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To cite this article: George Taxidis (2021) Waking Up in Someone Else's Bed: On *Ethos* (*Bir Başkadır*), Netflix, Turkey, 2020, *Studies in Gender and Sexuality*, 22:4, 338-340, DOI: 10.1080/15240657.2021.1996743

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/15240657.2021.1996743>



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Published online: 17 Dec 2021.



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Waking Up in Someone Else's Bed: On *Ethos* (*Bir Başkadır*), Netflix, Turkey, 2020

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ABSTRACT

The Turkish Netflix series *Ethos* takes a sensitive look at the quagmire that is alterity, both within and outside of psychotherapy. It offers an opportunity to challenge the rigid narratives we use to cope with the unknown and with otherness, as well as problematizing binaries such as religious/secular, primitive/civilized, client/therapist.

Having grown up in Greece, a country that was previously under Ottoman rule for four centuries, I'm familiar with some of the aesthetics and affective repertoire of the characters of Turkish Netflix drama series *Ethos* (*Bir Başkadır*). For instance, the house of the main protagonists (siblings Meryem and Yasin) is very similar to my grandparents' house, and Ruhiye making a particular "ooch" sound, as an expression of affection for her son, viscerally brings me back to my early childhood. More painfully, I'm familiar with—and have been straitjacketed by—the kinds of east Mediterranean masculine paradigms represented in *Ethos*: the violent, oppressive, and emotionally cut off patriarchs, as well as the gentle, wise, and calm ones. I recognize these similarities, in defiance of the Greek nationalist narratives I was taught as a child, which see Turks only as past conqueror, barbarian, primitive.

There are, of course, elements that I and most non-Turkish viewers are much less familiar with, especially what I am told are recognizable references to Erdogan's Justice and Development Party (AKP); the history of Islam and Kemalism; or the particular interplay between religion, class, and gender in Turkey. In this sense I find myself in a predicament similar to that of the characters themselves, who grapple with the complexity of encountering otherness (*Bir Başkadır* is Turkish for "something else," as in, something exceptional—perhaps a playful valorizing of otherness), stumbling, making assumptions, alienating each other, but also occasionally meeting more meaningfully. As they do so, they oscillate between hysterical misery and common unhappiness, as Freud would put it.

Ethos draws heavily from classical psychoanalysis, as well as, refreshingly, Jungian psychology—an indication of the current revival of interest in the latter. Within the first few minutes, we're in a therapist's consulting room, where Meryem, a young hijabi, is tentatively trying to work out what psychotherapy is. Peri, her upper-class therapist, sees Meryem as a classical Freudian patient, suffering from a medically unexplained symptom—fainting spells—and she comes to the neat formulation that they are caused by her repressed sexual desire toward Sinan, whose house Meryem cleans for a living.

Psychoanalysis is only one of many systems of thinking that the characters rely on to order their worlds, obtain some certainty, and regulate their affective life and interpersonal relationships. "She doesn't know how to give thanks to God," says Meryem about her sister-in-law's depression. Meanwhile, Peri believes that passionately falling in love is simply anima/animus projection. "Countertransference" is how Gülbin, Peri's supervisor, describes Peri's prejudice toward Meryem. "God wanted to take her," says the Hodja (Islamic teacher), when he loses his wife, although a little later he does manage to access his grief, crying in a childlike way. Hilmi, who is involved in the local

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mosque, has just discovered Jung, and will talk to anyone who is willing to listen (and to some who are not) about him. His prolonged Jungian *spiel* to his friends is only momentarily interrupted by becoming mesmerized by Meryem walking past. Thinking is juxtaposed with feeling, or even enchantment, in ways that Jung does have something to say about, especially in his Red Book. Anyone who has ever felt that a newly discovered political school of thought, religion, philosophy, or psychological theory can explain almost everything around them will recognize themselves in Hilmi.

There are multiple moments of disconnectedness activated by an overadherence to these belief systems. “You’re going to drive me mad,” Yasin shouts at Ruhiye, his severely depressed wife, when he sees her pray (but not in the direction of Mecca). Often, the protagonists take for granted that others see things in the way they do, as in Meryem’s absent-minded rhetorical question—“Who wouldn’t want to be married?”—or Peri’s confident assertion that she and Gülbin live in a world far removed from Meryem’s religious milieu, only to discover that Gülbin’s sister is a hijabi.

When Sinan asks Gülbin whether she’d stay over at his flat, she replies that she’d rather wake up in her own bed. Indeed, when she wakes up in his, she seems disoriented. Encountering otherness feels a little like not waking up in one’s own bed, sometimes exciting and exotic (perhaps that’s how Meryem sees Sinan’s swanky flat), at others simply wrong, uncomfortable, even painful. The bed is supposedly the site of intimacy and letting go. One woman routinely goes to bed before her husband, to avoid being woken up by his snoring. Another wakes up from a dream that her husband shows little interest in—to his own detriment, as it would have helped him see that his wife is afraid of losing him, just as he is afraid of losing her.

