

A REVIEW OF PSYCHOLOGICAL THEMES IN “MASUMLAR APARTMANI” SERIES

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ABSTRACT

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Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD), Trauma, Intergenerational trauma, Childhood abuse, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD).

Original research



This article presents a broad scientific review of the Turkish TV series "Masumlar Apartmanı" (The Innocents), which aired on TRT1 in 2020-2022. The series, adapted from Gülseren Budayıcıoğlu's book "Inside the Medallion", explores deep-rooted psychological trauma, obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), and generational transmission. Using a psychological and narrative analysis approach, this article examines how the series portrays mental disorders, their accuracy in representation, the public impact of such a series on mental health awareness. Safiye's depiction of OCD challenges misconceptions, highlighting its debilitating impact beyond mere cleanliness. Anxiety and trauma-related disorders manifest themselves in many characters, including Gülben's learned helplessness, Neriman's self-harm, and Han's compulsive behaviors. The series highlights the intergenerational transmission of trauma, showing how unresolved emotional wounds perpetuate psychological struggles. This series immerses viewers in the psychological depth of its characters through flashbacks, cinematography, symbolic storytelling, instilling empathy and understanding. The series has played a significant role in changing public attitudes towards mental health in Türkiye, fostering debate, and raising awareness. While it has had a positive impact on viewers by normalizing mental health struggles and inspiring some to seek help, it also raises questions about the media's responsibility in portraying such sensitive topics. This article provides an in-depth analysis of "Masumlar Apartmanı" to highlight its social impact and underscore the importance of accurate and empathetic representations of mental health in popular culture.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The representation of mental health in the media plays a crucial role in shaping public opinion, reducing stigma, and raising awareness about mental disorders. "Masumlar Apartmanı" is widely recognized for its raw

and realistic portrayal of mental health issues, particularly OCD, anxiety disorders, and the lasting effects of childhood trauma. By analyzing character development, storytelling techniques, and psychological theories, this article aims to assess the series' contribution to mental health discourse.

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The series has received widespread attention for its raw and realistic portrayal of mental health issues, particularly OCD, anxiety disorders, and the transmission of trauma across generations. Through a character-driven narrative, *Masumlar Apartmanı* depicts how unresolved childhood trauma impacts the emotional and psychological lives of its adult characters. Rather than simplifying mental health struggles into simple narrative patterns, the series explores the complexities of its characters' psychological states and draws connections between past trauma and present-day coping mechanisms. The series' impact extends beyond entertainment; it has played a significant role in normalizing discussions of mental health in Turkish society, encouraging viewers to engage more openly with the issue of mental well-being.

As society's attitudes toward mental health continue to evolve, *Masumlar Apartmanı* offers an insightful and emotionally charged take on how psychological disorders such as OCD and PTSD shape individuals' lives. This article aims to assess the series' contribution to the ongoing discourse on mental health by analyzing the depiction of various mental health conditions, the accuracy of these representations, and the series' role in influencing public awareness. Specifically, this article examines how the series challenges traditional views of mental illness, particularly OCD, by portraying it as a complex, multidimensional condition that goes far beyond common misconceptions.

Furthermore, the representation of mental health in "*Masumlar Apartmanı*" is significant because it not only highlights the internal struggles of the characters, but also depicts the social and familial contexts that contribute to the development and perpetuation of mental health disorders. By incorporating themes of intergenerational trauma and the cyclical nature of psychological wounds, the series emphasizes the importance of addressing emotional distress not only at the individual level, but also within the framework of the family and community. Through this psychological and narrative analysis, this article will examine how the series uses character development, symbolic storytelling, and cinematic techniques to build empathy and increase understanding of the complexities of mental health. By closely examining the portrayal of OCD, anxiety disorders, and trauma-related conditions, the article aims to highlight the importance of accurate and sensitive media portrayals of mental health issues and their broader societal impacts. In particular, it will focus on how *Masumlar Apartmanı* has contributed to raising awareness, removing the stigma of mental health and encouraging open dialogue about mental wellbeing in Turkish society.

