



## Selfish, Vengeful, and Full of Spite: The representations of women who have abortions on Turkish television

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To cite this article: Mary Lou O'Neil (2013) Selfish, Vengeful, and Full of Spite: The representations of women who have abortions on Turkish television, *Feminist Media Studies*, 13:5, 810-818, DOI: [10.1080/14680777.2013.838360](https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2013.838360)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2013.838360>



Published online: 11 Oct 2013.



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# SELFISH, VENGEFUL, AND FULL OF SPITE: THE REPRESENTATIONS OF WOMEN WHO HAVE ABORTIONS ON TURKISH TELEVISION

Mary Lou O'Neil

*This article analyses the portrayal of women who have abortions in four recent Turkish television series, *Gümüş*, *Aşk-ı Memnu*, *Hanımın Çiftliği*, and *Öyle Bir Geçer Zaman ki*, all of which appeared between 2005 and 2011. It is clear from the varying storylines of these melodramas that the depiction of women who have abortions on Turkish television is decidedly negative. The women who have abortions are seen as defying cultural expectations to place motherhood before all else. They are portrayed as cheating on their husbands, having sex outside of marriage, and prioritizing career over marriage and family. The negative portrayal of women who have abortions in Turkish soap operas perpetuates the discourse on Republican womanhood, which prescribes motherhood as women's national duty and as being at the core of their identity.*

KEYWORDS abortion; television; Turkey; representations; women

## Introduction

In May 2012, the Prime Minister of Turkey, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, set off a firestorm when he stated that “abortion is murder” (Radikal 2012). This was quickly followed by the announcement that new legislation would be promulgated restricting abortion, which prompted many to participate in “my body, my decision” campaigns and thousands of people to protest in the streets. As of 2013, no new legislation has been offered, and abortion remains legal through the tenth week of pregnancy. This has led some to argue that Erdoğan's sudden announcement was a cynical political ploy to divert attention from the massacre of thirty-four civilians thought to be terrorists in the Eastern part of Turkey. At the same time, Erdoğan's remarks play upon the discourse which advocates that women, first and foremost, be mothers. More recently, he has made repeated calls for women to give birth to at least three children. Prior to the Prime Minister's controversial remarks, there have been a number of stories revolving around abortion in hit television melodramas. Despite the prevalence of these storylines, and what appears to be the acceptability of abortion in practice, depictions of women who have abortions in Turkish television programs are decidedly negative.

This article analyzes the portrayal of women who have abortions in four recent television series, *Gümüş*, *Aşk-ı Memnu*, *Hanımın Çiftliği* and *Öyle Bir Geçer Zaman ki*, all of

which aired between 2005 and 2011. It is clear from the varying storylines of these melodramas that it is women who do not conform to the gender expectations of family and home before all else—women who have sex outside of marriage, women who prioritize career over marriage and family, women who scheme and connive, women who seek revenge for the wrongs they have suffered, and women who are selfish and think of themselves first—that have abortions. These women are often countered by other female characters who are portrayed as loving and self-sacrificing, placing others, particularly their families, before their own desires. In short, women who have abortions are selfish, vengeful, and often full of spite.

### **Abortion in the Ottoman Empire and Turkish Republic**

The roots of abortion policy in present-day Turkey are grounded in the Ottoman era, which linked the issue of abortion with demographics and population planning. Until 1838, the Ottomans maintained a liberal outlook on abortion. In line with Islamic law at the time, abortion was permissible, although not encouraged, as long as it occurred before ensoulment, which was believed to take place at four months, and there needed to be a legitimate reason. Throughout the early nineteenth century, as long as a woman received her husband's permission, she could secure an abortion without fear of legal repercussions. Although considered a sin, abortion was not illegal (Tuba Demirci & Selçuk Akşin Somel 2008, p. 384) until 1838 when an imperial edict (firman) made it a crime. The new law sought to punish only providers, and punishment ranged from hard labor to imprisonment. Yet, to preserve the historic exception provided by Islamic law, the law did not criminalize abortions that women sought of their own will.

