BEING A WOMAN IN TURKEY: PERCEPTIONS SHADOWED BY THE BALANCE OF POWER

Abstracts

The social structure in Turkey is predominantly patriarchal, and this has a major influence on the perception of women. Because of its historical roots and the broad authority that Islam grants men, the preponderant male dominance in the social order in Turkey rests on rather firm foundations. Victimhood is inevitable in a social order where women are deemed as weak compared to men and where their roles and relationships are defined in a way that will perpetuate this weakness. However, it becomes clear that sometimes steps that seem progressive recoil back on women over time or that they are ineffective. The reason for this is that all actions take place in the general melting pot of perceptions, where they are shaped to become acceptable to the hegemonic views. It is vital that perceptions made within a balance-of-power framework where women are disadvantaged be identified and exposed. Furthermore, the struggle to create a Turkey where women and men have equal status should also include the effort to be change the perceptions of women that we have discussed here.

Keywords: Perceptions of women, women in Turkic legends, patriarchy in Turkey, sexuality and virginity, the women’s movement in Turkey
GÜÇ EKSENLİ ALGININ GÖLGESİNDE TÜRKİYE’DE KADIN OLMAK

Öz


Anahtar kelimeler: Kadın algısı, Türk efsanelerinde kadınlardır, Türkiye’de ataerkil, cinsellik ve bekaret, Türkiye’de kadın hareketi

1. Introduction

The value accorded to women and the status of women offer important indications about the perception of women in society. Sociocultural parameters are, without a doubt, the most important factor that reveals the status of Turkish women—the value people give to women in their cultural repertoire, in other words. This process of giving value manifests itself as patterns of behaviour determined by traditional and religious motivations. We see that historical traditions keep women in the background, culturally. Folk sayings and folk beliefs commonly include value judgements as to the superiority of men over women (Kirkpınar, 1998, p. 26). The roots of these beliefs are to be found in myths and legends. One of the oldest written works in Turkic culture, the Kutadgu Bilig, written in 11th century by Yusuf Has Hacib (2008), is worth examining as it allows us to trace the roots of the perception of women.

2. The Historical Roots Of The Perception Of Women Among Turkic Peoples

There is a widespread belief that women were greatly valued among the early Turkic peoples and Turkic myths and legends have always been interpreted accordingly. However, as will be seen in the examples below, Turkic myths and legends do not value women as women, but as mothers or for their fertility; as wives, women are lauded for being able to lay down their lives for the sake of their husbands or for placing their husband’s commands over their own most sacred beliefs. Women are the only people who work, who have to work, towards continuing the man’s bloodline, and when they are unwilling or unable to do so, they are the only people who are held responsible. Indeed, Yusuf Has Hacib (2008, p. 603), the writer of the Kutadgu Bilig, emphasised how important women are for the continuation of bloodlines in this couplet:

Hear what the cream of society says:

the cure for a broken bloodline is a woman (Hacib, 2008, p. 603).
2.1. Women in Turkic Mythology

According to the Altay creation myth collected by Radloff, God (Kuday) forbade anyone to eat the fruit from four branches of the nine-branched tree that He had created. However, when Kişi—the son of God and Lord of the Underworld, referred to as Erlik and later as Körmös and Satan in following sections of the myth—learned of this, he told Törüngey and Eje—the first man and woman—to eat the forbidden fruit. Törüngey obeyed God’s word and did not eat the forbidden fruit. His wife Eje could not resist and ate some. It was very sweet. She took some and smeared it on her husband’s mouth.

Woman (Eje) fell under the influence of evil powers (Erlik, Satan or Körmös) and then made man (Törüngey) an instrument of her evil, whereupon God punished them:

“He turned to Eje, ‘You obeyed Körmös’ word. You ate the forbidden fruit. You shall pay the price for that. You shall bear a child and while giving birth, you shall suffer pain. You shall die in the end; you shall taste death.’ He punished Törüngey too, saying, ‘You ate Körmös’ food. You did not heed my word; you obeyed Körmös Erlik’s word. His men live in his world; they are found in the world of darkness. They are deprived of my light. Körmös turned against me, and you too shall turn against him. If you had heeded my word, you would have been like me, but because you did not, you shall have nine sons and nine daughters. Henceforth I shall not create any more people. From now on, people shall descend from you.” (Dilimiz ve Edebiyatımız, n.d.).

