

Reading the Representation of Motherhood in a Literary Text: Gendered Perspectives of Greek and Turkish Preservice Teachers

Özlem Kanat

Ankara University, Ankara, Türkiye

Serdar Malkoç

Ankara University, Ankara, Türkiye

Marianna Missou

University of the Aegean, Rhodes, Greece

The Unquestionable Role of Women: Motherhood from Perspectives of Greek and Turkish Teacher Candidates

Abstract

This study comparatively examines the perspectives of pre-service female teachers in Türkiye and Greece on gender norms through Nazlı Eray's short story Monte Kristo. Eray's text, which interrogates themes of womanhood, motherhood, and freedom, is analyzed through participants' responses to six open-ended questions. The findings indicate that the interpretations of pre-service teachers in both countries cluster around two main themes: tensions surrounding the maternal role and resolution/irresolution. When evaluating the actions of the story's main character, Nobile, participants strongly relied on cultural norms that associate motherhood with self-sacrifice, responsibility, and childcare, and they largely judged the desire for liberation depicted in the story within the framework of ideal motherhood and moral obligations. While Turkish participants tended to make more explicit moral and normative evaluations, Greek participants offered relatively more

empathetic and contextualized interpretations. In both groups, the discourse of the “good mother” emerged as a powerful point of reference. Overall, the findings reveal that pre-service female teachers from two different countries both reproduce gender norms and, to a certain extent, are able to question them. The study suggests that gender awareness in teacher education should be strengthened not only at the level of representation, but also by focusing on less visible structures such as motherhood, care labor, and ideologies of womanhood.

Keywords: *gender, motherhood, text analysis, teacher education*

Introduction

Examining preservice teachers' perspectives on gender roles through literary texts offers an important opportunity to understand how they negotiate gender norms. Reading is a dynamic process in which individuals interpret a text in line with their worldview, knowledge base, and cultural experiences, while simultaneously being shaped by the broader social context (Berger, 2018). Elements such as individuals' social class, geographical location, gender, and ethnic identity not only influence how they read texts but also profoundly affect how they conceptualize the world (Berger, 2012).

In this regard, preservice teachers—who will serve as the educators of the future—constitute key intermediaries that bring texts (textbooks, children's literature, and other written or visual materials) into contact with students. Their mediating role goes beyond the transmission of knowledge; through classroom discourse and pedagogical choices, teachers assume a form of moral guidance that shapes students' value systems (Tom, 1984; Buzzelli & Johnston, 2001). Therefore, teachers' capacity to read, interpret, and transform the cultural codes

represented in texts directly influences whether gender norms are reproduced or critically transformed.

Indeed, the representations of women and men in written and printed texts are often constructed through gender-based stereotypes (Bajar, 2008; Kostas, 2018, 2021; Peterson & Lach, 1990; Rice, 2000; Wing, 1997; Yeoman, 1999). As a result, educational materials become powerful sites for the reproduction of gender norms and cultural ideologies (Blumberg, 2009; Erden, 2009; Esen, 2018; Filipović, 2018; Kostas, 2023; Taylor, 2003; Tsao, 2008). Teachers, through their creation of classroom discussions, the concepts they employ, and their selection of materials, hold the potential to either support deviations from these norms or reinforce the existing gender regime (Bajar, 2008; Stewart et al., 2021; Wing, 2007).

The literature shows that teachers can critically analyze gendered meanings in texts (Davies, 1993; Davies & Banks, 1992; Yeoman, 1999), yet it also reveals that when these meanings go unnoticed, they may be reproduced unintentionally (Filipović, 2018; Kostas, 2023). Moreover, even teachers who possess gender-equality awareness may not always find it easy to challenge or transform gender-biased texts (Biemmi, 2015; Tainio & Karvonen, 2015; Koster & Litosseliti, 2021). These findings suggest that teacher attitudes are a stronger variable than the structure of the texts themselves, underscoring the critical importance of the pedagogical subject in transforming normative structures within educational settings (Sunderland et al., 2000).

Gender Norms and Motherhood

Gender norms are the social rules that define acceptable and appropriate behaviors for women and men in a given society. These norms are embedded in both formal and informal institutions, internalized in individuals' minds, and

continuously produced and reproduced through social interaction. Gender norms shape access to resources and freedoms—often unequally for women and men—directly influencing individuals’ voices, agency, and self-perceptions (Cislaghi & Heise, 2020, p. 416). Although gender norms manifest as cognitive beliefs, these beliefs are simultaneously nourished by the material and cultural realities in which people live and, in turn, reshape those realities. Therefore, gender norms cannot be explained solely through individual preferences; they are strongly guided by social context and relationships (Ridgeway et al., 2004).