The pronatalist policies begun by the Ottomans in 1838 continued under the new Republic until 1983. The new Republic criminalized both abortion and contraception as part of repopulation efforts. The country had witnessed devastating losses of population through war and continued to suffer from epidemics of disease. Furthermore, the country needed to repopulate in order to rebuild its agriculture-based economy (Erdem Aydın 2000, p. 177). In contrast to the Ottoman law, the new Republic prosecuted all those involved in abortion.

The Republic's anti-abortion policies also represented a continuation of the discursive link between abortion, reproduction, and population planning. To this end, the new government offered incentives to encourage large families. Women who gave birth to six or more children were awarded medals and financial support. At the same time, slogans such as "the strength of a nation is measured by the size of its population" were circulated (William Hale 1981, p. 24). This approach continued until 1960 when Turkey's rapidly rising population led to fears of overpopulation, which quickly became linked to economic underdevelopment (Akile Gürsoy 1996, p. 532).

In 1965, Turkey passed a new population planning law, which largely repudiated the pronatalist approach in place for more than a century. The new law legalized contraceptive devices and information about birth control, but abortion remained illegal. The new act was drafted in part due to fears of overpopulation, but increasing evidence of the continued practice of abortion also spurred lawmakers into action as concerns grew over the large number of illegal abortions taking place, and the number of deaths from complications (Aydın 2000, p. 178). The new statute emphasized family planning, clinics were established, and the earlier rhetorical focus on quantity was replaced by an emphasis on quality.

Although the Population Planning Law of 1965 delineated an important change in policy, the very name of the law clearly illustrates the continued framing of the issues of abortion and birth control within population planning rather than a discourse of rights, which recognizes women's right to control their own bodies.

### **Abortion Policy Today**

In 1983, Turkey legalized abortion. The Law Concerning Population Planning No. 2827 is still in effect today and makes abortion legal upon request through ten weeks of pregnancy. Married women must have their husband's consent and minors the assent of a parent, although there is a judicial bypass mechanism for minors. After ten weeks, the statute only allows for abortion if the mother's life is in danger or if the fetus is significantly disabled. Ensuring that the practice of abortion is securely within the purview of the medical community, the law mandates that all abortions be performed by or under the supervision of a licensed gynecologist/obstetrician. This final requirement has generated the most hardship for rural women who are effectively denied access to abortions due to the shortage of trained gynecologist/obstetricians practicing in rural areas ([Fusun Artiran İğde, Rükiye Gül, Mahir İğde & Murat Yalçın 2008](#), p. 373).

For much of the past century and a half, abortion was illegal in Turkey. Despite this, it appears that the practice was fairly common. In the 1960s and 1970s, as birth control and information were scarce, abortion rates rose and it is estimated that in the 1970s almost one-third of all Turkish women had at least one abortion ([Pinar Senlet, Jill Mathis, Siân L. Curtis & Han Raggars 2000](#), p. 5). Others place the number of illegal abortions per year between 200,000 and 400,000, and estimate that more than 10,000 women per year died as a result of complications ([Aydm 2000](#), p. 178; [Gürsoy 1996](#), p. 534).

In 1983, the year of legalization, 36 percent of women reported having had an abortion. By 1988 that number had increased to 42 percent ([Hacettepe University Institute of Population Studies 1989](#), p. 111). However, the next decade witnessed a sharp decline in abortions to 27 percent and that trend has continued to the present, with 22 percent of married women reporting having terminated a pregnancy ([Hacettepe Üniversitesi Nüfus Etütleri Enstitüsü 2009](#), p. 97). The decrease is largely due to increased rates of modern birth control usage. Reflecting the sexual politics of Turkey, which still expects women to refrain from engaging in premarital sex, studies have only dealt with married women. Single women are rendered invisible and consequently these statistics are, without doubt, an underestimation of the number of actual women having abortions today.

