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# Virginal Facades

## Sexual Freedom and Guilt among Young Turkish Women

Gul Ozyegin

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**ABSTRACT** Charged with personal, societal and legal significance, the hymen, as a fold of flesh, has the power to rule the sexual identities of unmarried women in Turkey. This article examines the forms and associated meanings of contemporary challenges to virginity rules among educationally advantaged, upwardly mobile young women. The article demonstrates that in the process of negotiating often contradictory expectations of their sexual behavior, young women cultivate purposefully ambiguous identities related to their state of virginhood. The author calls these identities 'virginal facades' and explores their complex and contradictory implications. The author highlights an important normative shift from a focus on the physical reality of virginity to a focus on the moral expression of virginity, and emphasizes the intricate connection between social class and women's sexuality experienced by some young women as sexual guilt.

**KEY WORDS** sexual guilt ♦ sexual modernity ♦ social class ♦ Turkey ♦ virginity ♦ young women

### INTRODUCTION

Since the 1980s, rapid and pervasive cultural and economic change has shaken the fixity of national, class, religious and gender and sexual identities in Turkey. The transformation from state-controlled capitalism to a privatized and liberalized market economy within the context of Islamization, globalization and the European integration process has altered the ways in which personal and collective identities are defined, opening up a process of radically reframing gender relations and sexuality in Turkish society.

In this article, I approach the question of changing structures of gender and sexuality in Turkey by focusing on the dominant norm of virginity, which prescribes that unmarried women protect their hymen until marriage.

Charged with personal, societal and legal significance, the hymen, a fold of flesh, has the power to rule the sexual identities of unmarried women in Turkey. The classification of women into the two categories of *kadin* and *kiz* on the basis of the status of their hymen is still pervasive in Turkish culture, and clearly reflected in the vernacular. When describing or addressing an unmarried woman, the word *kiz* (girl, intact hymen) is used: the *kiz* becomes a *kadin* (woman, non-virgin) when she is married and her hymen is broken. Explicit in the notion of *kiz* is not only sexual purity and innocence, but also, particularly important, the desexualization of unmarried women, and the normative expectation that the transition from girlhood/non-sexual to womanhood/sexual should occur in the institution of marriage. In short, a non-virgin unmarried woman has no place in the societal classification.

In considering the violation or preservation of virginity norms in the contemporary context, I draw upon the narratives of a particular group of secular young women who more than any other group of women in Turkish society is likely to denounce virginity norms, and forsake virgin identities. They are upwardly mobile young women<sup>1</sup> whose investment in an elite education and a professional identity stands in stark contrast with virginity norms dictating chastity throughout schooling, including post-graduate education, thus considerably extending 'girlhood'.

The study of these young women thus sheds light on the degree, effect and meanings associated with women's challenges to the dominant norm of virginity in Turkey. In forsaking virgin identities, women reveal a capacity to destabilize the resilient societal classification of two distinct categories on the basis of their hymen status. Do these educationally advantaged women emerge as active violators of virginity norms? What are the contradictions and tensions they face when their quest for sexual autonomy and freedom conflicts with the expectations of significant others, such as parents? To what extent is resistance or conformity to virginity codes shaped by other sources of identity, such as family class origins, a salient source of identity in Turkey?

This article draws upon interview data from 29 young women born amid the social transformations of the 1980s, aged between 19 and 23.<sup>2</sup> They are coming of age in an era of multiple sources of intensified cultural transformations: Islamization, secular challenges to Islamization and feminism. All my respondents were students at the prestigious Bogazici University in Istanbul and all the interviews were conducted between 2002 and 2004. As an elite institution, Bogazici University offers its students an avenue for upward mobility but also brings together students with vastly different biographies. I draw from the narratives of young women who identify themselves as secular Turks and who share a commonality in their general embracement of feminist ideas, although they vary in claiming or refuting the feminist label. This is a diverse group along class lines, and class is a critical analytical lens on gender and sexual transformations.

I also refer to the interviews I conducted with a number of male respondents to describe their sexual ideology, although male narratives are not the focus of this article.

My aim is not to formulate broadly generalizable conclusions about young Turkish adults' sexual culture and attitudes to virginity but to examine the strategic responses of young upwardly mobile women to the tensions and disjunctures they face when their quest for sexual autonomy and freedom conflicts with the expectations of significant others. Equally important to emphasize is that the conundrum of virginity was, unquestionably, engaged with among earlier generations of Turkish women. In probing the significance of virginity as a charged site of control over women's sexuality, my objective is to illuminate the violation or preservation of virginity norms within the context of the 1980s' multilayered societal transformations, marked also by the emergence of the public discursivity about and on virginity.