Among gender norms, one of the most resiliently preserved structures is the motherhood norm. In educational materials as well as in public discourse, motherhood is constructed as an ideal placed at the center of womanhood. Indeed, the sanctification of motherhood in textbooks and cultural narratives positions the female body as the bearer of both a biological destiny and a moral obligation (Thapa, 2023). Feminist literature demonstrates that this ideological construction of motherhood generates psychological and social pressure on women (Ambrosini & Stanghellini, 2012; Rich, 1976). This norm becomes not only a cultural expectation but also a socially sanctioned identity reinforced by political and economic systems (Neyer & Bernardi, 2011). Thus, motherhood transforms into an ideological role—passed down across generations—that legitimizes domestic responsibilities as women’s “natural duty.”

The motherhood norm is frequently idealized through the dichotomy of the “good mother/bad mother” (Maushart, 1999). Within this structure, motherhood is positioned as the “primary normative obligation,” and women who violate this norm face strong stigmatization. Negative societal judgments directed at voluntarily childfree women reveal that motherhood is perceived as a moral duty at the societal level, while voluntary childlessness is viewed as a threat to feminine identity. In this context, voluntary childlessness is judged more harshly

because it is perceived not merely as an outcome but as an intentional violation of a social norm (Szekeres, vd., 2023). Aracı İyiaydın and Ergun (2025) report that participants feel social pressure for not conforming to traditional gender roles; choosing a childfree life emerges as a complex process shaped by cultural norms, societal expectations, and individual agency. It is evident that the motherhood norm—situated at the core of feminine identity—is one of the most enduring gendered structures reproduced both in public discourse and at the institutional level. Educational environments are among the settings in which this norm is reproduced both explicitly and implicitly. For this reason, the awareness of pre-service teachers regarding gender norms—particularly the ideological construction of the motherhood norm—constitutes a critical component of efforts toward gender equality.

Theoretical Perspective

Gender consists of socially and culturally learned structures related to femininity and masculinity. According to Connell (1987), femininity and masculinity vary across time and place, which produces different forms of gendered divisions of labor. Thus, individuals raised within a specific sociocultural framework tend to acquire identities and desires traditionally associated with gender. This organization of gender is referred to as the *gender order*, a framework within which gender differences emerge, are reproduced, or are questioned (Connell, 1987). However, even within a single society, different social and cultural contexts, ethnic identities, ages, physical abilities, and social classes can significantly alter the meanings attributed to male and female bodies and to gender itself.

Gender encompasses the mechanisms through which masculine and feminine categories are produced and naturalized, but it can also function as an apparatus through which these categories are deconstructed and their assumed naturalness

is questioned (Butler, 2009, p. 75). Individuals' actions influence these processes by enacting gender performances that are either legitimized or challenged by social practices. West and Zimmerman (2009) emphasize that *doing gender* refers to a set of perceptual, interactional, and micropolitical activities that are socially guided and present particular engagements as expressions of supposedly masculine or feminine "natures" (p. 126). In this sense, the process of doing gender should be understood not merely as an individual performance but also as a phenomenon interwoven with institutional arrangements and social power dynamics.

Butler (1993) stresses that gender shapes individuals through particular norms across their lives within cultural contexts, yet it does not constitute a fixed category that rigidly and permanently defines one's identity. Therefore, gender is not simply an individual identity category but a process shaped by various power relations and normative structures. Gender roles, reproduced at both institutional and individual levels, may differ and transform across historical and cultural contexts. Yet such transformations are often constrained by dominant normative systems. Consequently, the dynamic and mutable nature of gender requires viewing it not as a stable identity category but as an ongoing, negotiated, and continually reproduced performance.

The Research Context: Greece and Türkiye

Greece and Turkey are two neighboring countries with historically fluctuating political relations in the international arena. In terms of educational policies, both demonstrate similarities shaped by their alignment processes with the European Union (EU). Each country signed the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in 1985. Since the 1980s, Greece has taken significant steps regarding educational programs and policies (Kostas, 2014). In 2019, Greece enacted Law No. 4604 to promote

substantive gender equality and prevent gender-based violence (Greek Government Gazette 50/t.1/26.3.2019). Article 17 of this law concerns the promotion of gender equality in education (p. 1461), including the integration of a gender dimension into the content and language of educational materials, the encouragement of non-stereotypical career choices, and the implementation of training and awareness programs for educators.