### **Abortion and the Women Who Have Them**

Depictions of women who have abortions closely follow a division between those women who adhere to notions of acceptable womanhood and those who do not. It is only those who do not play by the rules that have abortions on Turkish television. In direct contrast to the narrative of acceptable womanhood, they think of themselves first; their pregnancies often become a tool for revenge and they claim to have had abortions to spite the men who have wronged them. The most egregious offense committed by these characters is that they refuse motherhood. It is as if those women who conform to the script on femininity would never have an abortion, in spite of the abundant evidence that many women in Turkey have abortions each year.

The four programs that are the subject of analysis here are all prime-time soap operas. They aired between 2005 and 2011 and all were broadcast on the private station Kanal D. Two of the programs are historical in nature; *Hanımın Çiftliği* (*The Lady's Farm*) set in 1950s Adana, and *Öyle Bir Geçer Zaman ki* (*As Times Goes By*), which begins in late 1960s Istanbul. *Gümüş* (*Silver*) and *Aşk-ı Memnu* (*Forbidden Love*) are both set in current day Istanbul. *Aşk-ı Memnu*, while set in the present, is an adaptation of a novel with the same title by Halid Ziya Usaklıgil, which first appeared in serialized form between 1899 and 1900. Similarly, *Hanımın Çiftliği* is a re-presentation of the Orhan Kemal novel of the same name that was originally published in 1961.

*Hanımın Çiftliği*, set in the mid-size Mediterranean city of Adana, is the story of the wealthy landowner Muzaffer and his wife Güllü who becomes the lady of the farm after Muzaffer is killed. The story revolves around a struggle for command over the land and holdings that Muzaffer leaves when he is killed. Halide, Muzaffer's sister, battles with Güllü throughout for control, first over Muzaffer and then the farm. Although Güllü's true love is Kemal, it is Halide who eventually marries him. Halide continually tries to undermine Güllü's authority and conspires with numerous others against her, consistently placing her pursuit of power and control of money and property above all else.

From the moment Halide realizes she is pregnant, she is reluctant to share the information with her husband Kemal since they are separated and she believes there is little chance for reconciliation. As a result, she appeals to her doctor for an abortion. He quickly rejects her, stating that it is illegal. While she knows that it is banned, she further entreats the doctor by recounting her hopeless marital situation. This, however, is to no avail, as the doctor again refuses and advises her to reconsider her decision. This is a recurring pattern that presents men who are close to the pregnant woman trying to convince them not to have an abortion.

Halide eventually finds a midwife to perform an illegal abortion, but in an interesting turn, the midwife tells her that "it [the sin of abortion] is on your head" (*Hanımın Çiftliği* 2010). However, reflecting the flexibility of the Turkish language, the word used is "günah" which can be translated as sin, error, or mistake. Despite the current Islamic argument that abortion is a sin (unless the mother's life is at risk or there is fetal impairment), the invocation of a discourse of religion/morality as relates to abortion portrayed in these programs is virtually non-existent. It occurs in *Hanımın Çiftliği* once in the form above and in *Öyle Bir Geçer Zaman ki* when Cemile's former mother-in-law asserts that the fetus she is carrying is a life and she should not kill it. In both cases, these discourses are trumped by other concerns. Furthermore, both these serials are set at a time when abortion was illegal. Therefore, the use of a language of morality may be an attempt to illustrate sentiments that were then more prominent.

When Halide realizes that she may be able to recapture Kemal's affections and keep him away from his first love Güllü, she reveals that she is pregnant. In this way, her pregnancy and eventually her abortion become tools in her manipulations of her husband. Although Kemal agrees to reconcile out of a sense of duty, it is clear that his heart is still with Güllü. Yet, when it is revealed that Halide withheld knowledge of who set the fire, which resulted in his mother's death, Kemal rejects Halide. Upon this rejection Halide vows that, "Kemal will pay for this. He will regret it. I will cause him a thousand times the pain that he has caused me" (*Hanımın Çiftliği* 2010). Halide, after calling an ambulance, performs an abortion on herself in the bathroom using a long pointed piece of metal.