It is particularly interesting that God gave the act of giving birth as a punishment to woman. While Turkic myths always emphasise the value placed on women who give birth (on mothers, on motherhood), we must particularly stress the reason why this punishment was given: woman was punished with pregnancy because she had tasted a forbidden pleasure and had made man taste the same pleasure too. The pleasure that a man and woman taste together and that is the cause of pregnancy in real life is sex. In Turkey, wet dreams are referred to as “a trick of the devil”, and engaging in unwanted sexual relations is called “yielding to the devil”. This saying of the prophet Muhammad unites women and the devil in a single body when it comes to sexual relations:

“The woman advances and retires in the shape of a devil, so when a woman fascinates any one of you and she captivates his heart, he should go to his wife and have intercourse with her, for that will repel what he feels in his heart.”

There is no doubt that the association of women with the devil, even their portrayal as the same entity, in mythology, everyday language and the prevailing religion will also influence how women are perceived. When speaking of forbidden sexuality, even if it amounts to no more than desire, women are in league with the devil or else are the devil himself.

“Again, according to the same Altay creation myth, God gave Erlik the power to create. Erlik took up a hammer, a pair of bellows and an anvil. However, when he used his newly acquired power for evil, God took Erlik’s hammer, anvil and bellows, and threw them in the fire. The bellows became a woman, and the hammer a man. God took the woman and spat in her face. She became a bird and flew away. This bird was called the Kurday bird; its meat is not eaten and its feathers are not used as fletching. God took the man too and spat in his face. He also became a bird and flew away; they called him the Yalban bird.” (Dilimiz ve Edebiyatımız, n.d.).

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In addition to Radloff’s recension, there is also a second version of the Turkic creation myth, compiled by Verbitsky. Both collections of the creation myth a woman called Ak Ene (White Mother) inspires God’s creative urge. Kabakli Çimen (2008, p. 107) takes the following view:

“Nothing would have been created had it not been for Ak Ene. The thought that God’s creative urge was inspired by an ethereal woman is aesthetically important inasmuch as it reflects the social status of women. Furthermore, it is striking that the mother—one of fundamental pillars of the family—, Ak Ene, manifests herself in such an important role. According to the legend, Ak Ene is also the person who teaches us feelings such as honesty and steadfastness, which are the foundation of morality.” Kabakli Çimen (2008, p. 107).

It is clear that Kabakli Çimen’s comments exalt women and this is focused on women’s function of ensuring the continuation of society. Motherhood and fertility are blessed when combined with good morals.

2.2. Women in Turkic Legends

It is of utmost importance that the child who was to continue the bloodline be male. This suggests that women are perceived as an intermediary in reproduction, there to ensure the continuation of men. In legends, we often encounter men who do not have a son being burdened with grief and women being held responsible for this misfortune. In the Book of Dede Korkut, Boğaç Khan’s future father, Dirse Khan, is one of the famous examples of this. Once a year, Khan of Khans Bayındır Khan hosted the lords who were under his authority in three separate state tents: white, red and black. In the story, being hosted in the black state tent was an insult and meant being considered worthless. (The Kutadgu Bilig says that black is the colour of slaves, and white the colour of lords.) (Hacib, 2008, p. 419). The childless lords were seated on black rugs and served black sheep stew. Bayındır Khan would say, ‘Let them eat it if they will, and if they do not, let them be on their way.’ He would add that those who had been cursed by God were also cursed by him (Gökyay, 2000, p. 4).

Dirse Khan, a guest, was most aggrieved when he was seated on a black rug and served black sheep stew. He immediately went to his wife. First he praised her figure; her eyebrows, arched as bows; her mouth, so tiny that not even an almond would fit in it; and her cheeks, rosy as apples. Then he berated her because they did not have any children. He drew his sword and threatened to kill her (Gökyay, 2000, p. 5).

Dirse Khan’s wife said that it was not either of their faults that they did not have any children. It was God’s will. Dirse Khan should feed the hungry, clothe the naked and ransom the captive. In short, he should do plentiful good deeds. Dirse Khan followed his wife’s advice and became the father of a son, who was to become the famous Boğaç Khan. While still a child, Boğaç Khan won fame for over a raging bull (Gökyay, 2000, p. 6).