Similarly, in Turkey, initiatives aimed at strengthening gender equality in education emerged in the mid-2000s within the broader context of EU harmonization processes, including the revision of textbooks (Esen & Bağlı, 2002). However, these efforts have not progressed continuously and were interrupted for extended periods.

Although Greece undertook notable structural reforms following its accession to the EU, several aspects of its educational policy continue to attract academic criticism (Deliyanni-Kouimtzis, 2000; Kostas, 2023; Tsouroufli, 2002). For instance, Kitta and Cardona-Moltó (2022) argue that gender equality in Greek higher education is not sufficiently institutionalized. Kostas's (2023) study examining teachers' ability to recognize gendered discourses in textbooks shows that teachers are largely unaware of the prevalence of such discourse and do not make concrete efforts to mitigate its harmful effects on students' gender perceptions. Earlier work by Kostas (2014) found that teachers' attempts to address gender inequalities were insufficient, despite their stated sensitivity to gender issues. Her studies further demonstrate that educators tend to reinforce traditional gender discourses in everyday practice and reproduce hegemonic masculinity with the support of textbooks, while avoiding discussions of gender equality in the classroom. Tsouroufli (2002) similarly documented stereotypical behaviors toward girls and boys within classroom processes, findings later echoed in research on preservice teachers (Kokkinos et al., 2004).

Several studies also indicate the persistence of strong gender stereotypes in Greek textbooks (Gouvias & Alexopoulos, 2016; Papadakis, 2018). Women are frequently depicted as emotional, insecure and caring, while men are represented as composed and serious. Research highlights the significance of the adjectives used to describe each gender, reflecting gendered patterns of representation. Studies on English language textbooks similarly reveal the continuation of gender stereotypes. Collectively, this body of literature demonstrates that gender equality in Greek higher education is insufficiently addressed at both institutional and curricular levels, and that women continue to be portrayed as responsible for maintaining a clean household, taking care of children, and occupying low-profile social roles (Kitta & Cardona-Moltó, 2022).

In Turkey, research likewise points to gender blindness in both school textbooks and in the gender-related views and attitudes of teachers and preservice teachers. Deficiencies are evident across almost all fields of teacher education (Esen, 2013a; Esen, 2013b; Seçgin & Tural, 2011; Şahin et al., 2018). Preservice teachers exhibit a mix of approving, rejecting or resistant stances toward gender equality (Esen, 2013a; Esen, 2013b), and female preservice teachers often draw on widespread gender stereotypes reflecting the imposed roles of women as mothers and wives (Aslan, 2015). Studies on preservice teachers further show that women tend to hold more egalitarian views in some areas (Bayraktar & Yağan Güder, 2019; Seçgin & Tural, 2011). Conversely, some studies reveal that men adopt more traditional approaches than women (Arıcı, 2011; Esen, 2013; Yazıcı, 2016; Yılmaz et al., 2009). One study found that teachers held certain biases toward women, viewing them as emotional beings who should be protected due to their perceived vulnerability (Erbek & Coğaltay, 2022).

Textbooks and written materials frequently position women in domestic roles, thereby reproducing maternal identities (Esen & Bağlı, 2002; İncikabı & Ulusoy, 2019; Pamuk, 2021). Turkish studies show that women are largely depicted as “mothers,” “caregivers,” or “bearers of household responsibilities,” whereas men are represented in public and productive domains (Aydemir et al., 2022). UNESCO (2020) and OECD (2022) reports similarly conclude that women are predominantly linked to traditional roles such as caregiving, domestic labor, or child-rearing in educational materials. A large-scale analysis by Crawfurd et al. (2024) demonstrates that this trend is globally widespread, with textbooks anchoring women’s social roles within a motherhood-centered framework. In another extensive study, Jahle (2024) likewise shows that the representation of women and men in textbooks reflects institutionalized gender norms in education.