In a society where mental health struggles are often downplayed or misunderstood, portrayals of such complex conditions in mainstream media can encourage viewers to reconsider their perceptions of mental illness and provide a window into the emotional realities faced by those living with these disorders. By providing a balanced and realistic portrayal of mental health issues, *Masumlar Apartmanı* is not only an important cultural

product, but also a tool for social change that encourages greater empathy and understanding of psychological challenges in a world where mental health awareness continues to be important.

1.1 Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD) in "Masumlar Apartmanı"

Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD) is a chronic mental health condition characterized by intrusive thoughts (obsessions) and repetitive behaviors or mental rituals (compulsions) aimed at reducing anxiety. In "*Masumlar Apartmanı*", OCD is primarily portrayed through the character of Safiye, whose life is dominated by excessive cleaning rituals, obsessive fears of contamination, and an intense need for order and control. Safiye's compulsions include excessive hand-washing, repeated cleaning of household items, and an inability to tolerate physical contact with others. These behaviors stem from deep-seated anxiety and traumatic childhood experiences, particularly psychological abuse from her mother. Her obsessive need to maintain a sterile environment serves as a coping mechanism for her sense of control in an otherwise chaotic world.

The portrayal of OCD in "*Masumlar Apartmanı*" is consistent with clinical research, which suggests that early life trauma and environmental stressors can contribute to the onset and severity of OCD symptoms (Adams et al., 2018). Safiye's situation reflects the real-life struggles of individuals with OCD, highlighting the emotional distress, social isolation, and disrupted daily activities that often accompany the disorder. The series effectively debunks misconceptions about OCD by moving beyond the stereotype of simple perfectionism or cleanliness. Instead, it presents the condition as a debilitating mental illness that significantly impacts a person's quality of life. In doing so, "*Masumlar Apartmanı*" raises awareness about the severity of OCD and emphasizes the importance of psychological support and intervention.

1.2 Anxiety and trauma-related disorders

Anxiety and trauma-related disorders are central to this series and shape the psychological struggles of several of the main characters. The series effectively portrays the profound impact of past traumatic experiences on present behavior, highlighting conditions such as generalized anxiety disorder (GAD), posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and self-harming behaviors.

One of the main characters, Gülben, exhibits symptoms of chronic anxiety and learned helplessness, a psychological condition in which a person feels powerless to change their circumstances due to repeated exposure to stressful situations (Holovchenko, 2022). As a result of her authoritarian mother's emotional neglect and control, Gülben struggles with extreme self-doubt and social anxiety. Her constant need for validation and approval, combined with her fear of rejection, suggests characteristics associated with dependent personality disorder (DPD).

In addition, Gülben experiences nocturnal enuresis (bedwetting). This condition intensifies her feelings of inferiority and dependency, creating a cycle of emotional distress that significantly impacts her interpersonal relationships.

The youngest sibling, Nariman, struggles with self-harming behaviors, particularly scratching and cutting herself in times of distress. Self-harm is often associated with emotional dysregulation and serves as an inappropriate coping mechanism to manage intense psychological pain (Yavuz et al., 2022). Her condition is further exacerbated by a hostile home environment lacking emotional support and validation.

From a clinical perspective, self-harm is often associated with trauma-related disorders, including borderline personality disorder (BPD) and PTSD (McFetridge et al., 2015). Nariman's actions reflect an attempt to externalize her inner distress, seeking temporary relief from overwhelming emotions. However, the lack of psychological intervention within the story highlights the importance of professional support in addressing self-harming behaviors.

The male character, Han, exhibits compulsive behaviors and unstable emotional responses that are rooted in childhood trauma. His tendency to collect his family and obsessively observe suggests an increased need for control, a common response in individuals with PTSD and trauma-related anxiety (Wald & Taylor, 2008). Han's struggles illustrate how unresolved trauma can manifest itself in compulsive behaviors that serve as emotional regulation mechanisms. The portrayal of anxiety and trauma-related disorders in this series aligns with clinical psychological theories and research. The series highlights the diverse ways in which trauma manifests itself—from compulsive behaviors to social withdrawal and self-harm. By portraying these conditions with emotional depth and realism, "Masumlar Apartmanı" contributes to public awareness of mental health issues and encourages discussion about the importance of psychological support and therapy in trauma recovery.