His heroism is one of the innumerable examples from Turkic mythology to show the importance of physical strength. These examples, which form the roots of perceptions in contemporary Turkey, give the message that strength is decisive in gaining social status. Even though we no longer lead lives where physical prowess is of paramount importance, it is possible
to think that the belief in the innate weakness of women, which is broadly accepted in society, is based on this view (Cesur-Kılıçaslan and Işık-Kılıçaslan, 2014, p. 204).

According to the Legend of Oğuz Khan, Oğuz Khan married the daughters of two of his uncles; however, despite his best efforts, he could not make them convert to Islam, so he stopped looking at them and would not even lay a finger on them. The daughter of his third uncle was uglier than the other two. However, she had loved Oğuz Khan with all her heart since her childhood. In the end, Oğuz went to her, bared his soul and said that, as long as she became a Muslim, he would marry her. The girl had been waiting a long time for this proposal; crying, she looked at him and said:

I’ll not follow Allah’s demands; to Tengri I’ll pay no heed!
Your word is my command; I’ll always take your lead!
Whatever you say shall be; all you decree I’ll do!
While you’re in charge of me, I’ll only have eyes for you!

When Oğuz heard this, he was very pleased and his fears subsided. He told her to believe in God. On hearing this, the girl became Muslim (Ögel, 1997, p. 54).

The legend advises women to be absolutely obedient to men. They are subject to men even when deciding their religion. As a husband, a man occupies a position higher than God, in a sense, because the prospective wife who is held up as a role model said that she recognised the word of Oğuz Khan before that of Allah or Tengri as a command. If we interpret the relevant section of the legend, where the importance of Islam in Oğuz Khan’s choice of marriage partner appears to be emphasised, from a woman’s point of view, we see that the ideal woman obeys her man, even when it is a question of religious belief.

The Turkic people best known for their legends may be the Kyrgyz (Reichl, 2011, p. 21). In the Kyrgyz Epic of Manas, the strength of a whip is praised by emphasising its effect on women.

“And now the brave Manas stood with his magnificent whip, woven from twelve strands, that deafens the ear when cracked; it subdues the shrewish woman and makes the woman who pretends not to see you call you her hero; it makes the sullen woman find her tongue; it makes the unwilling woman embrace you; it makes the woman who does not come out to meet you tremble; it makes the woman who does not agree with you smile; it makes the woman who does not care for you call you her darling; it makes a confidante out of the woman who does not reveal secrets; well, it was with this magnificent whip that the brave Manas struck the unbelievers who were standing there and tore open their backs” (Hatto, 1977, p. 42-45).

The expressions used in praise of the whip show that the use of force, or even violence, on women is approved of and recommended. If we take the interpretation a little further, it becomes clear that disciplining (!) a woman and subduing an enemy are defined as similar acts.

In legends, women’s roles are almost always defined in terms of a man: they are either the male hero’s beloved or his fiancée or his wife or his sister. For this reason, heroines mainly have secondary roles. One of two noteworthy exceptions to this is in the Karakalpak legend “Kırık Kız” (Forty Girls: Kırık Kız). The heroine is Gülayım, the daughter of a rich lord. Gülayım and

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her forty girls are trained on the island of Miyvalı to become strong warriors. However much there might be a second storyline that also includes Arslan, a hero from Khwarezm who Gülayım marries at the end of the legend, and Altınay, his sister, the focus of the main events is on Gülayım’s heroic deeds (Reichl, 2011, p. 321-322). In the other exception, the legend of Oçi Bala, an Altay legend, the main character, who overcomes enemies with a warlike spirit and physical strength, is a woman (Dilek, 2007, p. 41-119).

We should not overlook the fact that in these legends, the heroines act like men; in a sense, they are masculinised. Women can be the main heroine if they show success in an area dependent on physical strength where men are superior, such as war. These examples do not contradict society’s view, which is dependent on strength, and they show that women can determine their own destiny, but only if they can prove themselves by male standards.