Islam and Asadullah (2018), through a comparative content analysis of English textbooks in four South and Southeast Asian countries (Malaysia, Indonesia, Pakistan and Bangladesh), found that female characters were significantly underrepresented. Women were associated with traditional, domestic and lower-prestige occupations (e.g., housewife, mother, secretary), while men were portrayed as powerful, prestigious and affluent.

Taken together, research findings from Greece and Turkey show strong continuity with broader European trends and align closely with studies conducted in Asian contexts. Although this study focuses on two national settings, the evidence suggests that institutions and social structures that speak about or act upon women tend to generate universal and recurrent themes across diverse cultural and geographical contexts.

Methodology

This study aims to explore and compare pre-service teachers' gender perspectives through the analysis of a literary text. To this end, the short story by feminist writer Nazlı Eray (1976), which critically engages with gender roles, was presented to pre-service teachers studying in two different countries. The selected story, *Monte Kristo* from the collection *Ah Bayim Ah*, was chosen for its multilayered structure and its interrogation of gender roles. The participants of the study consisted of pre-service teachers enrolled in teacher education programs in Greece and Turkey, who were asked to read the story and analyze its characters by responding to six open-ended questions.

Nazlı Eray has been known since her first published story in 1960 for featuring female protagonists and creating unconventional women characters in Turkish literature (Polat, 2017; Balık & Uğurlu, 2008). Prioritizing women's perspectives and identities (Balık & Uğurlu, 2008), Eray frequently addresses the existential dilemmas of urban, educated women, while also exploring the struggles of lower- and middle-class housewives. As a woman living within this society, Eray incorporates autobiographical elements—her experiences, emotions, and modes of being—into her stories. Although her writing displays both conscious and unconscious tendencies, it naturally reflects a gendered perspective informed by her experiences as a woman. *Monte Kristo* is one of her stories in which themes of motherhood, womanhood, sexuality, and freedom are treated sharply and strikingly. The story has a multilayered structure, enriched with repeated words and intertextual references. Its first layer revolves around the easily recognizable theme of forbidden love. The protagonist, Nebile, is an ordinary housewife living with her husband and two children in an apartment, appearing to belong to the middle class. Nebile is trapped—and even numbed—within a daily cycle shaped by the home, the market, shopping, housework, her children, her husband, and neighboring women. Her numbness continues until

the forbidden love she feels for Selahattin is revealed later in the story. The narrative allows the reader to feel Nebile's exhaustion and distress stemming from her interactions with her children and husband. One day, Nebile begins digging a tunnel from the small, narrow laundry room of her home toward the darkroom of Selahattin—a married man with children who develops photographic plates. The title *Monte Kristo* refers intertextually to Dumas's *The Count of Monte Cristo* and its central motif of escaping prison by digging a tunnel. Eray deepens Nebile's dilemmas by depicting her escape from one confinement to another, from one man to the next. By the end of the story, Nebile—expected to maintain her role as a housewife—abandons her children and husband, falling into another man's "prison" and thereby challenging the reader's gendered assumptions about motherhood. For all these reasons, *Monte Kristo* is considered a highly functional text for examining pre-service teachers' gender perspectives. It offers a meaningful basis for analyzing how pre-service teachers process gender stereotypes, how such stereotypes are activated, and how normative expectations are reproduced.

The short story *Monte Kristo* was translated from Turkish into Greek by the researchers and reviewed by a translation specialist. Participants were given three days to read the story and answer the prepared questions. Data were collected through open-ended questionnaires, as written responses allow participants to engage more deeply with the task of literary analysis. The questionnaire included the following questions:

1. What kind of person is Nebile in Nazlı Eray's *Monte Kristo*?
2. Do you find Nebile's attitudes and behaviors appropriate? Why or why not?
3. What kind of person is Selahattin in Nazlı Eray's *Monte Kristo*?
4. Do you find Selahattin's attitudes and behaviors appropriate? Why or why not?

5. Do you find Nebile's husband's attitudes and behaviors appropriate?
Why or why not?
6. How do you think Nebile can resolve her problem? Or is it unsolvable?

Data from the Greek pre-service teachers were collected in the fall semester of 2019. Data from the Turkish pre-service teachers were also collected in the fall semester of 2019, but data collection in Greece was delayed by one year due to extended research approval procedures and bureaucratic requirements.

