



Incest as a private/social conundrum: A brief analysis of *Athkarınca*¹ movie and the mother's reaction to the incestuous husband within the context of Ethics of Care

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Abstract

Incest, which is also the main theme of the movie *Athkarınca* (2011) (*Merry-Go-Round*), has been observed both in ancient and modern societies. As a lathomenon, despite mostly being kept as a secret, it has been one of the most brutal realities and practices of families and societies for centuries. Even though many countries have their own prohibitive laws regarding the issue, in Turkey it is still considered a taboo, and in Turkish Penal Code there is no article openly discussing incest. For this respect, *Athkarınca* can be thought as a brave step for bringing up the topic into the scene as a private and social dead-end and a conundrum. The movie reveals the physical and psychological demolition that incest brings to a family, and leaves questions in the viewers' minds about whether the mother's way of handling the situation is righteous or not. Also, since the movie is about a social reality, it serves as a documentary both by reflecting a social reality and symbolic narration. In the light of these, this study aims to analyze the movie in terms of social and legal deficiencies and problems in law and society and seeks to explain the mother's reaction to the incestuous father within the context of *Ethics of Care* as developed by the American Feminist writers Carol Gilligan and Nel Noddings.

Keywords: Incest; *athkarınca*; merry-go-round; ethics of care; movie.

1. Introduction

Incest, which is usually kept as a secret among the family members, is a lathomenon despite it is something to be observed both in ancient and modern societies. The word incest derives from the Latin word *incestus* which means impure, unchaste or immoral (merriam-webster: *incest*). As it is clear from the meaning of the word, incest is something depraved, yet in some royal families and societies – especially to protect the crown or the royalty – it had been practiced and kept hidden, though it was predominantly forbidden. In Hittite Civilization, for instance, “The majority of laws addressing issues of sexual behavior – eight out of the total fifteen – were related to prohibitions of incest and the regulation of prohibited and permitted kin relations. Judging by the high proportion of these laws within the whole group, and their highly detailed nature, these seem to reflect the sex-related issues that concerned the Hittites the most” (Peled, 2015, pp. 287–288) and most cases were punished by death. On the other hand, incest was a common practice in ancient civilizations including Egypt, Inca Peru, and, at times, Central Africa, Mexico, and Thailand because “Royal incest occurs mainly in societies where rulers have tremendous power and no peers, except gods.

¹ Merry-Go-Round

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Since gods marry each other, so should royals. [. . .] Marrying family members ensures that a king will share riches, privilege, and power only with people already his relatives” (Dobbs, 2010).

Now, almost every country has prohibitive and retributive laws regarding this issue. In Turkish Penal Code³, for instance, it is directly stated that child molestation is forbidden, and that the punishment will be more severe if the abuser has a kinship with the child, yet there is no article openly discussing or explaining what incest is, how it should be handled, and/or punished. For this reason, rather than a punishable action, incest is more of a social taboo in Turkey. Mostly regarded as domestic violence, incest has been perceived as a problem to be resolved or kept as a secret among family members, and this is generally caused by the victim's or the family members' fear of social oppression, anxiety of being exposed to more physical and psychological violence or being threatened by the incestuous family member (Özdemir, 2018, pp. 89, 97). Similar to the historical existence stated above, contemporary research (<http://childmolestationprevention.org/>, (Alikasifoglu et al., 2006), (Celbis, Ozcan, & Özdemir, 2006), (Gunduz, Karbeyaz, & Ayranci, 2011) on child molestation have shown that the abuser is often one of the family members or a person close to the family like friends, babysitters, childcare providers, or neighbors (Schwartz, retrieved 10/25/2018). Also, a 2009 research on incest survivors entitled “Understanding the Problem of Incest in Turkey” which was conducted in 6 different cities in Turkey revealed that “Perpetrators are usually male figures of authority generally fathers followed by grandfathers, brothers, uncles and other older-age male relatives. [. . .] The main obstacles in revealing incest are child's inability to word abuse, offenders physical and emotional threats, social pressures, and society's and institutions' tendency to protect family rather than individuals” (Çavlin Bozbeyoğlu, A., Koyuncu, E. et al., 2010, p. 2). The same study states that since it is mostly kept secret among the family (members), it is not possible to know the exact number of the cases in Turkey, 57% of the attackers are biological fathers, and the society believes that it is the mother who is supposed to solve the problems in/of the family (ibid. 6 & 13). Also, it is found that one of the many reasons that victims do not ask for help is societal pressure (ibid. 17). Shortly, the deficiencies in law, societal pressure both on the victims and non-offending family members, and being threatened by the abuser physically and/or emotionally are only a few reasons causing incest to be kept hidden and in Turkish society mother is seen as the absolute problem solver of the family in many cases.