Another common legendary trope is women who are willing to sacrifice themselves for their husbands or children: again, in the Book of Dede Korkut, Deli Dumrul was sentenced to death for going against God’s command. The only way that he could escape was to find someone who would give Azrael his or her own life instead of his. Deli Dumrul went to his elderly father and mother, but neither of them would agree to give their life up for their son. After this, Deli Dumrul went to his wife to bid her farewell. When she learned of the situation, she said that she would give her life up for him although Deli Dumrul objected. God rewarded her self-sacrifice and granted Deli Dumrul and his wife a long life (Gökyay, 2000, p. 75-82).

In Uzbek legends, when a girl is praised, she is said to be as valiant and strong as a man (Rahimov, 2007, p. 139,185); in other words, she is praised for having male characteristics in spite of being a girl (Rahimov, 2007, p. 205,215).

2.3. Women in the Kutadgu Bilig

The Kutadgu Bilig (the Wisdom of Royal Glory) professes to show the way that we must follow to be happy in this world and in the next in the form of advice spoken by a man and given only to men. The work contains a large number of couplets declaring that women cannot be trusted, that they have to be monitored by men and that they lead men to their downfall:

Do not give females free rein; keep the door closed:

all kinds of bother come from females to men (Hacib, 2008, p. 299).

Do not let strangers into your house; do not let females out;

before becoming intimate with someone, put him to the test (Hacib, 2008, p. 301).

Cowardly people are superfluous in war;
cowardly people are like women (Hacib, 2008, p. 447).

Keep women at home all the time;

women’s looks are deceptive.
Do not let strangers into your house; do not let women out; an eye that looks at them in the street is enough to seduce them.

Do not invite women when men are eating and drinking; if you do, they'll know no bounds.

Do not let women out of the house; if they go out, they will go astray.

Women are but flesh; flesh needs to be protected; if you do not take care of flesh, it will inevitably start to smell (Hacib, 2008, p. 775).

Respect women; let them have what they want; lock the door and let no man in the house.

Women have been untrue since history began; their hearts flow wherever their eyes look.

Women are like a tree that struggles to flourish and grow; its fruit is poison; harbour no appetite or desire for it.

How many thousands of mighty, heroical men have met their deaths because of women?

How many men, ruddy in cheek and face, glowing with health, have gone the way of all flesh because of women?

These women, they have buried alive thousands of renowned and illustrious heroes.

How are you going to bring a woman to heel? Only God, who protects everything, can deal with them (Hacib, 2008, p. 777).
A lord should be honest and keep his word;  
you cannot call one who goes back on his word a man.

A man does not go back on his word;  
No, consider those who do as women (Hacib, 2008, p. 859).

The Kutadgu Bilig lists worldly pleasures, but even these are only for men:

The total of worldly pleasures is these three things,  
and the taste of one of them equals another.

One of the three is eating and drinking,  
and one is the female who comforts the man.

The third of them is living healthily,  
and that is the most necessary of them all (Hacib, 2008, p. 631).

As far marriage in the Kutadgu Bilig, Hacib tells men what to do to choose the right woman as a wife.

If you decide to marry, try to marry an untouched family girl  
who has seen the face of no other man than you.

This kind of woman will love you and will know only you;  
she will not do anything unbecoming or unseemly.

If you decide to marry, marry someone beneath you in rank;  
Do not approach families higher than you; you will become their prisoner later (Hacib, 2008, p. 769).

Hacib’s advice to men to marry a woman of a lower rank confirms the existence of balance-of-power perceptions in Turkic society. In the event of a man marrying a woman of a higher rank, his wife will not be weaker than him. Hacib’s advice rests on the belief that such a relationship will be problematic, and there is still a similar idea in Turkish society today (Cesur-Kılıçaslan and Işık(Kılıçaslan), 2014a, p. 205; Cesur-Kılıçaslan and Işık(Kılıçaslan), 2014b).
In his couplets, Hacib (2008, p. 603) explicitly mentions how men who have sons will be immortal, but does not speak of the same being true for women:

Of a father who dies leaving a son behind,
who can say that he is not living?

A man with no son, when he dies, his bloodline ends.
His name is erased from the world and his place remains empty.