1.3 The intergenerational transmission of trauma

A central theme in "Masumlar Apartmanı" is the concept of intergenerational transmission of trauma. This psychological phenomenon often occurs when unresolved traumatic experiences are passed down from one generation to the next. In the series, this theme is intricately woven into the lives of the characters, particularly Safiye, Gülben, and Han, who each exhibit behaviors and mental health struggles stemming from their childhood experiences, particularly those shaped by their mothers' authoritative and abusive tendencies.

The notion that trauma can be passed down across generations is well documented in the psychological literature. Studies have shown that children of individuals who have experienced trauma, such as violence, war, or neglect, can also suffer from psychological and emotional difficulties (Lang & Gartstein, 2017). This transmission can take several forms: learned behaviors,

inherited stress responses, and even genetic changes that affect future generations' responses to stress.

In the series, the characters' mental health struggles and compulsive behaviors stem from the influence of their mothers. Her mother's strict, controlling approach to parenting, marked by neglect and emotional abuse, is a critical component of the trauma experienced by the siblings. The series highlights how these unresolved childhood experiences create psychological scars that continue into adulthood, shaping their mental health and relationships.

Safiye's trauma: Safiye's obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) is a direct manifestation of her childhood trauma, particularly the emotional abuse she suffered from her mother. Her mother's inordinate need for cleanliness and control over her environment instilled in Safiye a fear of contamination and an obsessive need for order. As an adult, Safiye's compulsions, such as excessive handwashing, cleanliness, and avoidance of physical contact, are a way of coping with the deep anxiety and lack of control she experienced as a child. Her behavior highlights the transmission of trauma in a very concrete way: she repeats the patterns of control and cleanliness she learned from her mother, which are associated with feelings of worthlessness and emotional instability.

Gülben's struggles: Similarly, Gulba's anxiety and learned helplessness are influenced by her mother's emotional neglect and authoritarian parenting. Gulba's constant need for validation and approval stems from her childhood experiences where emotional support was lacking and fear of rejection was omnipresent. The emotional neglect she experienced in her youth led to chronic anxiety, and her tendency to seek validation from others can be seen as an attempt to fill the emotional void left by her mother. Her situation underscores the theory that emotionally neglected children often internalize feelings of worthlessness and inadequacy, which continue to affect their mental health into adulthood.

Han's emotional repression: The youngest brother, Han, also struggles with his own trauma, which manifests itself in his obsessive need for control and privacy. Despite being protective of his siblings, Han struggles with emotional repression and unresolved anger from childhood. His compulsive behaviors—such as hoarding and obsessively checking his family—can be seen as a coping mechanism to deal with the lack of control she experienced growing up. Han's trauma is transmitted differently from her sisters - rather than displaying overt compulsions like Safiye or Gulben, Han's trauma is reflected in her emotional withdrawal, desire to maintain tight control over her surroundings, and difficulty expressing her emotions.

The intergenerational transmission of trauma in this series also highlights how family dynamics shaped by one generation's trauma affect subsequent generations. The mother's unresolved emotional pain from her own traumatic experiences is reflected in her parenting style. The cycle of trauma continues as the mother's trauma is rehabilitated, and as a result, her children grow up with

emotional wounds from which she herself has never healed.

Psychological research on intergenerational trauma. This description is consistent with research on the intergenerational transmission of trauma. According to research by Bowers and Yehuda (2015), children of traumatized parents often exhibit symptoms of anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), which indirectly reflect the traumatic experiences they were exposed to. Trauma can not only be transmitted through behavioral patterns, but can also affect biological mechanisms such as stress hormones and genetic expression, leading to increased vulnerability to mental health problems in subsequent generations (Lang & Gartstein, 2017).