Data Analysis

This study employed thematic analysis to interpret the data (Clarke & Braun, 2006). The process involved three researchers independently reading the responses and then collaboratively identifying themes within a feminist epistemological framework. In determining what each theme represented, the researchers focused on whether it captured a significant aspect of the research question or reflected recurring patterns of meaning relevant to the research focus. The study aimed to understand which points were most frequently repeated and emphasized by pre-service teachers regarding gender perspectives. Accordingly, the article adopts Clarke and Braun's (2006) latent thematic approach, which seeks to identify and examine underlying ideas, assumptions, conceptualizations, and ideologies that provide a theoretical foundation for the data's semantic content.

The three researchers collaboratively analyzed recurring themes through five synchronous online sessions. Cultural expectations surrounding gender norms related to motherhood provide a significant interpretive framework for understanding participants' evaluations of Nebile's actions. In this context, codes such as critical view of the mother role, maternal responsibility, reaction to child abandonment, unacceptable behavior, and lack of responsibility—

categorized under *motherly responsibility and childcare*—reflect the tension stemming from Nebile’s deviation from normative motherhood. These codes were therefore grouped under the theme “tension regarding the motherhood role.”

Similarly, the second category, *analysis of behavior and intention*, encompasses participants’ ways of questioning, critiquing, or making sense of Nebile’s actions. This category includes codes such as selfishness, negligence, and empathy toward her need to escape. The emerging theme reveals that the possible motivations behind Nebile’s abandonment of her maternal role conflict with societal expectations of motherhood. Thus, these have been interpreted as moral judgments arising from the tension surrounding the motherhood role.

Theme: Tension Regarding the Motherhood Role

↳ *Category 1: Motherly Responsibility and Childcare*

- Codes: Critical view, cultural values, shock of abandonment, perceived unacceptability, lack of responsibility

↳ *Category 2: Analysis of Behavior and Intention*

- Codes: Selfishness, neglect, escape—intention—understanding

Participants

None of the participants were married, involved in a legal or informal marital relationship, or had children. The Greek sample consisted of 20 female pre-service teachers enrolled in the Early Childhood and Primary Education Program at the University of the Aegean in Greece. The Turkish sample consisted of 20 female pre-service teachers studying in the Primary Education Bachelor’s Program at Ankara University in Turkey.

Researcher Positionality

In qualitative research, explicating the researcher's positionality is considered important for ensuring the transparency of the study (Berger, 2015). The origins of this study lie in the first author's effort to understand and question the processes of motherhood and womanhood—processes often shaped by the walls, obstacles, and constraints encountered in a woman's and a mother's life. Another motivation arose from the author's personal discomfort with the tension between maternal/female identity and societal norms, a tension experienced through her own background as a white-collar professional. The curiosity about how pre-service teachers interpret the female and male characters in Nazlı Eray's story also contributed to the conceptualization of the study. Identifying with the female protagonist both as a mother and a woman, and the belief that others might share a similar sense of empathy, further strengthened the rationale for the research.

Additionally, during the first author's stay in Greece, the idea emerged to administer the same story to a comparable group of students there; her accumulated observations and experiences regarding the two societies stimulated a desire for comparison. When she shared this idea with her Greek colleague, the colleague embraced it. Her colleague's own experiences—both as a woman and as a mother—of societal tensions and parallels, combined with curiosity about her students' perspectives on these issues, provided further motivation to conduct the study using data from both countries. Moreover, the first author's observations of cultural similarities and differences between Greek and Turkish students during her time as a visiting researcher strengthened her determination to pursue the study and heightened her curiosity about the findings it would yield.

Findings

Female preservice teachers enrolled in teacher education programs in two countries were asked to interpret the anti-hero and supporting characters in Nazlı Eray's 1976 short story *Monte Kristo*, included in her book *Ah Bayım Ah*. Participants were invited to comment on the responses of the protagonist Nebile and of another character, Selahattin Bey, to the circumstances presented in the story—specifically their choices, decisions, and actions—and to justify their interpretations with citations from the text.

The raw data were categorized into themes based on the perspectives through which participants interpreted the situations described in the story. The data are presented under two main themes: a) Tension Concerning the Role of Motherhood b) Solution / Lack of Solution

First and foremost, participants from both countries demonstrated a highly nuanced approach to Nebile's dilemmas within traditional codes of femininity. On the one hand, questioning Nebile's life and individual pursuits activated their suppressed attitudes toward traditional gender roles; on the other hand, their attempts to understand her complicated their perspectives. Comments in which motherhood overshadowed other interpretive contexts point to entrenched social judgments grounded in moral evaluations. Additionally, nuances regarding the issue of irresolution surfaced in differences between the two groups of participants. Their interpretations also appeared to oscillate between "being a mother" and "mothering," as understandings of motherhood grounded in care labor linked motherhood directly to childcare.