2.4. Perceptions of Women Turkish Proverbs

There are a large number of Turkish proverbs that describe women in negative terms: women are parasitic ("spoon enemy", meaning wife, refers to women breaking utensils during housework, thus—or so the phrase would have us believe—incurring extra costs on men), not to be trusted ("Don’t rely on your father; don’t trust your wife,") and unable to control their sexual desires ("A woman without a man is like a horse without a bridle."). As well as proverbs bestowing superiority on men ("A man is a flood; a woman is a lake," “A man speaks, a woman listens," there is also a large number of proverbs that portray women as inferior or even belittle them. All stereotypes are handed down from generation to generation through these proverbs (Ecevit, 2011, p. 28). Women should be kept under pressure with beatings and births: “Don’t neglect the stick for a woman’s back and the baby for her belly.” (Hatunoğlu et al., 2014: 248). That this proverb advises the use of pregnancy in order to control women gives rise to the thought that while the general value system of society continually lavishes praise on women in their function as mothers, it also seeks to rein them in (Cesur-Kılıçaslan and İzık(Kılıçaslan), 2014a, p. 205; Cesur-Kılıçaslan and İzık(Kılıçaslan), 2014b).

Here are some more examples: women are weak minded (“A woman’s hair is long, but her mind is short,”) girls should be beaten while being educated (“He who doesn’t beat his daughter will beat his breast,”) women are not to be trusted (“He who has a woman as a confidante has no need of a town crier,”) women’s words are not to be trusted (“Believe only one in every forty words a woman says.”) (Cesur-Kılıçaslan and İzık(Kılıçaslan), 2014b).

The only time women are defined positively in proverbs is in terms of being mothers: “There’s no one to love you like your mother, and nowhere to live like Baghdad,” “Only my mother’s tears are true; everyone else’s are fake.” (Cesur-Kılıçaslan and İzık(Kılıçaslan), 2014a, p. 205; Cesur-Kılıçaslan and İzık(Kılıçaslan), 2014b).

2.5. Patriarchy in Turkey and the Perception of Women

The social structure in Turkey is predominantly patriarchal, and this has a major influence on the perception of women. Patriarchy has gone through periodic changes from the past to the present day, as has not lost its predominance in the social structure. Traditional Islamic patriarchy turned into patriarchy-within-the-modernisation-process in the years of the Second Constitutional Era (1908-1922), and into nation-state patriarchy in the first years of the Republic (1923-) (Berktaş, 2001, p. 354-356).
Beginning with the reforms of the Tanzimat Era (1839-1876), society started to change; however, the local customs of the old order continued to exist. In Ottoman society, the father represented characteristics of the old order such as hierarchy, immutability and absolute authority, while the reflection of these characteristics in the political arena appeared as the absolutism of the Ottoman State. The Constitutional Era challenged the authority of the sultan/father: the concept of rights and freedoms was broached. However, the hypocrisy of the “enlightened” discourse, i.e. that men held absolute sway over women and that women were not party to the social contract, was also adopted. Ideologies at the time, such as Islamism, Westernism and nationalism/Turkism, contained all these views (Durakbaşı, 1998, p. 29-50).

3. BEING A WOMAN IN TURKEY

3.1. Perception of Women Being There for the Good of Men

In the Republican regime, it was understood that the rights to be given to women were of vital importance and that they would be not only for women, but also for the general good. Before that, however, the Ottoman state did in fact implement something along similar lines, albeit on a modest scale. For example, in a law passed in 1869, the opening of educational institutions for women was justified on the basis that it would produce good housewives and spouses: “Men who toil to make a living will only be at ease at home when women, knowing their religion and world, obey their husband’s orders, refrain from doing things that their husbands do not want, preserve their purity and are satisfied with their lot.” (Ergin, 1939, p. 382).

Male modernisers, while lamenting how they were deprived of their own rights because of “paternal pressure”, used the grievances of women for their own ends. They criticised situations such as women not being educated, having their life limited to the house, or their not having a say in divorce. They complained of being condemned to loveless marriages arranged by relatives to inadequate spouses who could not provide intellectual friendship. They wanted relationships between husband and wife based on love and friendship, and a family life independent of the family elders: to secure these, they wanted education for women and schooling for children (Çakır, 2010, p. 102-103). In all these efforts, we can see that women were perceived as being of a lower status than men and that improvements in the situation of women were a means of enabling them to be wives or mothers more worthy of the men. In spite of outward changes, there was no shift from the expectation that women would continue in the role of men’s helper and subordinate, as was in the past (Cesur-Kılıçaslan and İşık(Kılıçaslan), 2014a, p. 206; Cesur-Kılıçaslan and İşık(Kılıçaslan), 2014b).