#### TRANSFORMATIONS: THE NATIONAL CONTEXT

Over the past 20 years, Turkey has reached a critical crossroads in terms of its identity (Kandiyoti, 2002; Kasaba and Bozdogan, 2000). The ideology of secular, ethnic and linguistic homogeneity of the Turkish Republic has been challenged since the mid-1980s by Islamist groups within the context of globalization, European integration and a vastly liberalized economy. These multilayered social changes have opened new paths of social differentiation and sexual diversity among the Turkish youth. Islamization and its secular challenges are dynamic processes and are producing new selves that are not simply a replication of western secular or orthodox Islamic identities (see also Houston, 2002). This transition to diverse identities is also simultaneously marked by a generational identity that differentiates today's Turkish youth from earlier generations of youth in Turkey, who were, in Leyla Neyzi's (2001) terms, 'objects' of modernist projects. With the emergence of a global youth culture and transnational communication, the post-1980s youth has a greater ability to become 'subjects' of their generational identity in creating and enacting identities and relationships.

After the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, Turkey was the first Islamic country to accomplish the transition to a secular state and was one of the first countries in the world where the political rights of women as citizens were recognized. During the early years of the Republic, women as a focus of the radical westernist and secularizing program of reform represented the crux of modernity. The most important social reforms centered on women, sexuality and family (Gole, 1997; Kandiyoti, 1989; Zihnioglu, 2003). The new Turkish woman embodied the ideals of the West and a rejection of an Ottoman past. In particular, the shedding of the veil came

to symbolize the liberation of women and their participation in the public sphere. The new ideal woman was defined as 'an enlightened' mother in the private sphere and a 'masculinized' public actor (Kandiyoti, 1995). Women were superficially desexualized in that gender was dismissed as irrelevant under the state's policy of equality, while previous anxieties over female sexuality were incorporated into the construction of the new emancipated woman. The modern woman thus envisioned was joined with traditional essentialist conceptualizations of womanhood to create a virtuous, asexual, nationalistic mother. Turkish modernization did not eliminate the transcription of the traditional virtues onto female bodies; it merely transfigured these bodies as both modern and chaste – a paradoxical performance of the modern yet modest yet publicly visible yet virtuous (Parla, 2001). Patriarchy strongly fused with the state and individual forms of paternalism helped to solidify this gender consensus, despite its many lived contradictions. Since the early 1980s, a convergence of several forces, including the emergence of a strong feminist movement and Islamization, has ushered the breakdown of the material and cultural foundations of the republican gender consensus.

Modern Turkish feminism emerged during the early 1980s and is characterized by a complex and complicated engagement with state feminism. Until the 1980s, the republican consensus that the founding fathers' reforms had emancipated women and the perception that there was no need for an independent women's movement had remained uncontested. While attempting to carve out an independent political space vis-a-vis leftist political movements, the feminist activists of the 1980s based their politics on a rejection of the conceptualization of women as objects of paternalistic republican reforms that 'granted them their rights' and instead claimed subjecthood in their own lives (Arat, 1997; Sirman, 1989; Tekeli, 1986). The feminist movement impacted political and intellectual discourses, initiated important changes in the civil code, opened women's shelters, established significant institutions such as women's research centers, introduced women's/gender studies into university curricula, and are now calling for legal changes to institute a quota system in parliament. Building these institutions allowed feminists to articulate and disseminate feminist discourses and enabled them to reach beyond their immediate circles. Indeed, issues such as virginity, honor killings and domestic violence have been the main focus of feminist discourses and activism. In addition to mass demonstrations and public marches, the proliferation of feminist journals and magazines since the post-1980 period not only ushered in feminist issues, including women's sexuality, to the public realm and consciousness but also helped to develop multiple feminist lenses through which to interpret and interrogate popular culture and divisions among feminists on Islam (Arat, 2004).

Despite the unquestionable significance virginity holds for the control and regulation of women's sexuality in Turkey, the meanings girls and women

attribute to virginity remains an understudied topic. During the early 1990s, the question of virginity acquired a prominent place in public discourses, and became a focus of feminist activism (Altınay, 2000). Extensive media attention around virginity emerged in the 1990s owing to a particularly tragic event: the suicide of two teenage girls. Suspected of engaging in sexual misconduct, these girls had been asked to undergo 'a virginity test' to determine if their hymens were intact. As a result of national and international feminist activism to make this practice illegal, in 1999 a decree was passed that makes it illegal for state officials to initiate/request virginity tests without the consent of the woman or girl in question.

