

Marriage or Death: Salvation within Patriarchy

An Analysis of Female Autonomy in *Aşk-ı Memnu*

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ABSTRACT

This essay examines the complex relationship between Bihter Ziyagil and her mother Firdevs Yöreoğlu in Turkish Drama *Aşk-ı Memnu* (2008-2010), an adaptation of Halit Ziya Uşaklıgil's 1899 novel. Bihter's desire to separate from her mother's scandalous reputation puts her in a position where she struggles to keep up with the demands of the society as well as her own needs and desires as a woman. Firdevs's presence in Bihter's marriage frustrates Bihter, and she finds herself in a secret affair with her husband's nephew Behlül. Despite all her attempts, Bihter can find happiness neither in her marriage nor in her affair with Behlül. Unable to cope with the heartbreak, Bihter finds the solution in embracing her similarity to Firdevs, which would not last long. At last, Bihter's initial wish to form a separate identity leads to her self-destruction. Her final act of suicide is not merely a punishment for her immoral actions but her salvation from the judgment of patriarchal society.

On the evening of 24 June 2010, the Grand National Assembly of Türkiye was in the middle of a legislative session which struggled to reach quorum. Instead of attending the session, the congressmen were in the lobby, glued to the screen to the finale of the record-breaking show *Aşk-ı Memnu* (Hilal Saral 2010) (Habertürk). The television event became a cultural phenomenon so great that it convened 75% of the total audience, including the congressmen, to watch the tragic ending of Bihter Ziyagil (Beren Saat) (Ecevit 23). *Aşk-ı Memnu* won many prestigious awards; as of 2026, it continues to remain one of the most watched TV shows in Turkish television, with yearly reruns still dominating ratings.

Adapted from Halit Ziya Uşaklıgil's 1899 novel, *Aşk-ı Memnu* follows the story of Bihter, whose eagerness to escape the humiliating "Melih Bey Takımı" pushes her to marry an older man. Struggling to navigate the demands of society, Bihter eventually commits suicide. While *Aşk-ı Memnu* is often perceived as a tragic love story, it is rather a narration of Bihter's tragedy by showing how her relationship with her mother Firdevs (Nebahat Çehre) changes and shapes her decisions in a patriarchal society. This article will examine the visual dimensions of Bihter's psyche,

and her relationship with her mother Firdevs, as influenced by patriarchy.

Firdevs acts as a catalyst throughout the show, influencing and manipulating Bihter in various ways. Firdevs is introduced as a high-maintenance, self-centred person who infuriates Bihter and her sister Peyker (Nur Fettahoğlu). Bihter holds her mother to patriarchal standards, expecting Firdevs to be self-sacrificing and devoid of sexuality. Firdevs's refusal to fit in these standards increases the conflict between mother and daughter. Firdevs resents her children for stealing her youth and beauty and habitually sabotages their happiness; Bihter resents Firdevs for being greedy, which ultimately caused her father's downfall. According to poet Adrienne Rich, this hatred incites a feeling, 'matrophobia', which also arises in Bihter and induces fear of becoming her mother (235). Thus, Bihter separates herself from her mother through marriage, though it also helps her humiliate Firdevs as revenge.

Firdevs initially objects to the marriage between Bihter and Adnan (Selçuk Yöntem), recognizing Bihter's true intentions to humiliate her. Bihter says, "You would have ran to him if he



Fig. 1 | Firdevs laughs at Bihter's outburst. "Episode 3" 00:53:20. Ay Yapım, 2008.

chose you, but [Adnan] chose me instead" (Episode 3, 00:06:06). According to critic Catherine Hakim, Adnan's choice is an affirmation of Firdevs's loss of erotic capital, which represents beauty, youth, and presentation (17). In a transactional society where marriage is the only way of gaining autonomy, preserving erotic capital is essential for Firdevs to ensure survival (27). Losing a potential husband to her younger daughter proves her diminishing value in the marriage market. This loss is essential to Firdevs's character as it justifies her ongoing bitterness towards her daughters; she fears being defeated by them.