3.2. Republican Reforms

Because Islamic principles did not remain on a purely theological level, but also determined the judicial structure, Islam placed restrictions on women from two directions: it played an active role in both the social and judicial fields. If we bear in mind the restrictions that a traditional Islamic society places on relations between men and women, we cannot deny the success of Atatürk’s reforms (Toprak, 1979). Moreover, that Atatürk chose to adopt girls rather than boys in a society where the preference for sons was the undisputable norm is important symbolically (Kandiyoiti, 1988). In spite of all this, neither the limited group of Turkish women who have been
able to benefit from these reforms, nor the large majority who have remained untouched by the reforms has been able to escape from the pressure of tradition (Toprak, 1979).

Kandiyoti (2011, p. 56) sees the restrictions that the Republican reforms brought bear on the wide-ranging authority and privileges granted to men within the sharia order as an important gain, and she finds it objectionable to defend rights granted to men, such as being able to have more than one wife at the same time, by saying they are part of religious belief or cultural identity. According to her, this opens the door to practices that are undeniably still current and in use to be accepted legally as well. That Kandiyoti is correct in this assertion shows how little progress has been made on the subject of women, in spite of the overtly West-facing Republican regime.

3.3. Women Married Off at an Early Age and the Perception of Weakness

In Turkey, one of the practices that bolsters the perception of women being weak is the fact that they are married off when they are still practically children. One of the reasons for this is the understanding that obedience to the husband, which dominates in the traditional way of life, has to be established at an early age.

The general trend in Turkish society is for men to marry after they have studied to a certain level, completed their military service and found a job. This, though, results in men marrying relatively late. On the other hand, girls in Turkey quit their studies at an early age, they have no military-service obligations and their participation in working life is frowned upon (Ras-Work, 2006, p. 13). All of this ensures that men are more powerful than women: they have a higher educational level, they are older and they are the breadwinner (Cesur-Kılıçaslan and Işık(Kılıçaslan), 2014a, p. 206; Cesur-Kılıçaslan and Işık(Kılıçaslan), 2014b).

3.4. The Prime Minister’s View on Women in Turkey Today

An excerpt from the Prime Minister’s International Women’s Day message in 2013:

“We’re such faithful followers of the Prophet: the first thing he did was to forbid the barbaric treatment of girls. In a society that buried girls alive, he put women on a pedestal; he brought the good news that paradise lies under the feet of mothers. Listen carefully, paradise doesn’t lie under the feet of fathers or of women, but of mothers. That’s important.” (Aktif Haber, n.d.).

An excerpt from the Prime Minister’s International Women’s Day message in 2014:

“What I mainly see as the crowning glory of our women is motherhood. So my love for mothers is ever so intense on this point and my respect for women comes mainly from there.” (Türkiye Gazetesi, 2014).

We should pay special attention to the fact that these speeches were given not on Mother’s Day, but on International Women’s Day. When the Prime Minister expresses his view on days dedicated to women that motherhood ranks above womanhood, it gives rise to the thought that he perceives women conceptualising themselves as women (as opposed to mothers) to be a threat against the roles that society has imposed on women. This personal sentiment should be considered along with the power that what he has implemented as head of government has to transform society. On the other hand, out of all the politicians who have come to power so far in the Republic of Turkey, the current Prime Minister is acknowledged to be the leader who the people think is most like themselves. In other words, before he preaches his own views, it is plausible that these views have already been adopted by society.
On 18th July 2010, during a meeting with women’s NGOs as part of the Democratic Initiative Process and the Unity and Fraternity Project, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan said, “I don’t believe in equality between men and women. I believe in equality of opportunities. Men and women are different from each other and they complement each other.” (Vatan Gazetesi, 2010). The Prime Minister repeats here an old canard that those who are uncomfortable with the perception of women as having equal status with men resort to time and time again. Everyone knows that the advocates of equality between men and women do not claim that men and women are physically or psychologically identical. To make remarks to the effect that “men and women are different” when talking about equality is simply a method of dragging the claims of those who advocate social equality down to a level where they do not belong. Once more, we see the Prime Minister lined up alongside those who share the mainstream feeling in society (Cesur-Kılıçaslan and İşık(Kılıçaslan), 2014b).