Halide's abortion drama is inter-cut with the main story line of the kidnapping of Güllü's infant son, who is at the same time Halide's nephew. The series of scenes begins with Halide phoning for an ambulance and then moves to Güllü who has been called to police headquarters to identify an article of clothing that may belong to her son; the police, however, imply that he may be dead. The next scene is of Halide performing the abortion. Her face is reflected in the mirror, which then fades to Kemal, deep in thought, and then returns to Halide who is shown, rather significantly, to have blood on her hands. While Güllü would do anything for the return of her son, Halide, with little regard for anyone but herself, ends her pregnancy. Although she survives the abortion, she is duly punished for her actions when the doctor informs her that she may never become pregnant again.

To fully emphasize the reprehensible nature of what Halide has done, a scene presents Güllü dressed completely in white and bathed in the soft white light of the moon dotting on her recently returned son. Taking him into her arms, she declares that she will not let anyone hurt him. Güllü is presented as the perfect self-sacrificing mother with Halide the antithesis as she places her own needs, desires, and wants before all others, including her own future children. To finalize her punishment, in the final episode of the series, Halide, alone having lost everything, is shot dead in the street. As Halide's burial is shown, attended by no one other than the grave digger and a religious official, in a voiceover Güllü offers the sentiment that "Halide's was the loneliest of funerals. She died alone as she deserved" (*Hanımın Çiftliği* 2011).

*Aşk-ı Memnu* (*Forbidden Love*) is the tale of the rich widower Adnan, his two children, his nephew, and his second wife, the very young Bihter. Bihter marries Adnan to exact revenge against her mother who is initially interested in him. Similar to Halide in *Hanımın Çiftliği*, Bihter is selfish and bent on revenge, firstly against her husband, who she feels has undermined her authority in their home, and secondly against her lover who chooses another over her.

Early in her marriage to Adnan, Bihter becomes pregnant. She makes clear from the very beginning that she is not interested in having the baby. Her mother, ever the opportunist, tells Bihter "Don't be stupid . . . You are going to have Adnan Ziyagil's baby. That child is your guarantee. That child is your life insurance" (*Aşk-ı Memnu* 2008). What none of them realize is that Adnan overhears and his initial excitement at the prospect of a baby is quickly extinguished, first when Bihter states that she does not want the baby and then further when her mother sees the baby as a means to manipulate Adnan in the future. When they do actually discuss the topic face to face, Bihter claims that it is too early in the marriage for them to consider having a child. Although Adnan does not fully share her sentiments, he concedes that perhaps she is right and it is not the time for a new baby. In the end, Adnan extracts a promise from Bihter to wait a few more days before they make any decisions regarding her pregnancy.

A day or so later Bihter informs Adnan that, per their decision, she has had an abortion. While Bihter herself does not claim that her abortion was a means of revenge, the implication in the storyline is quite clear. Adnan voices the suspicions that have been created, playing one story, the pregnancy, against the other one of conflict between Adnan and Bihter over who controls the household. Essentially, both storylines center on the struggle for power. Bihter, having had an abortion without informing Adnan, makes it clear that she is willing to do what is necessary to have her way. Bihter then becomes pregnant again, as a result of her illicit affair with her husband's nephew Behlül. Her pregnancy

becomes a tool for manipulating the men in her life and an instrument of revenge when her machinations fail to bear fruit.