Besides defeating Firdevs, Bihter has another reason for marrying Adnan: distancing herself from Firdevs. Bihter chooses an older man because association with Firdevs ruins her chances of being taken seriously by younger men; "[she] will be liberated from being Firdevs Hanım's daughter once [she] become[s] Adnan's wife" ("Episode 3" 00:05:47). Even though Bihter claims to love Adnan, her remarks confirm that her motivation in this marriage is to solely exasperate her mother and reclaim her reputation as a Ziyagil. When another argument arouses, Bihter reminds Firdevs of Adnan's choice, and aggressively states, "You will never get a dime out of Adnan. Everything he owns belongs to me now" (00:53:12). Bihter's outrage reaches a peak as she slams on the dining table to assert her dominance. Firdevs's reaction to Bihter's outburst is a cheeky laugh (Fig. 1). "I know this woman," Firdevs says. She holds Bihter from her shoulders and turns her to face the mirror on the wall. "Same greed, same rage, same passion. No matter how much you claim yourself as your father's daughter, you are mine" (Fig. 2). Firdevs lets go of Bihter as she smiles and says, "I'm proud of you" (00:53:27). Firdevs's tight hold on Bihter is a demonstration of the power dynamic in their parent-child relationship. In the mirror, Firdevs



Fig. 2 | Firdevs shows Bihter their reflection in the mirror. "Episode 3" 00:53:30. Ay Yapım, 2008.

appears confident as Bihter seems startled, and she shrinks under Firdevs's touch. As the mother, Firdevs is in charge, dominating Bihter through their physical and inner resemblance. Bihter's efforts to define her self-image based on being her father's daughter is dismantled through her similarity to Firdevs in terms of character, which is Bihter's biggest nightmare.

In a Lacanian context, the mirror constructs a "Narcissistic fantasy," whereas in this scene it dismantles Bihter's idea of self (Smith 106). Confrontation with her similarity to Firdevs leaves Bihter defenseless. Regardless of her efforts to dissociate herself from Firdevs, she fails. Even though the mirror does not show a visual ugliness, it reflects what Otto Rank describes as the visceral ugliness that she represses (76). Bihter shares her mother's temperament despite her insistent claims that she takes after her father; and there is no force which can prevent her true self from surfacing. Firdevs weaponizes their



Fig. 3 | Bihter cries after Behlül calls her 'Firdevs Hanim's daughter'. "Episode 64" 00:16:55. Ay Yapım, 2010.



Fig. 4 | Bihter begs Firdevs to stop the wedding. "Episode 69" 01:23:34. Ay Yapım, 2010.

inherent similarity to provoke her since Bihter stole the man Firdevs planned to marry. Bihter's inertness in front of the mirror symbolizes her defeat; she gulps, likely to swallow her humiliation (Elsaesser 87). Firdevs has won.

Consequently, Bihter battles an internal war to gain independence while subconsciously being merged with Firdevs through their shared temperament, according to Stone (8). It is mandatory for her to establish borders between herself and Firdevs to distinguish her own personality. However, separating herself from her mother is not possible for Bihter as Firdevs moves into the Ziyagil Mansion. It is not only Firdevs's physical presence that disturbs Bihter, but also her psychological impact. During Firdevs's extended stay at the Ziyagil Mansion, we get to witness their parent-child dynamic firsthand. Firdevs overturns Bihter's life as she insists on the possibility of an affair between Bihter and Adnan's nephew, Behlül (Kıvanç Tatlıtuğ). Despite her criticism

of Firdevs's greedy and passionate nature, Bihter gives in to her desires and ends up cheating on her husband just like her mother, proving herself as 'Firdevs Hanim's daughter'. However, when Behlül tells her that "[she] really [is] Firdevs Hanim's daughter." ("Episode 64" 00:02:36), Bihter loses her composure. Just like Firdevs, Behlül uses Bihter's weakness to provoke her for conspiring to regain his advances. Hearing such a statement from her lover is even more detrimental than being reminded of her similarity to her mother. He is right nevertheless, because Bihter is indeed emulating Firdevs's demeanor. When Firdevs calls her afterwards, Bihter declares her hatred for her mother as Bihter blames Firdevs for her misery (Fig. 3).

Bihter is once again reminded that she has become exactly like her mother and she cannot run from it any longer. In a voicemail to Behlül she introduces herself as 'Firdevs Hanim's Daughter', conveying that his words did not affect her, as consciously imitating her mother is less humiliating than involuntarily becoming her double (00:23:41). It is Firdevs's pride and confidence she holds onto not lose herself.