According to the given, this study aims to analyze the movie *Atlıkarınca* as a reflector of social and legal deficiencies and problems in Turkey and seeks to explain the mother's reaction to the incestuous father and her coping strategy as a non-offending parent in Turkey within the context of Ethics of Care as developed by the American Feminist writers Carol Gilligan and Nel Noddings. The study will start with a brief plot and character analysis of the movie. Afterwards,

³ Child molestation

ARTICLE 103-(1) Any person who abuses a child sexually is sentenced to imprisonment from three years to eight years.

Sexual molestation covers the following acts;

a) All kinds of sexual attempt against children who are under the age of fifteen or against those attained the age of fifteen but lack of ability to understand the legal consequences of such act,
b) Abuse of other children sexually by force, threat or fraud.

(2) In case of performance of sexual abuse by inserting an organ or instrument into a body, the offender is sentenced to imprisonment from eight years to fifteen years. (3) In case of performance of sexual abuse by antecedents, second or third-degree blood relations, step father, guardian, educator, trainer, nurse and other persons rendering health services and responsible from protection and observation of the child, or by undue influence based on public office, the punishment to be imposed according to the above subsections is increased by one half. (4) In case of execution of sexual abuse against the children listed in paragraph (a) of first subsection by use of force or threat, the punishment to be imposed is increased by one half. (5) The provisions relating to felonious injury are additionally applied in case the acts of force and violence cause severe injury to the person subject to sexual abuse. (6) In case of deterioration of corporal and spiritual health of the victim as a result of offense, the offender is sentenced to imprisonment not less than fifteen years. (7) In case the offense results with death or vegetal existence of the victim, the offender is punished with heavy life imprisonment. (Official Gazette, 2004).

how the characters change throughout the course of the movie and the mother's (re)action to the father will be discussed and examined in terms of Ethics of Care. The mother and her coping strategy as a non-offending parent are the core of this study. Our aim is not to define what justice is or how it should be secured; we seek to understand how justice is formed and perceived by Sevil as a woman, mother, wife and care provider, and why her action is intelligible for the Turkish viewer or in Turkey in general.

2. *Atlıkarınca*: Plot and Character Analysis

The 2011 movie *Atlıkarınca* is a brave movie about incest which gave voice to the unspeakable in Turkish society. It tells the story of the Yalçın Family living in a small town in Turkey, consisting of four family members; the father (Erdem) who at first glance is the prototype of the perfect father, the mother (Sevil) who is portrayed as a loving and caring mother/woman, and two children, a boy (Edip) and a girl (Sevgi). One day when Sevil's mother gets paralyzed, the family decides to move to İstanbul to be able to take care of her, and this is the breaking point of the movie. The story follows a linear narrative. A few flashbacks are also used to show what the mother went through after learning that her children have been the victim of incest. The moment she decides to call the police to report her husband and how she hit him by a car are two examples. The setting is almost all the time dark -with a little light used- especially when the father is alone with the children, which is an indicator of the things happening. The characters are mostly described through their actions and the way they look at each other. Mother is the only one speaking more than the others until she discovers the situation. Then, she also becomes silent. It can be said that the message is transmitted to the viewer through their way of acting and silence. The only dialogues are between the mother and the father or the mother and the children. When the father speaks to the children, it is more like a monologue and the children do not want to talk or look back at him because of fear.