Islamism in Turkey has proved to be divergent, multifaceted and changing. Currently, the ruling party, the Justice and Development Party (AKP), has pursued a liberal agenda with a pro-EU and pro-human rights discourse since they came to power with a landslide victory in the 2002 elections. A new generation of Islamic power-holders are now dubbed post-Islamists to reflect the abandonment of the project of establishing an Islamic state, and the rejection of westernization, in favour of democracy and human rights, and pluralism in the course of the EU accession process. This shift from the politics of Islamism to post-Islamism has taken place in a context of a vastly liberalized economy and culture in the post-1980s. The public sphere expanded to accommodate Islamic consumption and leisure and became a major locus of Islamic identities and provided a new basis for Islamic modernity – a mode of social integration into a modern society that created alternative notions of self and new social ties (Gole, 1997). The Islamic media have greatly contributed to the increasing Islamization of the public sphere. In particular, youth-oriented literature has triggered the evolution of the modern Islamic young adult: intellectual, well read, ambitious and socially conscious, who are no longer burdened by an inferiority complex vis-a-vis the West (Saktanber, 2002). Among Islamist women, class-based hierarchies and consumption has problematized Islamic self-expression as they struggle with the paradox of being 'new Islamic women' and how this could fit in with the fundamentalist vision of female chastity and public decorum. The increasing commodification of the Islamic way of life has given rise to a new Islamic individualism embodied by educated head-scarved women in the big cities. This new Islamic individualism is blurring the distinction between religious/traditional and secular/modern by serving to break the head-scarf's association with ignorance and tradition while signaling distance from Islamic fundamentalism and anti-consumerism (Genel and Karaosmanoglu, 2006). As Keyman (2007: 217) observes, 'as Islamic identity claims have become more and more pluralized and multi-dimensional, they have also begun to operate mainly as group-based demands for religious rights and freedoms within the domain of Turkish modernity'.

This growing heterogeneity has been also taking place within the context of the consolidation of neoliberal social and economic reforms and global

consumer culture. The liberalized market economy and the extensive access to the media and the internet has brought about important changes in Turkish youth's relationship to courtship, romance and sex. The proliferation of 'public spaces' that they navigate between home and school has granted them more freedom in self-expression, youth sociability, sexual communication and neoliberal self making. Like elsewhere, the values of the consumer culture form an important force in Turkey today, especially in sexualizing the courtship practices and removing sexual and intimate relations from the considerations of marriage. Norms about courtship and sexuality are now integrally tied to the global commercialization of leisure activities and have been increasingly shaped and defined by the consumer values of liquidity, freedom of choice and of transient but renewable pleasures (Bauman, 2003; Illouz, 1997). However, the discrepancies in access to commercialized leisure and entertainment create fragmentation and polarization among these young adults. The increasing privatization of education coupled with the proliferation of new religious schools with different class and gender orientations has also fragmented youth identities and subcultures (Acar and Ayata, 2002). In short, Turkish young adults today have to develop strategies to embrace, ignore and negotiate globally diffused and often contradictory models of gender relations and sexual norms, including the norm of virginity.

#### SEXUAL AND GENDER IDEOLOGIES OF BOGAZICI WOMEN AND MEN

It is within this larger context of the rapid socioeconomic reconfiguration of Turkey that the young subjects of this article come of age. The overwhelming majority of both women and men in my study characterized their parents' generation as a normative model of selfless femininity and protective masculinity. Renouncing the parental generation's gender ideals, they expressed a desire for an individualized liberated self, autonomy and self-realization in work, marriage and leisure. The ideology of individualism is pivotal in fashioning new gender and sexual identities. This includes claims for sexual autonomy and antipathy toward marriage and parenthood, forming a strong critique of the patriarchal construction of womanhood among their mothers' generation. They all view their mothers in the same critical way: the selfless female devoid of the subjective experience of having an independent self.

However, the escape from traditional femininity and respectability (Alemdaroglu, 2007) to individual selfhood is fraught with tensions and contradictions because it occurs amid a continued societal emphasis on virginity. This insistence on virginity forms and regulates the sexual behavior of young women and figures centrally in the ways in which they enter, negotiate or exit romantic and sexual relationships.

The narratives I collected from 29 women and 21 men reveal an overall strong gender convergence on ideas of sexuality in general, and virginity in particular. First, both the women and the men view societal insistence on female virginity as a mark of traditionalism. They strongly reject the idealization of female chastity and the symbolic value of virginity, its equation with honor and female purity. The intact hymen is not seen as the property of 'others', the family, parents, the nation, culture.

Second, the women and men shared a common narrative in rejecting what they called 'societal sexual restraint and repression.' They promoted heterosexual desire experienced in premarital relations as a positive force – something important to individual happiness and successful future marriage. They also emphasized that the greatest obstacles to the sexual liberation of young Turks are anachronistic notions of virginity and sexual honor.

Third, both young women and men subscribed to an emerging code of sexual ethics that promotes premarital sex within the context of emotionality (*duygusallik*) and love.

Fourth, a vocabulary of gender equality dominated both women's and men's narratives. Four men I interviewed were in agreement with a *conservative single standard* that supports the concept of virginity for both; 16 men embraced a *liberal single standard with virginity for neither*; and one man I interviewed supported the blatantly *sexist double standard*. None of the women I interviewed supported the traditional norm of virginity until marriage.

Fifth, the lived experiences of the tension between embracing a liberal sexual ideology and actual sexual practices also brought to light another important gender commonality. The representation of 'technical virgins', those who engage in various sexual activities but avoid penile-vaginal intercourse, among the young women I interviewed, as a large middle category (7), between virgins (6) and non-virgins (16), highlights this tension.

Finally, but not surprisingly, they draw contrasts between their own values concerning virginity and sexuality, and their parents' generation. This contrast is sharpest among those who were raised in sexually restrictive small towns where mixed-gender interaction among youth and dating practices are limited.