Firdevs's psychological control over Bihter extends to the Ziyagil Mansion, where Firdevs provokes Bihter to assert her authority as the lady of the house. Fueled by Firdevs, Bihter takes her anger out of the household. Despite what Bihter thinks, Firdevs's provocation aims to strengthen Bihter's position as the lady of the house rather than create unnecessary conflict. The Ziyagil Mansion is the only place in which Bihter can claim any authority and Firdevs, as a mother, aspires to guide Bihter through the realities of managing a household in a patriarchal society where women cannot exert 'practical' power.

While Firdevs appears to genuinely care about her daughter, her self-indulgence surpasses her compassion for Bihter's



Fig. 5 | Firdevs scolds Bihter for acting irrational. "Episode 77" 00:46:21. Ay Yapım, 2010.

situation. Firdevs blackmails Bihter to secure her position in the mansion ("Episode 23"). Later, Bihter uses the same strategy against Firdevs to prevent Behlül from marrying Nihal (Hazal Kaya), a marriage Firdevs imposed on both parties to eliminate Behlül from Bihter's life ("Episode 69"). Firdevs aims to eliminate Behlül not out of concern for Bihter's happiness with Adnan, but because the termination of their marriage would deprive both from the prosperity it provides. What Firdevs fails to account for is Bihter's devotion to the affair, which takes her by surprise when Bihter swallows her pride to eventually ask for Firdevs's help to stop Behlül and Nihal's wedding (Fig. 4).

Bihter and Firdevs are at visually opposite sides, which is demonstrated through their fashion choices. While Bihter's white attire shows her hopes of holding onto her innocence, Firdevs's satin black dress expresses her unapologetically desirous nature. Bihter accepts the mother's identity by holding Firdevs's hand; the high angle emphasizes Bihter's vulnerability as she falls on her knees, yielding to matriarchal authority.

Firdevs becomes Bihter's anchor in navigating her split with Behlül. As Bihter tries to find ways to stop the wedding, Firdevs reminds her of the realities of the patriarchal society, that the revelation of the affair would not only ruin Firdevs's reputation along with Bihter, but it would also account for social suicide ("Episode 77") (Fig. 5). While Bihter is lucky enough to survive the aftermath of an extramarital affair, a revelation would ruin the already tarnished reputation of the "Melih Bey Takımı". By declaring her unfaithfulness to the society, Bihter would be destroying her chances of finding another husband, reducing her name to one of a mistress. Even though Firdevs sounds tone-deaf, she wants to help her daughter before she causes irreversible damage

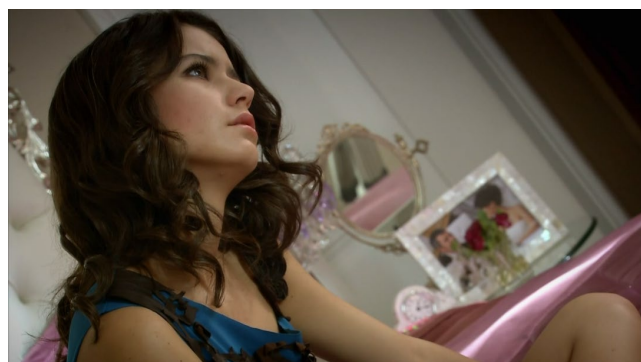


Fig. 6 | Bihter stares blankly after Behlül leaves her for good. "Veda" 00:17:08. Ay Yapım, 2010.

to her honor in a society where it is her most valuable dowry. Though Bihter tries to shut Firdevs down, the likelihood of a shameful life Firdevs warns her about is essentially what sets the ground for Bihter's imminent suicide.

Bihter's emotional turmoil becomes more apparent through the visual composition as the wedding date approaches ("Veda"). As Bihter sits on the bed covered with satin pink sheets, the disharmony between her blue dress externalizes the alienation she feels in her own home. As stated by Blain Brown, the Dutch angles demonstrate her deranged state of mind as she thinks about the imminent wedding of her lover and her stepdaughter (66). Her wedding picture with Adnan indicates her doubts and regrets regarding her own marriage (Fig. 6). Worried by Bihter's silence, Firdevs gets the door unlocked by a maid. Bihter smiles at Firdevs, rather tragically, when she is confronted about locking herself into her room. Alarmed by Bihter's unstable mood, Firdevs



Fig. 7 | Firdevs pulls Bihter to her chest as she cries. "Veda" 00:33:12. Ay Yapım, 2010.



Fig. 8 | Bihter cries in Firdevs's arms. "Veda" 00:33:11. Ay Yapım, 2010.