The movie opens with a scene where a neighbor is sacrificing a sheep in Yalçın's front yard. Erdem, who seems uncomfortable with the ritual, is not able to look at what the neighbor is doing, gets disturbed when the neighbor leaves a blood print on the children's foreheads, he asks Sevil to wash the children. Erdem, as a poet/writer, is a man of feelings, he is sensitive, and what the neighbor is doing is not something pleasurable for him. From the point he takes the children to the bathroom, from Edip's silence and appearance, we, as the viewers, start feeling that something is wrong with their relationship.

All the names for the characters are chosen carefully. The meanings of the names are all related to how a Turkish family should be. Erdem means virtue or morality, Sevil means beloved or the loved one, Sevgi means love, Edip means decent or well-mannered, and Saadet (the name of the grandmother) means happiness or bliss. All these names are interconnected with the Turkish family structure in different ways. The father needs to be the virtuous, wise and morally right member who is responsible for representing and teaching these values to the other family members. The mother is the one who is loved by everyone in the family and responsible for giving love to the others. As the descendants of their father and mother, the male child is the next virtuous and decent person, and the female child is the one handing down love to the next generation. Lastly, the old grandmother needs to be the happy person for being able to see her daughter's and her family's content and comfort. Yet, to show how this family structure and the characters, which are the representatives of the social norms, are corrupted, all these values are demolished in the depiction of the characters. The father is not moral, the mother is not loved, the children cannot live a decent and loving life, and the grandmother is muted, motionless and mournful. Also, the name chosen for the movie has a deeper meaning than it seems. *Atlıkarınca*, which means merry-go-round or carousel, is one of the most innocent and harmless rides that could be found in an amusement park. For this reason, the name of the movie symbolizes the loss

of childhood and innocence, or childhood being harmed, and stands there only figuratively as if the movie will be fun to watch.

Erdem is the incestuous father. The first child he starts abusing is his son. Starting with the bathroom scene, Edip never expresses any sign of happiness when he is with the father alone or altogether with the family members. Ten years later, when he calls her mother from the boarding school detached from the family, after Sevil asks if he would be visiting them soon, he never says a word or comments on his mother's question.

Sevil, unaware of what her son went through and her daughter is dealing with, continues her life until she senses that Sevgi's behaviors are changing, and that she is getting introverted.

During those years, the grandmother is still alive and the only witness of the abuse. Sevgi confesses everything to her paralyzed grandmother while reading about some part of a book about a dead girl's lying body in a coffin. Crying, she tells the grandmother that she was innocent and did not do anything, asks if she should kill herself. Sevil overhears everything and her internal conflict starts. At first, she does not take any action except crying out of grief and shock, does not let the others sense that she knows everything, keeps silent but becomes observant. At the end of the movie, being sure about her husband abusing their children for a very long time, Sevil runs over Erdem by her car, making it seem like an accident. The family members do not say anything to each other about what happened, they prepare a funeral for him, accept people's condolences.

3. Analysis of the Mother's Reaction to the Incestuous Father and Ethics of Care

Ethics of Care, or in other words, Care Ethics is an ethical theory that came into being in the second half of the 20th century and was created and developed by Feminist scholars. The first important name among these scholars is Carol Gilligan who is an American Feminist, Ethicist, psychologist and a professor at New York University. In her remarkable work *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development* (1982)⁴, Gilligan criticizes American psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg's stages of moral development of children which states that the level of moral development of boys is higher than girls (Kohlberg & Kramer, 1969 and Kohlberg, 2008). In her book Gilligan argues that men and women evaluate and see morality in different ways, and these gender-based differences are the result of approaching problems in a justice-based or compassionate point of view as an outcome of the patriarchal society and its structure. For Gilligan, such an approach to the issue is necessary and revolutionary because

A new psychological theory in which girls and women are seen and heard is an inevitable challenge to a patriarchal order that can remain in place only through the continuing eclipse of women's experience. Bringing the experiences of women and girls to full light, although in one sense perfectly straightforward, becomes a radical endeavor. (Gilligan, 1993, p. xxiv)