In short, the values held by this group of young Turks mark an important transition to what they consider as sexual modernity. As tradition-free agents, they subscribe to the principle that losing or preserving one's virginity should be a personal matter or choice. The concept of personal responsibility and ownership of the hymen is the key to this shift from external to internal authority. Power located externally to the individual (tradition) is rejected but restraint from within is emphasized (modernity) (Adam, 1996: 138). The changing emphasis from the physical reality of virginity to the morality of virginity is central to this sexual modernity: 'virginity is not between the legs; it resides in the brain', as expressed colloquially by some young women and men I interviewed. Irrespective of



their actual sexual experiences, and privately held views, both young men and women stated that expressing a desire for a virgin bride or wanting to be a virgin bride are no longer acceptable public narratives. This ideological resistance to the preservation of virginity is a prerequisite to the making of modern femininities and masculinities among the educated, secular young Turks I studied. For young men, it is neither entirely advantageous nor practical to desire a virgin because the status of virgin by definition signals inaccessibility and non-availability, a situation that is at odds with the new definitions of masculinity aligned with the values of sexual modernity. Engaging in premarital sex is not only a means of expressing modern liberated masculinity but also a strategy of social distinction from other 'traditional', sexually repressed men.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, for young women, a man who wants a virgin as his bride is seen as backward and therefore not a desirable partner.

It is important to note that their shifting notions of sexuality are couched in the language of the tradition/modernity opposition, revealing the centrality of this dualism in the constitution of their subjectivities. The modernity/tradition opposition exercises a special potency in organizing experience and consciousness, giving rise to a self-reflexivity in which the conduct of feelings of the self are continuously assessed for their modernity or traditionality. I concur with those who argue for the abandonment of the tradition/modernity opposition. However, I believe the centrality of this dualism in people's understanding poses a serious challenge to theoretical attempts to abandon it. Failure to acknowledge the tradition/modernity opposition in interpretation risks a misconstruing of the terms most central to the self-understanding and worldview of its subjects. I preserve the language of my subjects while critically analyzing the binary with the notion of virginal facades to explain the complexity of negotiations and resignifications attached to virginity and sexual honor.

## CONCEPTUALIZING THE HYMEN

How can we conceptualize the hymen sociologically, this fold of flesh, which for much of Turkish history ruled the sexual lives of unmarried women? What does this social/collective investment of the hymen signify? As Mary Douglas (1989) formulated with great clarity, 'what is carved in human flesh is the image of society'. What delineated the confines of the body, its surface and skin, is systematically used to signify the other boundaries informed by social taboos and anticipated transgression. Indeed, the boundaries of the body parallel the confines of the social world. From Douglas's perspective, the hymen as a part of the body becomes a medium for societal classification. The hymen represents the line that demarcates women (*kadin*) from girls (*kiz*), dividing two social statuses.

The law, which codifies the image of a society, exposes these demarcations. Notably, while an attack on the male body is conceptualized as a violation of individual rights, the attack on a female body constitutes a violation of the family order. The virgin or non-virgin as combined with the unmarried/married status of a woman frequently defines the nature of crime and its punishment. In Turkey, up until recent changes in the penal code, the preservation of the family's honor and public decency took precedence at the expense of the victim. For example, a rapist was not held accountable if he consented to marry the woman he raped. Also, a man who abducted an unmarried woman would have received only three years in prison, as opposed to seven if she were married. Virginity examinations, performed on 'political detainees, women suspected of prostitution, and on girls in state orphanages, dormitories, and high schools' (Parla, 2001: 168) were state-sanctioned in Turkey until 1999.<sup>4</sup> Because of feminist and human rights organizations' extensive campaigns and in order to harmonize Turkish civil and penal law with that of the EU, Turkey reformed its civil and penal codes in 2001 and 2004, including the ones pertaining to sexuality and gender relations.

The cultural significance of virginity in societies like Turkey has been explained in terms of the Mediterranean honor and shame complex (Goddard, 1987; Lindisfarne, 1994). Preoccupation with women's chastity/sexual purity appears in the code of honor. In its classical conceptualization, the code of honor refers to the honor or moral purity of a group – that is the group defined as family, lineage, caste, class, region and nation – and this honor is determined by the behavior of its womenfolk. Honor is lost as a result of female misconduct. Women thus carry the burden of safeguarding group identity and group honor. The female body symbolizes the social boundaries of cultural identities, and virginity ultimately represents the demarcation between ingroup and outgroup mores. For example, in actively enforcing the moral order of their own marginalized community in relation to the dominant majority group, Moroccan immigrants in the Netherlands attempt to strategically assert moral superiority by controlling female sexuality (Buitelaar, 2002).