3.5. Sexuality, Virginity and the Perception of Women

The modernisation of women’s lives has not reduced the special value that Turkish society places on virginity. Basically, the modernisation process has tended in the main to change the public roles of women, while social gender roles have remained unquestioned. Moreover, the concepts of “modern” and “Western”, especially with regard to roles that women are expected to assume, can be said to be extremely patriarchal: the primary roles ascribed to women are that of good wife and mother (Cindoğlu, 2004, p.120). In the recent past, various authorities would often request virginity tests—without any basis in law—and this raised public awareness of the subject. In May 1992, the Turkish media examined the case of a group of high-school students from Simav (Kütahya) who were subjected to unauthorised virginity tests on the order of the headmaster, and this unfortunately resulted in the suicide of one of the girls (Cindoğlu, 2004, p. 123).

While this news was still fresh, it was found out that while the then Minister of Health, Dr. Yıldırım Aktuna, was the Senior Consultant at Bakırköy Psychiatric Hospital, he had ordered female patients to have virginity tests each month. His defence was that it was to protect them from being sexually abused by the men at the hospital (both patients and staff) (Cindoğlu, 2004, p. 123-124).

The testing programme that the minister explained was only intended to protect the virgins, and it is obvious that a girl who is a virgin can still suffer sexual abuse without losing her virginity. This being so, it is possible to say that the minister’s programme, far from protecting virgin girls, was intended to protect virginity itself.

Liberal social gender ideology, in a Turkish context, demands women who are free but chaste. A modern woman should be sexually available for men, but at the same time a virgin (Cindoğlu, 2004, p. 131).

The European Court of Human Rights, in a complaint relating to a sixteen-year-old girl who was taken into custody and made to undergo a gynaecological examination unaccompanied and without her consent, ruled that her human rights had been violated and ordered Turkey to pay damages. It was the third time that Turkey had been found in violation on the subject of forced virginity checks (Radikal Gazetesi, 2011).

In the old Turkish Penal Code, the punishment for abducting a single—and therefore assumed to be virgin—woman was higher than for abducting a married woman. In fact, even though the law does not deem the victim’s not being a virgin to be an extenuating circumstance,
the male-dominant mentality that the judges have internalised can take precedence over the law. Indeed, the fact that virginity tests were carried out on some young women in university dormitories in contravention of the 2005 Turkish Penal Code, which although not abolishing virginity tests completely, at least makes them subject to the decision of a competent judge or public prosecutor, is yet another example of the disconnect between legal development and the logic of society (Elçik, 2011, p. 152).

Another thought-provoking example of this disconnect is the case of the female judge having to get a “certificate of virginity” to defend herself after she handed down a guilty verdict in a trial in 2010 and was subsequently fired when letters of denunciation about her were sent claiming that she “wore too much lipstick”, “wore a miniskirt”, “took a lawyer into her office and closed the door”, “ate with different men” (Taraf Gazetesi, n.d.).

Deputy Prime Minister Bülent Arınç made some extremely striking comments about women in a public speech in 2014. After saying that women should be modest, he used precisely these words: “They should not laugh out loud in public. They should not be inviting in any of their movements,” (CNN TÜRK, 2014). When this speech was given, Bülent Arınç had been a member of parliament for approximately twenty years and was not a marginal politician. His speech was given at a time when Turkey is in the run-up to a presidential election and was intended to support the candidate of his party, which has been in power for twelve years. As Bülent Arınç is politician who knows the electorate well, it is plausible to assume that he was expressing these opinions in order to win public acclaim.

A link is made between virginity, on the one hand, and purity, innocence and cleanliness, on the other; being “untouched”, inexperienced and naive are deemed to increase a woman’s quality. The thing that women are inculcated with is that they should save their virginity for the man who will deflower them (Sosyalist Feminist Kolektif, n.d.).