According to Gilligan (1993), when it comes to moral dilemmas, men and women have different perspectives; in varying degrees, people are dependent and interdependent with each other (Gilligan, 1993, p. 24), individuals are affected by their choices and their consequences (ibid. 66), women have a distinctive construction of moral problems (p.105), and the question about responsibility followed a dilemma posed by a woman's conflict between her commitments to work and to family relationships (p.35). Referring to Nancy Chodorow's "Family Structure and Feminine Personality" (1974), Gilligan claims that since "women, universally, are largely responsible for early childcare [. . .] feminine personality comes to define itself in relation and connection to other people more than masculine personality does" (p.7). It can be inferred that gender and personality are intertwined with each other in the female personality construction process, the relationship with the others helps define one's self, and these relationships accompany responsibility with them. Gilligan, by taking Virginia Woolf's (1929) critic into consideration stating that the values of women differ from that of men's and are shaped by an external authority, argues that "women's deference

⁴ The book was first published in 1982, but in this study the 1993 publication is used.

is not only in their social subordination but also in the substance of their moral concern. Sensitivity to the needs of others and the assumption of responsibility for taking care lead women to attend to voices other than their own and to include in their judgment other points of view” (p.16) and “Thus women not only define themselves in a context of human relationship but also judge themselves in terms of their ability to care” (p.17). Positioned by the society and by themselves as the caregivers, women evaluate themselves through their aptness of taking care of others which could be seen as both a selfless and selfish action. Since taking care of someone requires self-devotion, it also means the cared one is superior to the others who are not cared. Hurting one's self and others is another issue that is deeply discussed in her work particularly over women's relationship with the others and abortion. The women she interviewed with find it immoral to hurt others. Living peacefully is the core of their understanding of the moral. Yet, when responsibilities lead to self-care or care for others, what is necessary has to be chosen as the option:

In separating the voice of the self from the voices of others, the woman asks if it is possible to be responsible to herself as well as to others and thus to reconcile the disparity between hurt and care. The exercise of such responsibility requires a new kind of judgment, whose first demand is for honesty. To be responsible for oneself, it is first necessary to acknowledge what one is doing.

The criterion for judgment thus shifts from goodness to truth when the morality of action is assessed not on the basis of its appearance in the eyes of others, but in terms of the realities of its intention and consequence. (pp.82-83)

As stated above, women define themselves according to their relationship with others. In Gilligan's work, when they are asked to describe themselves, the result is similar. All women describe themselves through a relationship “depicting their identity in the connection of future mother, present wife, adopted child, or past lover. Similarly, the standard of moral judgment that informs their assessment of self is a standard of relationship, an ethic of nurturance, responsibility, and care” (p.159). And, when they measure their strength in the activity of attachment as care givers “these highly successful and achieving women do not mention their academic and professional distinction in the context of describing themselves” (p.159). To them, being themselves is mostly related to who they are to others.

The last point to be discussed is women's judgements and how they approach problems to solve them. Referring to Norma Haan's (1975) research on college students and Constance Holstein's (1976) three-year study of adolescents and their parents Gilligan says that these research indicated “that the moral judgments of women differ from those of men in the greater extent to which women's judgments are tied to feelings of empathy and compassion and are concerned with the resolution of real as opposed to hypothetical dilemmas” (p.69), and “life is valuable and can only be sustained by care in relationships” (p.127): women impose a distinctive construction on moral problems, seeing moral dilemmas in terms of conflicting responsibilities. This construction was traced through a sequence of three perspectives, each perspective representing a more complex understanding of the relationship between self and other and each transition involving a critical reinterpretation of the conflict between selfishness and responsibility. The sequence of women's moral judgment proceeds from an initial concern with survival to a focus on goodness and finally to a reflective understanding of care as the most adequate guide to the resolution of conflict in human relationships. (p.105)

More interestingly, “When no option exists that can be construed as being in the best interest of everybody, when responsibilities conflict and decision entails the sacrifice of somebody's needs, then the woman confronts the seemingly impossible task of choosing the victim” (p.80).

Shortly, in her work Gilligan calls our attention to understand how women's judgements are different from men's. Women tend to judge on a relational level and caregiving is the key point of their judgements. In their relationships, commitments are important, these bear responsibilities and conflicts within one's self. Feelings of empathy and compassion play an important role in decision making and when there is no option left, they confront the task of choosing the victim. All in all,

care is always the key point to a woman's decision and as Gilligan states "McClelland reports that while men represent powerful activity as assertion and aggression, women in contrast portray of nurturance as acts of strength" (p.168).