Feminist activism today continues to pivot around the question of so-called honor crimes in southeastern Turkey: the murder by the member(s) of family or kin of women suspected of having transgressed the limits of sexual behavior as imposed by traditions, for example engaging in a premarital relationship, flirting or dressing 'inappropriately'. New feminist scholarship refuses to frame these so-called honor crimes within the singular and narrow paradigm of honor code. They suggest that it is imperative we turn our attention from solely focusing on a particular 'culture' or 'tradition' to an examination of institutional, juridical and legislative practices of the state, arguing that 'what are defined as honor crimes and the ways of dealing with them are produced in relation to these institutional

practices and discourses' (Kocacioglu, 2004: 119). Nukhet Sirman argues that 'the legal institution recognizes the key role played by kinship and the family in the political order and organizes the clauses of the Civil and Penal codes so as to protect the social and familial order rather than the rights of the individual' (Sirman, 2004: 51). Yet human rights and feminist interventions depend on a false vision of a modern nation-state and polity composed of the sovereign, ungendered, autonomous subject conceived as explicitly transcendent of kinship, embedded in honor code.

Similarly, Ayse Parla (2001) challenges the framing of virginity examinations as an appalling and reactionary expression of lingering traditions, constructed in diametrical opposition to the nationalist policy of modernization. By locating virginity examinations in a very specific historical and political context, Parla elucidates how they function as a disciplinary tool of the modern state, which continues to inscribe the paradoxical nationalist ideologies of both 'traditional' virginity and new modernity onto female bodies (modest yet publicly visible yet virtuous). In the post-1980s, when women began reclaiming identities not endorsed by official ideology, the state increased the implementation of virginity examinations to correct and to discipline female bodies in the name of the nation. Legal ambiguity and systematic gender discrimination continue to enable the state's routinized intrusion into women's bodies. Furthermore, the police are literally entrusted with protecting honor and chastity. Anyone who violates 'public morality and the rules of modesty' may be detained. Such ambiguity has allowed police to threaten or force women to undergo virginity examinations, particularly in state institutions like orphanages and prisons. This systematic regulation of female bodies in the name of the nation is most visible in the treatment of political detainees and prostitutes because their sexual behavior is perceived as an act against the state. The threat strategically produces disciplined, desexualized citizens, while the examination, as a corrective penalty, differentiates, classifies and punishes deviants.

The increasing demand for surgically reconstructed hymens sheds light on the intriguing relationship between women's own attempts to gain control over their sexualities and the powerful hold virginity retains in the social milieu. It is argued that this demand for fake virginity by unmarried women is a sign of the weakening of traditional patriarchal control over women's bodies (Cindoglu, 1997; Mernissi, 1982). Cindoglu calls artificial virginity in Turkey a survival strategy for women, arguing that 'a woman's utilization of medicine for her own needs, that is, repairs, may be conceptualized as the manifestation of women's demands for control over their own bodies' (Cindoglu, 1997: 260). The hymen repair, on the one hand, might be a helpful intervention for women in a climate that still values virginity, but, on the other hand, it also reifies virginity itself.

## VIRGINAL FACADES

A virgin is an elite female among females, withheld, untouched, exclusive. (Ortner, 1978: 32)

Among upwardly mobile, educated young Turks, a virgin is not an elite woman anymore but then neither is a self-proclaimed non-virgin. It is between this dichotomy, the virgin and the non-virgin, two undesirable states, that new constructions of young elite (valued) woman are being built.

In order to achieve the new expectations of desirability, the new 'elite' woman must demonstrate a capacity for passion and sex, not just romance and marriage. She must not be sexually innocent or naive but nor should she exude excessive sexual experience. She must evoke sexual availability and accessibility and must be ready to disregard the spatial and moral boundaries of her family. *Vis-a-vis* her female peers, she must reveal a self in control, a capacity to negotiate, attract and reject men successfully. *Vis-a-vis* her parents, she must maintain a facade of being sexually untouched but also engage in relationships with men.

In order to negotiate the contradictory expectations and normative definitions of how young women behave, feel and relate sexually to men, the young women I studied attempted to create identities in relation to their state of virginhood that are purposefully ambiguous. Constructing these identities allows young women to navigate the shifting and undelineated boundaries of what is permissible and prohibited. I call these identities *virginal facades* to capture the dynamic nature of putting on appearances, pretensions and creating or permitting silences that enable young women to accommodate their own desires and negotiate the often conflicting expectations of parents, men and peers. The notion of *virginal facades*, ironically, also befits the facade in the popular and official vernacular of unmarried women as *kiz* (girl), which assumes all unmarried women are virgins. Finally, the notion of *facade* helps to signify the importance of the 'audience' in managing identities: the self must be properly presented and then evaluated by others. Peer group and parents' scrutiny and judgment of the sexual behavior of young women figure strongly in the construction of this virginal facade.

*Motor Girl as the Cautionary Type*

Evaluations of the sexual behavior of women by their peers operate within what Skeggs (1997: 4) terms a dialogic form of recognition: recognizing the recognitions of others. Recognitions are always deeply imbued with value judgments of others. The power of these judgments lies in their explicit or implicit expression through day-to-day peer conversations, romantic and sexual storytelling about others and gossip. These all operate to differentiate, categorize and label young women and their sexual behaviors and

practices, distinguishing 'respectable' girls and relationships from 'bad' girls and undesirable relationships.