Tension Concerning the Role of Motherhood

Cultural expectations based on gender norms provided a significant framework for evaluating Nebile's actions. In this context, the participant responses

grouped under motherhood and childcare included codes such as maternal responsibility, reaction to child abandonment, unacceptable behavior, faulty mothering, and irresponsibility. These codes reflect the tension arising from Nebile's failure to meet cultural norms associated with motherhood, such as "sacrificing for one's child," "never abandoning one's child," and "always being present." Accordingly, these codes were clustered under the category "maternal responsibility and childcare."

A second category shaped around the role of motherhood focused on Nebile's behaviors and intentions. This category encompassed participants' ways of questioning, criticizing, or interpreting Nebile's actions. It included codes such as selfishness, indifference, and empathy toward her desire to escape. What stands out here is that the tension originates from the conflict between Nebile's departure from the maternal role and societal expectations regarding motherhood.

Maternal Responsibility and Childcare

Nebile's responses to the circumstances in the story were central to how female preservice teachers in both countries articulated their discourse on motherhood. Both Turkish and Greek participants expressed strong criticism toward Nebile's attempt to escape from her monotonous and tedious domestic life. Almost all participants across the two groups found Nebile's effort to distance herself from the traditional maternal role unjustifiable.

Some participant statements include:

"As a mother, I questioned Nebile." (TR1-Deniz)

"Nebile is selfish and thoughtless. She doesn't care about her children at all." (TR4-Sevgi)

“How could Nebile leave her children?!” (TR6-Fatma)

“A mother is sacred in every society and must strive for her children.” (TR20-Nisan)

“She seems to care about her children, but in reality she doesn’t.” (GR5-Panoiota)

“Leaving her children is unacceptable. Personally, I cannot accept someone abandoning their children!” (GR11-Foti)

“She should have taken her children with her from the very beginning.” (GR13-Elefteria)

“I can understand that she wanted to escape, but the right thing would have been to talk to her husband to try to resolve the situation. If that was not possible, she could have left the house but still kept in contact with her children.” (GR2-Merry)

Nebile’s dilemmas and emotional conflicts contradict participants’ idealized conceptualizations of motherhood. Accusations of “selfishness” became evident when ideal motherhood diverged from individual choices. All participants adopted attitudes aligned with the frequently emphasized “self-sacrificing mother” model in the literature. The “ideal mother,” who dedicates her life to her children, is incompatible with a mother who pursues her own desires. From the participants’ perspectives, childcare responsibilities were the defining element of motherhood, subjecting maternal choices to strong moral scrutiny. Turkish participants expressed particularly strong moral objections to scenarios that deviated from ideal motherhood:

“Even though she hears her husband’s and children’s voices every day, spending nights with another man is immoral.” (TR19-Güneş)

“She is destroying the family; anyone who destroys the family is immoral.” (TR18-Gözde)

“Nebile behaves like a woman of low character.” (TR12-Sevim)

“What Nebile does is immoral.” (TR10-Eda)

Greek participants’ comments also reflected tension around the maternal role, but the moral dimension was less emphatic:

“Her actions are not right because they lead not to happiness but to temporary pleasure.”

(GR3-Angeliki)

“Selahattin is generous but not honest; therefore he cannot be truly happy, nor can he make others happy.” (GR3-Angeliki)

“Nebile is a middle-class housewife who feels trapped in her lifestyle. Her daily routine consists of sweepers, varnish, soap, and laundry baskets.” (GR7-Maria)

Turkish participants evaluated Nebile’s behavior more explicitly through traditional gender roles. Their judgments relied on limited knowledge of domestic roles and were shaped by gender stereotypes, focusing on moral–ethical shortcomings rather than jointly assessing the implications of both characters’ actions.

Analysis of Behavior and Intention

Greek participants’ evaluations reflected relatively different perspectives on Nebile’s actions and provided nuanced interpretations regarding ethics and gender roles. Their comments on Nebile’s pursuit of happiness revealed the societal expectation that a woman’s well-being depends on fulfilling her traditional roles.