In the movie, the mother, by all means, is the embodiment of Gilligan's theory. As a woman, mother and wife, she focuses on her relationship with her children. Although she cannot tempt to take an action first, she makes up her mind and annihilates the source of the problem. She decides to give an end to the molestation by killing her husband. This is not something shocking to the Turkish viewer for two reasons. First, most of the Turkish citizens are already aware that trying to seek justice in a police station or the court will end up with a long procedure which might take years⁵, the abuser might not get punished as deserved, and the mother might be found guilty both by the law and the society for not being a "good mother"⁶ who should have taken "good" care of her children. The second reason is the fear of becoming a gossip fodder or facing endless questions and being the target of judgmental glance of people. Also, as a consequence of the second reason, the children's lives could get devastated and the psychological and physical wounds could become deeper. For these reasons, the mother feels that she is not left with many options. In order to save the lives of her children, who are the ones she cares for, she needs to take action. So, although she is against hurting someone, in order to open up the way out of this dead end, she kills her husband. We can say that the mother takes her strength from caring, and survival is the main motive of her action.

American Feminist writer of the book *Caring: A Relational Approach to Ethics and Moral Education* (1986) Nel Noddings also explains that sometimes we just do care without any ethical effort is required (Noddings, 2013, p. 81), our interest in morality derives from caring and we act on behalf of the present other (ibid. 83). As she sets forth, the problem of justification is not concentrated upon justified action in general since we are not "justified" but are *obligated-to* do what is required to maintain caring (p.95). In addition, when the topic is morality of women, in a similar manner with Gilligan, Noddings says that most women "approach moral problems not as intellectual problems to be solved by abstract reasoning but as concrete human problems to be lived and to be solved in living. Their approach is founded in caring" (p.96). For her, when women face with a hypothetical moral dilemma, they tend to ask for more information to form a picture; like act-deontologists in general, except focusing on the universal principles, they give their reasons for their acts pointing to feelings, needs, situational conditions and their sense of personal ideal (p.96). In this sense caring is both self-serving and other-serving and "Willard Gaylin describes it as necessary to the survival of the species: "If one's frame of reference focuses on the individual, caring seems self-sacrificing. But if the focus is on the group, on the species, it is the ultimate self-serving device-the sine qua non of survival" (p.99). Furthermore, in the part she discussed killing as a prohibited action, she gives the example of a woman killing her husband as a defensive action due to the husband's abusive behavior. She claims that the woman is torn between what is ethical and what is necessary, but considering the case, even the law finds her innocent:

It is the difference between "I don't believe in killing, but ..." and "I did not believe in killing cold-bloodedly, but now I see that I must and for these reasons." In the latter case, I may retain my ethicality, but at considerable cost (p.101) I do not want to kill if other options are open to me [...] To remain one-caring, I might have to kill. Consider the case of a woman who kills her sleeping husband. Under most circumstances, the one-caring would judge such an act wrong. It violates the very possibility of caring for the husband. But as she hears how the husband abused his wife and children, about the fear with which the woman lived, about the past efforts to solve the problem legally, the one-caring revises her judgment. The jury finds the woman not guilty by reason of an extenuated self-defense. The one-caring finds her ethical, but under the guidance of a sadly

⁵ For a sample case from Turkey see (CNN TURK, 2017).

⁶ For a detailed analysis of mother blaming and good/bad mothers see (Ladd-Taylor, 2004).

diminished ethical ideal. The woman has behaved in the only way she found open to protect herself and her children and, thus, she has behaved in accord with the current vision of herself as one-caring (p.102).

Different from Sevil's situation, the woman in Nodding's example tries to take legal steps first, but like in Sevil's situations, when law fails to protect her and the children, she kills her husband. In both cases, circumstances make caring impossible and murder becomes the only way out.