Bihter again seeks an abortion and the scenario repeats many of the elements presented in *Hanımın Çiftliği*. While abortion is legal, Bihter's doctor gently tries to persuade her to reconsider her decision in light of the fact that this will be her second abortion. Similar to Halide's doctor, he forecasts a future that could be without children. Bihter, however, is insistent that she cannot have the child. The doctor relents but once Bihter is under anesthesia she claims that she wants the baby. She leaves the clinic still pregnant. These scenes are countered by images of Bihter's sister representing the perfect embodiment of acceptable womanhood. She is happily married and has just given birth to her second child. In what seems like a reward for her choices, she is repeatedly shown surrounded by family and love, whereas Bihter is often depicted alone and staring out of a window seemingly searching for something. More often than not, the representation of women who have abortions is that of lonely women estranged from their families. Similar to the portrayal of Halide in *Hanımın Çiftliği*, Bihter meets the same end. She dies alone by her own hand having been abandoned by both her husband Adnan and her lover Behlül. The punishment these storylines meet out for women who refuse the cultural script on womanhood, which centers on motherhood, is a lonely death.

Bahar, from the series *Gümüş*, initially rejects all aspects of the social script on femininity. Instead, she is the epitome of the selfish career woman. She places her career before all other aspects of her life, including her pregnancy. Her partner sees the pregnancy as a pleasant surprise and offers marriage, but Bahar rejects him by reminding him that in her eyes the pregnancy is a "problem" (*Gümüş* 2006). In rejecting her impending motherhood, Bahar asserts, "You think I resemble a woman who is going to stay home and raise a child. I have a career. This baby is going to go" (*Gümüş* 2006). Once she confirms her pregnancy, she lies to her boyfriend telling him that she is not pregnant after all, and without further consultation, has an abortion.

Revealing her true priorities, Bahar's first thought upon completion of the procedure is of work. Still on the operating table, she inquires after the time and states that she is late for a meeting.

Over the doctor's protestations, she heads straight for her office where she nearly faints. It is interesting that all of these serials depict abortion as something that women undertake by themselves. There is no one to help, no one to comfort them, or care for them, in the aftermath. These women are portrayed as having forsaken family or, at the very least, as putting other priorities before family, and the price to pay for this seems to be a life lived largely alone. However, if a woman is willing to reorient her priorities and place family first, then she can be rewarded. In an interesting reversal, once Bahar marries and becomes a mother, she ceases to plot, scheme, and connive. She is, in fact, domesticated by motherhood. Once she embraces her most important roles as wife and mother, she then achieves that which she sought in the first place. At the end of the series, she is named businesswoman of the year and her brother cedes her the leadership in the family corporation. It appears that a woman on Turkish television can have it all, but only if she is willing to first embrace marriage and motherhood.

#### The One Who Didn't?

It is interesting to note that in these series, the women who have abortions have yet to become mothers. It appears that once women become mothers, they are no longer allowed to consider abortion. Cemile, from the series *Öyle Bir Geçer Zaman ki*, is a mother of

four and exemplifies the ideal of Turkish womanhood. Although divorced, she maintains her position as a model woman due to the fact that she was wronged by her husband and, in spite of her attempts to save the marriage, is abandoned. Cemile places the well being of her children and family before all else, in particular, her own wants and desires. Visually, her "goodness" is displayed in a plain, unadorned appearance. Moreover, she is also nearly devoid of sexuality, her pregnancy the result of having been raped by her ex-husband Ali. Thus, despite the fact that she is unmarried and pregnant, she maintains her status as a respectable woman.

Notwithstanding Ali's vehement opposition and claims that he will raise the child, Cemile insists on an abortion. This is, in part, motivated by her fear of social reprisals. She is a divorced woman who is pregnant in 1967 when abortion was still illegal. Her fear of social condemnation is well founded and she is consistently concerned with secrecy. Confiding to her former mother-in-law that she is pregnant, her anxiety about discovery is clear: "You know what will happen if they hear?" (*Öyle Bir Geçer Zaman ki* 2011) Her fear is realized when, through a series of manipulations and misunderstandings, her pregnancy is revealed by Carolin, who is the antithesis of Cemile: young, fashionable, foreign, tall, blond, and sexy. Ali divorced Cemile in order to marry Carolin. Carolin, with great pleasure, publicly announces the pregnancy and states, "Now you understand why Cemile is marrying the fisherman. She is pregnant and not married . . . Cemile doesn't like me. I am supposedly a bad woman but the actual bad woman is Cemile" (*Öyle Bir Geçer Zaman ki* 2011).