“No matter how unhappy she is, she could have at least left a note to her husband to let him know she was safe.” (GR1-Katherina)

They also emphasized that Selahattin’s apparent generosity did not equate to honesty, and they highlighted Nebile’s sense of entrapment due to domestic responsibilities:

“Her husband also made mistakes; he neglected his wife. No matter how tired he is, he should make time for his family.” (GR1-Katherina)

Participants acknowledged Nebile's search for personal meaning yet pointed to the ethical dilemmas stemming from her abandonment of her children. They also noted that women's tendency to believe men's "sweet words" and "generous gestures" intersects with gender stereotypes that shape relational dynamics.

Solution / Lack of Solution

Participants' proposed solutions regarding Nebile and the other characters included both similarities and differences. Motherhood emerged as a focal point where women's attempts to balance childcare and working life were reflected through contradictory discourses.

Some participants from both Turkey and Greece adopted empathy-based approaches:

"I do not completely blame either the husband or Nebile; both needed to invest in their marriage." (GR20-Kokino)

"Nebile should convince Selahattin to leave the depot, and they should live their love freely; otherwise, she should start a new life away from both men." (GR5-Panoiota)

"Nebile's problem is not unsolvable. She can resolve it through dialogue." (GR9-Elfida)

Greek participants suggested solutions such as family therapy, while Turkish participants expressed more cautious empathy:

"Nebile is trapped in routine chores, household responsibilities, and childcare, unable to find time for herself." (TR5-Nergis)

"If a person is this unhappy where they are, they should accept it." (TR18-Gözde)

Some Turkish participants considered Nebile's desire to escape "unnecessary" because she already had what they perceived as a good life. The responses from both groups clearly demonstrate the difficulty in resolving the issue.

Conclusion and Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that the female preservice teachers engaged in a multilayered reading of the story, interpreting Nebile and the other characters not only through the plot but also through their own cultural, ethical, and social positioning. Although the participants' responses appeared to revolve around individual choices and parenting roles on the surface, they also revealed the silent yet powerful influence of normative frameworks such as femininity, motherhood, family, and loyalty.

Interpretations of Nebile's actions particularly centered on the tension between the culturally exalted meaning of motherhood and women's individual freedom and subjective needs. The frequent recourse to moral norms when evaluating the character suggests that motherhood functions not only as a form of care labor but also as a strong moral category. Despite not being mothers themselves, the participants adhered strongly to idealized notions of motherhood, highlighting how deeply ingrained cultural constructions of femininity and motherhood operate at both cognitive and emotional levels.

At this point, the discourse of ideal motherhood becomes especially significant. As Rich (1976) argues, motherhood is both a patriarchal institution that restricts women (motherhood) and a practice shaped by women's own experiences that holds the potential for transformation (mothering). Thus, while motherhood regulates women's behavior through cultural mechanisms, women's lived experiences also carry the capacity to redefine it. Participants' criticisms of child-rearing practices may unintentionally reproduce the dominant ideology that a woman's self-realization is only possible through childbirth and care labor (Hays, 1996). This also reflects how prevailing norms of ideal motherhood exert pressure on women's mothering practices by aligning them with processes of public observation, judgment, and regulation (Schmidt et al., 2023).

Most participants evaluated Nebile's search for happiness through the lens of "being a good mother" and "being a good wife," interpreting her personal desires within moral boundaries—an approach that directly corresponds with Hays's (1996) concept of "intensive mothering." Other studies similarly show that female preservice teachers tend to reinforce or reproduce the discourse of motherhood and its association with childcare (Acar-Erdol et al., 2022; Gündoğan & Taşdere, 2021; Çakır & Günel, 2023; Persson, 2021). For instance, Çakır and Günel (2023) found that women perceive their lifestyles as legitimate only when aligned with patriarchal gender roles. Acar-Erdol et al. (2022) reported that female preservice teachers define motherhood through childcare, love, and affection, whereas fatherhood is understood as role-modelling. Kandiyoti (2015) showed that success for women is equated with being a good wife and a good mother, while Gündoğan and Taşdere (2021) found that participants associated women with words such as "mother," "self-sacrificing," and "child," and men with "father," "work," and "money." Likewise, Athanassiadou (2002) noted that young women may prioritize motherhood when planning their adult lives.