On the other hand, killing someone, even for the valid reason in both cases, drags women into a twinge of conscious; "She is now one-who-has-killed once" (p.102). In the movie, for instance, we understand that Sevil feels guilty because she starts hallucinating. Despite Erdem is dead now and cannot be present at home or in his own funeral, Sevil sees him and looks at him uncomfortably. In another scene, after she hits him by her car, she starts crying out of fear and grief. Yet, what she did is justifiable to her because her "rational attitude built upon natural caring" (p.95). Not doing what is right for the sake of the cared ones could cause them to suffer from something worse.

Lastly, although in most cases, mother is not the penetrator, or in other words she is the non-offending parent, "the mother is viewed simultaneously as the object of blame for failing to protect her children, to control the perpetrator, and to safeguard her family, and the subject of hope for rescuing the victim and maintaining the home" (Tamraz, 1997, p. 76). Also, the parents of sexually abused children "may experience significant levels of distress. A substantial body of research evidence has been developed during the past decade that documents the nature and the seriousness of the impact on non-offending parents of finding out about the sexual abuse of their children" and "Women have described how they have felt guilt and failure in their role as mothers (Hill, 2005, p. 340). Hill (2005) also states that for women finding out about their children being abused is both a cognitive and emotional process (p.341). Also, since the sexual abuse is done by someone who is known, it becomes "difficult for the non-offending caregiver to comprehend that someone they know, perhaps trust, could commit such an act" (Elliott & Carnes, 2001, p. 315). In the movie, Sevil also wants to gather more information about the truth. Without directly accusing her husband or talking to the daughter, she tries to look for both material and emotional clues. She checks the husband's shoes to find some traces of mud after he claimed that we went on fishing, gets back home earlier to check is there is something unusual, and tries to understand why her daughter is becoming more introverted.

4. Conclusion

The analysis of the movie *Atlıkarınca* in terms of incest and its state in Turkish Judiciary System, the study of the mother's reaction to the incest phenomenon in the movie through the scope of Ethics of Care, and how the symbolic narration of the movie shed light to a private and social problem in Turkey and the Turkish penal code have been the focal point of this study. First of all, the analysis of the characters and the plot of the movie indicated that family, as the core structure of the society, becomes the signifier of corruption and harmful relationships when incest damages the members both physically and psychologically. Since the movie touches a sore spot in Turkish society and the Turkish penal code, it could be said that in Turkey not only the victims of incest but also the non-offending parents have to go through a severe psychological and social pressure unless better laws are enacted regarding the issue. The social pressure and lack of supportive laws impel victims and their nonoffending family members into a dark deep silence. As Roi Wagner sets forth "silence is the result of silencing" (Wagner, 2012, p. 102) which then creates its own action and resistance within its capability. Thus, the mother in the movie keeps silent (like most of the victims or witnesses of incest) even before and after the husband's death because she is silenced by the society and law. Her behavior is not only the proof of incest as a taboo in the society, but also a true reflection of the reality. Also, the conceptualization of justice regarding child molestation

within the incestuous cases was examined to be in a grey zone. Thus, as the representative of non-offending parents, the silenced mother decides to take action and perceives murder as the only way to secure justice. Yet, it must be noted that this study does not think of the mother's action in the movie as a morally, ethically and legally acceptable way of securing the justice. What is highlighted is that social pressure and the lack of necessary laws pave the way for such an action also in real life. Furthermore, as a woman, mother, and care provider, the mother's method of handling the crime is explicable within the context of ethics of care. As the research and interviews we have mentioned show, for women the only way to sustain life and a relationship is caring, and caring means taking responsibilities. Thus, when women feel obliged to do something for the cared ones because of a moral concern, their behaviors become justifiable for them since it means rescuing the victim and maintaining peace. And finally, although there are criticism (Puka, 1990; Tronto, 1994, pp.111-112; Robinson,1999, p.31) towards Ethics of Care for limiting a woman's ability to be autonomous, and reinforcing traditional gender roles, being ambiguous and relating ethics to motherhood, this study still considers Ethics of Care as a strong social and ethical approach touching moral, private and public issues in a different perspective which empowers care providers and care providing activities, and which also helps us understand those people's actions.

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