Those young women who engage repeatedly in uncommitted encounters involving acts of penetrative sex are judged and categorized as 'promiscuous' and referred to as *motor* or *bir gecelik kızlar* (one-night girls). They are also alternatively labeled as *yirtik* (torn), or *bozulmus* (spoilt) by an explicit reference to the broken hymen. It is not, however, the broken hymen that differentiates her from other girls but her refusal to seek sex within a setting of love. One of the interviewees described her room mates' reactions to her relationship with men by relating how her friends quizzed her motives – questions which in her view emphasized their denial of her own desires and pleasure:

'Why are you sleeping with every man who comes your way? You shouldn't sleep with everyone. How long have you been known that man? Do you love him? Did you really fall for him? . . . why are you letting yourself be used?' As if I myself didn't want it; as if he used me and left me . . . they say 'don't be stupid, you deserve better' as if I need to get something in return: 'will he see you again?' . . .

*Motor's* opposite is not a virgin but a girl who is in control, who 'doesn't let herself be used in a relationship' and who demonstrates internal restraint. But most importantly, *motor* signifies fear of unbridled sexuality and unrestrained sexual freedom. She is the personification of the notion that a young woman who loses her virginity loses control of her sexuality because as a non-virgin she has to sleep with every man she has a relationship with.<sup>5</sup> This fear of 'falling' is not only associated with the danger and stigmatization of multiple sexual encounters and sexual adventure, as personified by *motors*, but it is also linked to a host of other conducts and practices, ranging from multiple brief affairs with or without sexual intimacy, changing boyfriends too often and even falling in and out of love too frequently. All these practices are open to the potential interpretation of a manifestation of unbridled female sexuality. The non-virgin women I interviewed explained that this was the reason some girls are reluctant to 'go all the way'. It is this anxiety about sexual independence and autonomy demanding young women to navigate a domain of complex and freer sexual choices having relinquished their virginity that figures centrally in young women's choices to become technical virgins. This unease is a sign of danger on the threshold of identity, an identity in between with its claims of innocence and sexual purity, and with its fears of dissolution and falling to impurity. It is in this context that losing virginity is considered such a transformative and enduring event.

Another interviewee talked about how her best friend responded harshly after she broke up with a young man whom she didn't even have sex with:

'You finished it again, once more a relationship began quickly and ended quickly.' Her reaction was very hurtful because it was like a reaction: 'Let

me tell you how many men you slept with.' This was very disturbing to me because [it was] as if she was saying 'it is not even clear how many man you have had so far'.

The imperative to 'not let yourself be used' dictates the most salient dimension of 'respectable' expressions of a young woman's sexual behavior, the opposite of what a *motor* is imagined to practice. Yet because this imperative is relative, whether one is 'letting herself be used' cannot be determined outside the specific situational contexts; only those who experience sex with a steady boyfriend in a long-term relationship are able to fix the meaning of it. Thus the virginal facade is not merely about displaying and narrating a self that cannot be recognized as *motor* by others but more importantly is about presenting relationships with men in such a way that compliance to the framework of a fusion of love and sex is clearly present. The language of self-control and self-respect contained in the vocabulary of 'not letting yourself be used' strongly resonates with this particular group of women who are foremost defined by their high-achiever status.

In these new definitions of purity and impurity, a girl who loses her virginity in a long-term relationship, which is assumed to be connected to love, is still morally a virgin (pure); while a woman who loses her virginity during a casual encounter becomes impure. Because long-term relationships and sex within those relationships are privileged in this new code of sexual ethics, the young women I interviewed chose not to disclose their sexual histories and experiences even to close friends, with the exception of a few confidantes. They neither disclose their state of virginhood nor share any information regarding how far they go sexually; instead, they adopt virginal facades. The subjective boundaries technical virgins draw illustrate powerfully how producing the boundaries of appropriate sexual behavior is in the making and serves as a significant emblem of the tensions and ambivalences involved in deploying boundaries that are not yet firmly encoded. While not the only moral gauge, parental expectations form the strongest source of internalized pressure to stay a virgin before marriage, further complicating the enactment of boundaries in the making.

### *Don't Ask, Don't Tell*

Even though daughters' understanding of parental expectations concerning their sexuality involves the dictum that they should remain untouched until marriage, it would be quite wrong to assume that parental control manifests itself only in terms of inhibition. According to these young women's narratives, daughters are actively encouraged by their mothers to 'find someone' so that they can maintain a 'respectable' relationship with a desirable young man who could potentially become a future husband. This parental expectation is especially true for lower-class families

who are eager to marry their daughters upwards. Even the most sexually conservative parents expect their daughters to use their chances to build a romantic relationship that could lead to marriage with a higher-status spouse. Similarly, upper middle-class families' downward mobility concerns also motivate an interest in the daughters' intimate relationships.