In contrast, some participants interpreted Nebile's choices as expressions of personal freedom. Her attempt to resist social norms and pursue her own meaning in life can be read as an effort to break away from patriarchal roles. However, because this pursuit involved leaving her children, it created a sharp ethical dilemma for the participants. As Miller (2007) argues, such conflicts make visible the gap between the idealized discourse of motherhood and the lived realities of mothering. Efforts to empathize with Nebile acknowledged her longing for personal fulfillment but viewed the violation of "good motherhood" norms as unacceptable—revealing how even women's right to self-determination is constrained by the ideology of motherhood.

Evaluations of Selahattin also showed the reproduction of gender-based moral frameworks. While men's "generous" or "protective" actions were viewed positively, women's self-oriented choices were labelled as "selfish" or "irresponsible." This aligns with O'Brien's (2007) argument that the moral discourse surrounding love and care liberates men while restricting women.

Most participants defined Nebile's decision to leave her children as "bad motherhood." As Maier (2015) notes, even mundane household tasks can become indicators of ideal motherhood. Miller (2007) and Constantinou et al. (2021) show that maternal guilt serves as a regulatory force in women's lives. Collins (2021) further argues that the myth of the "never good enough mother" amplifies this guilt. James (2010) highlights a similar burden for teacher-mothers, who are expected to constantly self-sacrifice or risk being judged as uncaring. Thus, gendered care labor becomes an invisible yet persistent norm expected of women both in the family and in the teaching profession (Haynes, 2017; Ullah & Skelton, 2013).

Comparing the two groups, Greek participants tended to offer more flexible interpretations of Nebile's behavior, acknowledging her emotional struggles and domestic burdens rather than rejecting her actions outright. In contrast, Turkish participants evaluated the situation through stricter moral boundaries tied to motherhood and family. This flexibility among Greek participants may stem from cultural differences or a more distanced, aesthetic engagement with the text. For Turkish participants, attempts to understand Nebile may have been perceived as condoning her actions, leading to more rigid and dismissive judgments. Further research is required to determine which factor is more influential; however, current findings clearly show that gender norms strongly shape perceptions in both groups.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that societal gender norms significantly influence preservice teachers' value judgments. However, existing literature (Tantekin-Erden, 2009; Engebretson, 2016) provides evidence that gender-focused awareness-raising activities have the potential to transform preservice teachers' perspectives. The diverse views observed among participants may represent early signs of such transformational potential.

This study reveals that female preservice teachers both reproduce and, to some extent, question gendered norms surrounding motherhood. Motherhood continues to function as a central gendered norm in the construction of women's identities, yet it also holds the potential to be redefined through individual ethical reflection.

The results suggest that gender studies within teacher education programs should extend beyond issues of representation and include less visible dimensions such as motherhood and care labor. Dialogic reading practices (Flecha et al., 2010) may offer opportunities to foster critical engagement with texts addressing motherhood and childcare.

Evaluating these findings in the context of teacher education is essential, as the literature provides strong evidence for the transformative potential of such programs. Studies show that preservice teachers exposed to gender-focused coursework demonstrate positive attitudinal changes (Tantekin-Erden, 2009), and that experiences and course content significantly influence gender perceptions (Malewski & Phillon, 2009; Markauskaite, 2006). Moreover, teachers' beliefs affect their professional practices (Cushman, 2012). Nonetheless, persistent gaps in gender education within preservice programs must still be addressed (Engebretson, 2016).

Although increased representation of women in textbooks is often cited as progress, the effectiveness of these changes remains debated (Deliyanni-Kouimtzis, 2000). More importantly, narratives that confine women to a sanctified space of motherhood require critical scrutiny. Including non-traditional maternal figures in textbooks, stories, and fairy tales—such as women who work late, do not love cooking, or lack time for domestic tasks—may help challenge entrenched stereotypes. Indeed, some studies show the inclusion of such characters in educational materials (Beimin, 2015).

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Author Details

Dr. Özlem Kanat (corresponding author)

Educational Sciences Faculty, Department of Turkish Language and Social Sciences Education, Ankara, University, Ankara, Türkiye

ORCID: 0000-0002-9071-2700

Dr. Serdar Malkoç

Educational Sciences Faculty, Department of Turkish Language and Social Sciences Education, Ankara, University, Ankara, Türkiye

ORCID: 0000-0003-4169-1082

Dr. Marianna Missou

School of Humanities, Department of Preschool Education, University of the Aegean, Rhodes, Greece

ORCID: 0000-0001-9021-2530