Fig. 9 | Bihter caresses Firdevs's cheek. "Veda" 01:07:51. Ay Yapım, 2010.



Fig. 10 | Firdevs looks puzzled as Bihter shows affection. "Veda" 01:07:52. Ay Yapım, 2010.

questions Bihter's intentions; it is not the revelation she is afraid of but rather the mental wellbeing of Bihter ahead of the wedding. Bihter's confident gestures contrast her fluctuating expression as she talks: "I'm Bihter Ziyagil, Firdevs Yöreoğlu's daughter. No one can humiliate me. No one can hurt me" (00:31:34). For the first time, Bihter does not use Firdevs's name as an insult but a praise. She associates Firdevs with strength and pride, two traits she needs desperately to move on with her life after the affair. By Lucy Irigaray's words, Bihter tries to "rewrap herself in the flesh of the other," meaning that she embraces her mother's identity to protect herself (110).

Despite Bihter's efforts to hide her pain, she fails and transforms into a little child seeking comfort in her mother's arms. Her cries disprove her claims, her hand on her chest insinuates the pain she feels in her heart. Firdevs hugs Bihter to her chest as she caresses her head; and the high angle allows us to grasp the Bihter's devastation (Fig. 7).

The heartless mother image Bihter attributed to Firdevs is broken as Bihter squeezes Firdevs's arm for support (Fig. 8).

Compared to their previous interactions, this bond feels like a mother-daughter relationship, without rivalry and hostility. Bihter asks, "Mother, how will I bear it?" (00:33:09). This question hides the answer to the ultimate difference between Firdevs and Bihter. They share the same characteristics, but their coping mechanisms are entirely different. Firdevs prioritizes herself by adopting pride as means of survival, while Bihter's immense desire to be loved and emotional fragility keeps her from recovering from such a loss. Bihter is aware of the difference between herself and Firdevs, and it is why she attempts to declare herself as Firdevs's daughter as a last resort. However, according to Alison Stone, reclaiming this identity does more harm than good for Bihter, and she starts to dissolve in her mother (8). After realizing that being her authentic self caused her distress, Bihter adopts Firdevs's demeanor. Thus, the failure of Bihter's attempts to separate herself from Firdevs is the cause of this dissolution. Already in a deranged state, Bihter appears so cheerful that it alarms Firdevs. Their last conversation on the day of the wedding serves as Bihter's farewell to her mother, and a warning of future events.

Foreshadowing her impending suicide, Bihter declares her intentions to leave the mansion (Fig. 9). Following Bihter's claim that hell is about to break loose, Firdevs threatens Bihter by saying "If you do something foolish, I will never forgive you. Not in a lifetime." ("Veda" 01:07:39). Bihter caresses Firdevs's cheek, an unexpected display of affection, and says "Not in a lifetime." ("Veda" 01:07:50) (Fig.10). Bihter's decision to commit suicide is apparent in her last conversation with Firdevs, and the affection shown towards her mother; she seals the conversation with a kiss on Firdevs's cheek (Fig.11). In their last scene together, Bihter asserts dominance through the kiss, finalizing their symbolic war that has been going on since the mirror scene in Episode 3.

Throughout the show, Bihter and Firdevs's scenes are compositionally isolated. Bihter's desire to separate is reflected in composition choices by separating Firdevs and Bihter on the screen. However, they do appear together in a two-shot in scenes that are detrimental to Bihter's sense of identity. Such scenes are

also shot from high angles as to emphasize Bihter's vulnerability as well as shame.

Bihter's actions throughout the show are controlled by 'matrophobia' that aims to set Bihter free from the reputation of 'Melih Bey Takımı'. From her fashion choices to her marriage, Bihter attempts to detach herself from Firdevs in various ways. While Firdevs strove to elevate her position with a marriage after her husband's death, Bihter took patriarchy's side against her mother, eventually failing herself. The marriage which she thought would yield autonomy to her ended up confining her. Though Bihter seems successful in separating herself from Firdevs in the end by committing suicide and refusing the life of shame, she falls victim to the realities of patriarchal society. Some may argue that the suicide is a punishment for Bihter's immoral actions; but after a life of carrying the shame of Firdevs's obscene actions, for Bihter it is actually a salvation from the real punishment that would be the judgement of the world. ■



Fig. 11 | Bihter kisses Firdevs's cheek goodbye. "Veda" 01:08:19. Ay Yapım, 2010.

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