Generally speaking, for the parents of Bogazici women, the relative sexual freedom of their daughters, the ease with which they interact with male peers and the formation of deep cross-gender friendships are in fact symbolic of their modern, educated and cultivated status. As high-achieving girls, they are also expected to have fun and engage in respectable courtship with men. Yet the parental definition of a respectable relationship promotes sexual modesty, restraint and the preservation of virginity. How do daughters then manage such a tightrope of liberated modernity and sexual restraint?

Young women remain silent about temporary boyfriends. Boyfriends are introduced to parents if they are intended to last. Daughters also don't disclose boyfriends when they anticipate parental disapproval of a particular partner. Moreover, they do not talk about or introduce partners who fit the definition of a perfect future 'groom' if they are ambivalent about them. This is to avoid the opposite problem: being pressured to maintain an unsatisfying relationship. However, the most important concern for a young woman is to avoid creating an image of herself as a serial dater: someone who struggles and constantly fails in her relationships, and continually needs to move on to the next man, blemishing her high-achiever status. In response to my question why she was hiding her current relationship from her parents, one respondent related a very common experience:

Why I feel the need to keep it secret . . . because I already told them [her parents] about the previous boyfriend and about the one before him. Both of them ended fairly quickly, we didn't get along. This time I decided not to tell them before I get certain things [in the relationship] on track. Because if it ends again quickly I don't want to face them once more to say: 'it has finished again'.

These silences also enhance daughters' freedom to navigate their clandestine life zones without constantly lying. A virginal facade inevitably leads to a clandestine life. Those who live away from family and/or live on or off campus (alone or with friends) have ample opportunities for transgressions, therefore they tend to disclose less to the parents, and their secret lives tend to be more extensive. In contrast, young women who live with their families in Istanbul have limited opportunities to transgress, and thus their secret lives tend to be harder to manage. Not surprisingly, sexual secrecy creates guilt, and guilt is steeped in social class.

Those who expressed the most guilt are the ones who come from modest class backgrounds with uneducated parents, typically with rural origins.

Compared to savvy, highly educated upper middle-class parents, these parents' lack of knowledge about the daily life-worlds of their daughters poorly equip them in understanding the cultural milieu and relationships in which their daughters have entered through their education in an elite environment in Istanbul, enabling their daughters to put on facades easily. One of my respondents had had many short-term sexual relationships, as well as a longer relationship with a boyfriend but was still a technical virgin. She comes from a modest family background with uneducated parents. Living at home made it especially hard for her to experience her sexual autonomy and required her to lie constantly, intensifying her guilt for posing as what she called 'a false sense of self':

I am not who my parents think I am. . . . in my parents' mind I am so far away from sexuality [being a sexual being] . . . I am such a little innocent girl I have nothing to do with those kinds of things [sexual] . . . I feel like I have to behave the way they want me to behave, because they are the ones who give me everything. When I go home after a sexual experience and see them treat me as an innocent person [it] makes me feel guilty. I feel so bad about myself. . . . This weekend I told them I went to Ankara for a school trip, though I went to see a male friend [with whom she had sexual encounter]. Everything was fine and beautiful there for a while but it was still in my mind while I was having sex what my parents were thinking that I am innocently taking tours with the university. . . . it is so hard to feel this pressure. . . . It is so hard to live with this contradiction. . . . In the past because premarital sexuality is [a] sin and forbidden I was feeling guilty also in front of God but I transcended that [overcame that]. But I can't transcend this one.

Another technical virgin from a modest social class background made the following comment in response to my question of whether she would tell her mother if she lost her virginity:

If I lose it of course I won't tell my mother but then every time I see my mother I will remember it [losing my virginity] and will feel guilty, thinking 'how did I do such a thing? She doesn't feel anything right now but had she known she would be feeling horrible, and a huge disappointment in me.'

Acceptance into an elite university, such as Bogazici, demands long-term investment by families in their children's education and many financial and emotional parental sacrifices. In turn, daughters have a strong sense of emotional indebtedness to their parents. This indebtedness translates into an intense desire to protect their parents from potential disappointments and unhappiness. It is within this social class context that we should consider young women's intense feelings of guilt.

None of the upper middle-class daughters' narratives contained expression of guilt toward their mothers in relation to their secret sexual practices or virginity status. It seems they take parental sacrifices for granted because their class privileges and advantages assume familial



investment in their elite education. Also, it seems their parents are those who most 'feign' ignorance about their daughters' virginal facades. Perhaps because the daughters recognize that the parents know but pretend not to, they are less likely to feel guilty.

The Turkish case reminds us we cannot isolate sex and sexuality from questions of social class and its privileges as well as its injuries. Class is central to the formation of women's sexual subjectivities, especially in relation to young women's assertion of sexual autonomy and resistance to the regulation of their desires. Those young women who actively elude and resist the merging of sex with love are staging a clandestine and individualized sexual revolution. But some of these personal sexual revolutions have a greater potential to be stalled than others because they carry with them the extra burden of social class disadvantage, personally experienced as sexual guilt. Sexual guilt reveals its capacity to articulate class and sexuality, but it reveals much more as well. The young woman plagued by guilt, whom I quoted earlier, unlike her upper middle-class peers, did not plan a postgraduate education, despite the fact that she was majoring in a prestigious field, and was about to graduate with good grades. She wanted to get married (without even falling in love) as soon as possible, the only way she thought she could end her masquerade as an 'innocent' girl vis-a-vis her parents. Pushing her into early marriage and domesticity, guilt has become the single most important feeling in the formation of her personal and professional identity. Unlike disadvantaged revolutionaries like her, upper middle-class young women's class shields them from the injuries of sexual guilt and shame when they transgress parental boundaries because their class privilege does not construe an elite education as a source of parental indebtedness.