2. NARRATIVE TECHNIQUES AND REALISM IN MENTAL HEALTH PORTRAYAL

2.1 Flashback methods

Flashbacks play a significant role in “Masumlar Apartmani,” serving as a narrative device that connects past trauma with present-day behavior. Rather than relying on exposition, the series seamlessly weaves together these nonlinear sequences to uncover the origins of each character’s psychological struggles. By revisiting key childhood moments such as Safiye’s harsh upbringing, Gülben’s emotional neglect, and Neriman’s exposure to family dysfunction, viewers gain a deeper understanding of how early experiences shape adult coping mechanisms. From a psychological perspective, flashbacks reflect the resurgence of traumatic memories in individuals with posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) or anxiety-related disorders (Brewin, 2015). The series accurately portrays how unresolved trauma does not remain in the past but continues to influence thoughts, behaviors, and interpersonal relationships in the present. By incorporating these flashbacks into emotionally charged moments, the show reinforces the concept of emotional triggers—events that cause past distress, often leading to compulsive or avoidant behaviors.

Furthermore, the use of warm, nostalgic tones in positive childhood memories contrasts sharply with the darker, claustrophobic visuals in traumatic flashbacks, emphasizing the duality of past experiences. This technique not only adds depth to the story, but also aligns with psychological theories of memory processing, which posit that traumatic memories tend to be fragmented and emotionally charged (Wessel et al., 2020).

Overall, “Masumlar Apartmani” uses flashbacks not only as a storytelling device, but also as a means to highlight the long-lasting effects of trauma, offering viewers a deeper understanding of mental health struggles

2.2 Character-driven storytelling

Unlike traditional dramas that use mental health struggles as mere plot devices, “Masumlar Apartmani” intricately weaves psychological depth into its character arcs. Each

character’s mental state is not just a background element, but also a driving force behind their decisions, relationships, and conflicts. The series avoids oversimplification by presenting mental disorders as multifaceted, evolving conditions rather than static symptoms. Safiye’s psychological behaviors dictate her daily routine and social relationships, creating both internal and external conflicts that shape the course of the story. Gülben’s addiction and emotional fragility develop over time, showing how trauma and learned helplessness affect relationships. Han’s forced hoarding and secrecy add layers of complexity, depicting how trauma manifests in different ways. By placing psychological struggles at the core of its narrative, the series fosters empathy and offers a more authentic presentation of mental health issues in everyday life.

2.3 Symbolism and cinematography

The series uses powerful visual storytelling techniques to enhance psychological depth. The apartment itself serves as a metaphor for both physical and emotional confinement. The dimly lit, claustrophobic interiors reflect the characters’ entrapment in their own minds, reinforcing themes of isolation and psychological stagnation. The use of shadows and muted color palettes evoke a sense of melancholy and reinforce the weight of past trauma.

Safiye’s obsession with cleanliness is visually emphasized through the repeated imagery of soap, water, and white fabrics. The color white, often associated with purity and order, paradoxically symbolizes Safiye’s distress, as her compulsions to maintain cleanliness stem from deep trauma rather than a desire for hygiene. Frequent close-ups of her hands scrubbing surfaces or washing objects emphasize the intensity of her compulsions and the physical impact of her disorder.

The series also uses mirrors to explore duality and self-awareness. The characters often face each other in mirrors at moments of psychological crisis, symbolizing their inner struggles and fractured identities. Furthermore, the flashbacks are seamlessly integrated with contemporary scenes using smooth transitions, reinforcing the inescapable influence of childhood experiences on adult behavior. The cinematography, combined with these symbolic elements, creates a deeply immersive psychological atmosphere that allows the audience to experience the characters’ emotions on a visceral level (Lotman, 2016). Through careful visual composition, “Masumlar Apartmani” transforms everyday objects and spaces into powerful depictions of mental turmoil, making its story even more compelling and emotionally resonant.

3. SOCIETAL IMPACT AND MENTAL HEALTH AWARENESS

Mental health stigma remains a significant barrier to education, diagnosis, and treatment in many societies,

including Türkiye. “Masumlar Apartmanı” has played a significant role in combating misconceptions about psychological disorders, particularly OCD, anxiety, and trauma-related conditions. By portraying these conditions with depth and authenticity, the series has helped shift public perceptions of mental illness from seeing it as a personal weakness to understanding it as a legitimate medical condition that requires empathy and professional support. The series’ impact extends beyond entertainment; it has sparked national conversations about mental health, both in mainstream media and on social platforms. Many viewers have expressed that they have just recognized their own symptoms through the characters’ struggles, leading some to seek psychological help. This increased awareness is helping to normalize discussions about mental health, encouraging a more supportive and informed society.

