male body regards the pursuit of new relationships as a natural expression of masculinity. Aslı views this understanding of honor as deeply hypocritical, emphasizing that mere symbolic acts of honor-guarding do not suffice within a marriage: "What is Aslı really going through when she closes the door? Is she unhappy? Does she need anything? People aren't there for that part, so it's all superficial. She's married; good. Everything is fine. That's what honor-guarding is. Once you're married, everything's settled." Aslı suggests that even staging and sharing a photo with a hired man would ease people's minds. In other words, the issue lies in how men inherit patriarchal power solely by being male. The legitimacy of an unloving, indifferent authority figure who refuses to share responsibility is untenable.

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Expecting a Grain of Sand portrays the story of a real woman who remains steadfast in her defiance of the honor-based values upheld by an increasingly conservative, patriarchal society, refusing to compromise. In this regard, the film echoes Smelik's (1998, 8) assertion that "female filmmakers have to undo the spell of a culturally dominant fantasy of the eternal feminine by showing the 'real' life of 'real' women on the silver screen". As Smelik further observes, "by showing reality as it is 'really' is, ideology and society can be changed," a sentiment that appears to resonate with the film's audience. Director Aslı Akdağ mentioned in an interview that she receives numerous messages daily saying, "Know that you've touched someone's life" (Şimşek, 2023).

Conclusion

The female protagonists in the three films explored in this study are critically analyzed within the framework of traditional gender roles governed by honor culture. A central, recurring theme is the characters' resistance to patriarchal constructs of honor, which have become deeply ingrained in society through the establishment of consent. All three characters come to recognize the destinies imposed on them by a patriarchal society and grow weary of male domination. They seek to defy it and ultimately succeed through their actions. The representations of women in these films reject patriarchal ideals of masculinity, resist control over their bodies in the name of honor, and assert their resolve in determining their own futures.

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Thus, these women achieve subjectivity, subverting the passive, weak, and secondary female typology that relies on men and their values and the patriarchy-promoting discourse in films. In these films, the women are at the narrative's center, actively making independent decisions and challenging the honor-based values that skew power dynamics between the sexes in favor of men.

Moreover, these characters are depicted as belonging to a middle or upper-middle economic status and are living in urban areas rather than smaller towns or villages where conservative perspectives prevail. Their journey of becoming independent subjects and steering away from dominant social values arises from their ability to recognize and assert their individual values. This realization is achieved through encounters with intellectual figures, such as teachers and writers, or by being raised, educated, and employed in cosmopolitan environments with modern values.

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ENDNOTES:

[1] This is a timely and important contribution to the debate around honour killings in Turkey and the role of a mass medium like cinema in its ethical, realistic and socially responsible portrayal. Previous contribution on the subject includes Kogacioglu (2004), Yaşartürk (2012), Atakav (2015), Özen (2021), Adak (2022) and Ilkmen (2024).

[2] Se'ver and Yurdakul (2001) argue that it is misguided to link violence and honor killings exclusively to Islam. Honor killings predate Islam and are not consistent with the teachings of the Qur'an. Moreover, more developed, emerging, democratic, and secular states are not exempt from honor killings.

[3] "While crimes of passion and honor killings have always been perceived differently, it can be argued that both express the same outcome: the act of murdering women and girls, stemming from the same evolution and thought system" (Akbaba, 2008, 340).

[4] Here, Abisel notes that while labor is glorified, economic conflicts are often simplified and explained through the concept of "honor." This observation highlights capitalism's dependence on patriarchy.

[5] In addition to the teacher, the doctor also deserves honorable mention in the story. The town physician observes those around him, interprets the unfolding events rationally, and ultimately prevents the lynching of Mine and İlhan at the film's conclusion. Medicine teaches the use of the mind to acquire knowledge through observation, experimentation, and logical reasoning, grounded in values that include modern science and rationality. In this context, it is fitting that the doctor is the one who assists them.

[6] Naturally, some doctors respect women's rights and refuse to perform such examinations, viewing them as inhumane.