Despite Cemile's intention to end her pregnancy, she is consistently thwarted in her attempts. Through a series of female contacts she locates a midwife to perform the abortion. As the midwife is preparing for the operation, the scenes are interspersed with shots of Ali engaged in a house-to-house search of the neighborhood in an attempt to stop her. Just in time, Ali discovers their location, forces his way in, and carries Cemile out of the building to then hold her prisoner until she will promise not to harm the baby. Having been referred to another midwife, Cemile again tries to secure an abortion. This time she is hindered by hemorrhaging begun the night before and is taken away in an ambulance. Once in the hospital, she pleads with the doctor to terminate her pregnancy. He refuses based on the fact that abortion is illegal and can only be performed if there is a medical necessity. This narrative of the doctor's refusal that appears here and in *Hanımın Çiftliği* proves interesting in and of itself and stands in contrast to evidence that many doctors were performing abortions long before they became legal.

In spite of two attempts to obtain an abortion and severe hemorrhaging that threatens her life, Cemile remains pregnant. The first season ended without resolving this issue. Unlike Halide, Bihter, and Bahar, Cemile is first and foremost a mother. She is a committed housewife and mother until her husband leaves her with no means to support her children and only then does she begin to work. Her children and family are always her first concern. Despite the shame she feels at having to clean houses in order to support her children, she willingly accepts the burden for their sake.

Season two begins several years later and Cemile has a small child, which viewers are led to believe is the child resulting from the rape. It is, however, quickly revealed that the child is Ali and Carolin's; the issue of Cemile's pregnancy remains unresolved. Did she have an abortion or miscarry? Regardless, it appears that Cemile, the model Turkish woman, cannot be shown to have had an abortion. Furthermore, Cemile's embodiment of her role, with its self-sacrificing mother component, is so complete that she is willing to raise the child of her despised ex-husband and the woman who ruined her marriage. While Carolin

returns to claim her son, Cemile appears reluctant to relinquish him and Mustafa has now started to call her “mother.” Carolin is so unrecognizable as a mother figure that not even her own son can accept her as such.

## Conclusions

The negative portrayal of women who chose to have abortions in Turkish nighttime soap operas is thoroughly informed by the discourse on Turkish womanhood. More than this, the representations of these women also perpetuate the discourse on Republican womanhood, which dates back to the founding of the Republic. Since that time motherhood has been “the core of a woman’s national identity and citizenship” (Özlem Altan-Olcay 2009, p. 172). Women symbolize Turkish attempts to establish the country as a modern nation-state. Women were and are expected to dress and act in a “modern” manner and encouraged to enter the public sphere in limited ways, however, they were still obliged to place their role as mothers and homemakers before all else. As Jenny B. White explains,

Family, then as now, remains important if not paramount, even among the elite. Motherhood was a patriotic duty . . . . In the ordinary domestic world of men and women, traditional gender responsibilities and conservative sexual morality persisted, despite discussions of equality between men and women, women’s education and professional work, and the increasingly companionate character of marriage. (2003, p. 154)

The core of this ideology remains in place today with Prime Minister Erdoğan continuing to call upon women to give birth to at least three children (NTVMSNBC 2010). Moreover, the negative depiction of women who have abortions perpetuates and reproduces the historic discourse concerning women: marriage and motherhood before all else, limited sexual expression and only within the confines of heterosexual marriage. For those women who violate these scripts, punishment awaits. Yet, women in Turkey have the right to abortion, and the manner in which television in Turkey portrays women availing themselves of a legal right reveals the strength of the ideology of Republican womanhood and, at the same time, there exists some unresolved tension concerning discourses on women, the actual practice of abortion, and the law.

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