Ethos often invites the viewer to draw parallels between the relationships depicted. From the perspective of psychotherapy, perhaps the most thought-provoking is the parallel between the Hodja and the psychotherapist or supervisor. Consulted when someone is in crisis, often when the characters are at their wits’ end with their relationships, these figures tend to remain calm, occasionally using metaphors as devices to contain unmanageable experience. The Hodja teaches his interpretation of the Islamic way of facing life, but Peri also becomes didactic, effectively offering Meryem “psychoeducation,” the psychotherapeutic gospel. While sometimes the intention seems to be to depict all parts of the secular/religious continuum with equal sensitivity, the Hodja is portrayed in a more obviously unfavorable light. At one point, as he offers Yasin a carbon copy of the metaphor he gave to Meryem, he is revealed as even more thoughtless, given that he knows the two are siblings.

We are shown repeatedly how important—perhaps sacred—these relationships are; in psychoanalytic parlance, we’re shown the power of transference. Yasin, who has lost his father, speaks of an energy emanating from the paternal Hodja that causes him to tremble. Meryem feels similarly about the Hodja, but gradually also becomes attached to Peri. She declares that Peri has cured her fainting, but begins to ask: How many patients does Peri see? Is she driving Peri mad with her incessant talking? Is this just a job for Peri? Peri’s response fails to acknowledge how understandable it is to ask such questions, and how contradictory the work of the psychotherapist is: It is a job; one is usually meant to make a living out of it; but it’s also impossible to do it without being in some way touched, disturbed even, by every patient. *Ethos* doesn’t portray the psychotherapist as a saintly superhuman, made from compassion and patience—a tenacious fantasy among psychotherapists and the general public alike. Peri doesn’t initially feel the kind of love every patient hopes to elicit in their therapist. But she does confirm the Jungian and alchemical idea that if the work is deep enough, both parties are changed.

Ethos doesn’t shy away from the terror of loss and abandonment, within psychotherapy and outside it. On two occasions, patients end sessions prematurely in order to preempt the loss and rejection of a therapist. Characters are searching for ways to negotiate life in the face of loss. Meryem comically tries to embody her dead father’s dancing to cheerful music: That’s how he made people happy, and she is desperate to do the same. Is there such a difference between this attempt to control emotional states and Peri’s uptight-ness? The editing often seems to demonstrate that therapist and patient are as defended as one other. If Meryem is a classical Freudian patient, Peri could be a Fairbairnian schizoid

patient, desperately desiring intimacy and yet also terrified of it. In fact, this formulation makes Peri's defences pre-Oedipal, more infantile than Meryem's, her trauma much more difficult to access and verbalize.

The trauma that is eventually discussed more openly is related to gender-based violence, with Ruhiye revisiting the site of her abuse. Freud's excavation metaphor for psychoanalysis is perhaps alluded to through the location, which resembles an archaeological site, and by Ruhiye beginning to articulate her hope that this act of return might help her overcome her depression. Confronting her abuser, refusing to concede to his pathetic minimization of what he did (he presents himself as a victim), seems to offer her a release; this coincides with most characters meeting other people, or previously neglected parts of themselves, more meaningfully. At times, this drifts into sentimental, "Hollywood-ending" territory and two-dimensionality, away from the complexity the series more generally achieves.

One unsatisfactory resolution is that Yasin, relieved that his wife comes out of her depression, implores her to stop crying: One should only cry when there's a concrete reason to cry. This hyper-rational, normatively masculine idea unfortunately goes unchallenged by the series itself. I would also have appreciated a richer queer narrative than the secondary one included in *Ethos*. "You're crossing the line," says Yasin in his role as a security guard in a club; "I didn't know there was one," laughs Burcu, a queer woman. And this is about as queer as *Ethos* gets.

Nevertheless, the show is worth investing the six hours it requires to watch. In part, its value lies in the plethora of surprises, which helpfully frustrate the viewer who believes that they are well versed in encountering otherness with little prejudice. Although it's so specifically Turkish, *Ethos* continuously dances around universal experiences of familiarity and alienation, skilfully depicting the act of relating to others as inherently full of pain and joy.

Acknowledgment

I am grateful to Arthur Asseraf and Melih Aydem for their thoughts on *Ethos* and this review.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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George Taxidis (pronouns: he/him) is a psychotherapist and Jungian analyst in private practice in east London, and an Associate Lecturer at Goldsmiths, University of London. He co-founded the Queer Social Dreaming Matrix and the international Queer Jungian initiative. His upcoming book on queering Jungian psychology will be part of the Jung, Culture and Politics series by Routledge.