Women’s bodies have become so sexualised that most of the time, it is enough for a woman to be there as a woman for her to be perceived as a sexual being. For example, the mere presence of a woman sitting in a café or in a public park frequented mainly by men can be perceived as a sexual invitation in itself. (…) That is the reason why in some cases of sexual assault in Turkey, the fact that the woman met her attacker in a bar will always be held against her in her fight to bring him to justice (Elçik, 2011, p. 148). This all shows that women are perceived as passive beings characterised by being sexual arousing.

Examples of the sexualisation of women’s bodies are reflected in language as well. (…) As we encounter all too often in the tabloid press, the momentary appearance of a woman’s underwear is hailed as “flashing her knickers”, while a man in the same situation is merely said to have forgotten to do up his fly; men do not “flash their boxers” (Elçik, 2011, p. 148). The Turkish term for this kind of accidental exposure, “frikık”, comes of course from the English “free kick”, i.e. the punishment given in a football match to the team that has committed a foul. In the disparaging use of this term outside football, the side receiving the punishment is the woman and the reason she is punished is for inadvertently showing more of her own body than is allowed to appear (Cesur-Kılıçaslan and Işık(Kılıçaslan), 2014a, p. 206-207; Cesur-Kılıçaslan and Işık(Kılıçaslan), 2014b).

4. Conclusions
In their comprehensive work A History of Women in the West, editors Duby and Perrot emphasise the historical persistence of male dominance over women:

“Throughout history, so far as we can see, men have dominated women. This judgement is ratified today by the social sciences, including anthropology. Matriarchy appears to have been a concept invented by nineteenth-century anthropologists such as Bachofen and Morgan and taken up as a nostalgic with by early American feminists. In societies accessible to historical inquiry we find no trace of it. Nevertheless, the modes of male domination vary widely and it is this variation in which we are interested.” (Duby and Perrot, 2002, p. XX).

The history of women in Turkey has not yet been examined and written about in detail; however, in this paper examining the perception of women in the balance of power, we have not encountered any indication to show that Duby and Perrot’s claim is not valid for Turkey as well. Because of its historical roots and the broad authority that Islam grants men, the preponderant male dominance in the social order in Turkey rests on rather firm foundations (Cesur-Kılıçaslan and İşık(Kılıçaslan), 2014a; Cesur-Kılıçaslan and İşık(Kılıçaslan), 2014b). The fact that men are dominant at every level, from running the country to relations in the family, and, according to the religion followed by the majority, that women are defined as subject to men has of course also influenced society’s perception of women.

In Turkey, a country with a patriarchal social structure, the perception of women is power centred and is compatible with the power relations that have been embraced from the past to the present day (Cesur-Kılıçaslan and İşık(Kılıçaslan), 2014a, p. 207). Just as with patriarchy itself, the perception of women has also changed form in the course of time, but has remained the same in essence. A woman is a man’s wife; she is the mother of children, especially of sons; she is the representative of good morals in society; she is the protector of the family structure; but she is not a real actor with the right also to make mistakes. She cannot pursue goals that she has determined herself (Cesur-Kılıçaslan and İşık(Kılıçaslan), 2014a, p. 207; Cesur-Kılıçaslan and İşık(Kılıçaslan), 2014b). She is, as it were, the most important supporting actress in her own life. While she is applauded as long as she plays the role carved out for her by society, she is condemned when she tries to trace her own individual path.

Victimhood is inevitable in a social order where women are deemed as weak compared to men and where their roles and relationships are defined in a way that will perpetuate this weakness. Progressive elements of society see this as a problem, and measures aimed at a solution, like the ones after the proclamation of the Republic, have been taken. However, it becomes clear that sometimes steps that seem progressive recoil back on women over time or that they are ineffective. The reason for this is that all actions take place in the general melting pot of perceptions, where they are shaped to become acceptable to the hegemonic views. Until the thought that women are subject to men, that they exist to make men happy and to perform their duties towards men disappears, the period that follows every well-intentioned initiative will be the same.

Kandiyoti (2007, p. 53), who has authored important studies on women in Turkey, made the prediction in 1996 that future of women in Turkey is laden with uncertainties and rebellions. So that rebellions may be directed at the correct target and that uncertainties may be dispelled to the advantage of women, it is vital that perceptions made within a balance-of-power framework where women are disadvantaged be identified and exposed. Furthermore, the struggle to create a
Turkey where women and men have equal status should also include the effort to be change the perceptions of women that we have discussed here.

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