4. PUBLIC RECEPTION AND PSYCHOLOGICAL CONSULTATION

The public reception of “Masumlar Apartmanı” has been very positive, particularly in Türkiye, for its role in raising awareness of mental health issues. The series resonated with a large segment of the population, especially individuals whose struggles were reflected in the characters. It is likely that the number of individuals seeking psychological counseling, especially for conditions such as obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) and trauma-related disorders, has increased significantly since the show aired.

The portrayal of OCD and the struggles of characters like Safiye have encouraged people to recognize similar behaviors in themselves and seek professional help. This led to a broader public conversation about mental health, breaking down some of the societal barriers that traditionally prevent people from seeking treatment.

However, while the show has sparked important conversations, the depiction of mental health struggles, especially extreme cases, can be triggering for some viewers. Therefore, it is important that future media portrayals of mental health not only educate, but also offer resources for viewers seeking help.

Overall, this series has played a significant role in changing the narrative around mental health not only in Turkish society, but also in the world, facilitating greater understanding, empathy, and action for mental well-being.

5. DISCUSSION

While it offers an insightful realistic portrayal of mental health issues, it is important to address certain limitations and ethical considerations in its depiction.

Risk of triggering vulnerable audiences. The intense and often distressing portrayal of psychological disorders, such as OCD and self-harm, could trigger negative emotional responses from vulnerable viewers, particularly those with similar mental health struggles (Norouzi et al., 2024). Scenes depicting compulsive behaviors, extreme anxiety, and self-injurious actions may be distressing for individuals with mental health conditions, potentially exacerbating feelings of isolation.

Limited depiction of treatment and recovery. While the show accurately portrays the psychological struggles of its characters, it fails to provide realistic depictions of therapeutic interventions. The series does not provide a substantive portrayal of the recovery process or therapy as a means of managing a mental health condition. In many cases, the characters' conditions are portrayed in a difficult way, which can contribute to a fatalistic view of mental illness. A more balanced portrayal that includes positive depictions of professional treatment and recovery would have helped viewers understand that recovery is possible with the right care and support.

Ethical implications of sensationalizing trauma. This approach can unintentionally reinforce harmful stereotypes about victims of abuse or mental illness (Webermann & Brand, 2017). By focusing too much on extreme manifestations of trauma (such as self-harm, unstable behavior, or obsessive rituals), the show can perpetuate the idea that trauma survivors are defined solely by their past experiences, rather than presenting them as multifaceted individuals capable of growth, healing, and resilience.

It is also important for the series to convey a clear message to viewers that while trauma can be deeply affecting, it does not define a person’s entire being. Portraying characters as capable of healing through ongoing and professional treatment or support networks will help balance the narrative, reinforcing that there is hope and a path to recovery, even after profound suffering.

Social responsibility in mental health representation. Given the show’s widespread popularity, “Masumlar Apartmanı” has had a significant impact on shaping public understanding of mental health. With this impact comes a social responsibility to present mental health issues in a way that fosters empathy, reduces stigma, and encourages constructive conversations about mental health treatment (Ahad et al., 2023). The series has a unique opportunity to not only provide a window into the lives of those struggling with mental illness, but also to advocate for open dialogue about appropriate treatment, community support, and help-seeking.

By acknowledging these limitations and ethical considerations, future media portrayals of mental health can help balance realism with sensitivity, and contribute to a more nuanced and positive understanding of psychological disorders.

6. CONCLUSION

To sum up, “Masumlar Apartmani” is a significant work that both challenges and illuminates society’s views on mental health. It manages to portray the complexities of trauma, OCD, and anxiety disorders with empathy and realism, ultimately helping to provide a deeper understanding of the psychological struggles that many people face. By confronting the stigma surrounding mental health and advocating for emotional support and professional treatment, the series paves the way for more

inclusive and compassionate portrayals of mental illness in media. As mental health awareness continues to grow, future productions can build on the foundation established by The Innocents, offering not only a reflection of mental health issues, but also a vision of healing, resilience, and hope for those affected by psychological struggles.

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