But how credible are virginal facades vis-a-vis men and the parents? One of the young women I interviewed was vivid in describing a very close friend's virginal façade:

. . . every man she is with she shows him as if he is the first man in her life. Her every kiss is as if it is her first kiss. Her every love-making is as if it is the first time.

I asked her, and others: Do men believe this? Their response was reasonable: 'Yes because they would like to believe.' Virginal facades help young men to cope with the tension between the modern masculine renunciation of the importance of virginity and the loss of the male prerogative of being the first man.

The parents commonly adopt a 'don't ask don't tell policy' concerning their daughters' virginity, according to the daughters I interviewed, including the most sexually liberal parents. This policy, freeing daughters from feigning compliance or shielding them from potential conflicts with their parents, saves the parents from the anxieties of knowing. Indeed, everyone is investing in the facade.

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## CONCLUSION

The norm of virginity in Turkey is fragile and subject to challenges from the new elite women whose parents' insistence that their daughters remain untouched is profoundly contradicted by heavy investments in their daughters' education, which stretches between puberty and marriage. This contradiction opens up, both discursively and experientially, new paths of sexual freedom and autonomy for young women who forsake virginity and negotiate new identities as unmarried non-virgins. In the process of negotiating often contradictory expectations of their sexual behavior, they cultivate virginal facades to accommodate the old norms still grounded in virginity as well as the new rules of an emerging premarital sex culture. The moralizing discourses of this new culture privileges the morality of virginity as a new norm by which it becomes acceptable for young women to lose their virginity as long as it is within the context of love and emotional investment. Virginal facades allow young women to navigate these complex ambiguities of the moving boundaries of permitted and prohibited.

It is important to note that this premarital sex culture and its ideals for young women's sexuality are being formed in a cultural milieu of increasingly diversified moral values. The embrace of pious identities among educationally advantaged young women has invited new challenges to gender and sexual politics in Turkey. Some of these women have turned to feminism to identify patriarchal oppression. They reject the 'moralizing definition of woman in Islam' and the 'pseudo protection of women' as constructs that reassure men and confine women to the private sphere (Gole, 2000: 100–1). Their identification of Muslim men as part of the problem and consequent demand for independence creates a truly radical cleavage between women who unquestioningly acquiesce and those who fashion new, unique self-definitions not recognized by traditional Islamic morality, 'which is based on control of female sexuality and separation of the sexes' (Gole, 2000: 86). The transgression of gender rules is a transgression against Islam (especially feminine virtue). This new pious female identity is being formed in a complex field of tension with the secular order where exclusionary policies such as banning the headscarf dramatically undermine gender equality and any notions of pluralism. Yet, paradoxically these young women are being empowered by their education in a secular milieu to imagine and affirm a new Muslim female identity, not relegated to the private sphere. They pursue their religious identities in relation to and as part of a wider collective of differences that present these women with a wider framework and horizon to interpret and validate the new Muslim identity. The degree to which these women's new subjectivities change Muslim gender relations and reconfigure the 'Muslim sexual habitus' is an open question. Nonetheless, this gender polarization within educated Muslim young adults should be considered highly significant in the formative principles of a new Islamic sexual morality. To my knowledge, there is no in-depth empirical study of

pious educated men in Turkey, and they are only known from appearance in fiction and autobiography. Sociologists who analyze the fictionalized accounts of new Muslim men point out the transformative power of love and intimacy, altering Muslim male identity from a militant unitarian identity to a moderate and less dogmatic one (Gole, 2000; Houston, 2002; Saktanber, 2007). The new Muslim men in these accounts refuse to reproduce the dominant values of a communitarian morality that tolerates male–female intimacies and socialization only within the accepted boundaries of Islam. It is safe to assume that the question of sex and marriage will figure significantly in the crystallization and trajectory of Islamic modernity and add a new layer of complexity as desire, pleasure and sexual entitlement for women continue to be the most challenging issues confronting feminist politics in Turkey.

Addressing the question of whether virginal facades empower or disempower young women is difficult. Ambiguity and secrecy, in their various combinations, have the potential to empower young women because they allow them to enter into the realm of embodied sexuality. And also, they enable them to transgress parental boundaries by enlarging the parameters within which they can express desire and engage in sexual interaction and increase their sexual knowledge. Yet putting on virginal facades ultimately reinforces the valuation of virginity and diverts attention away from articulating a discourse of desire and pleasure as well as exploring social and emotional risks of sexual intimacy (see Fine, 1988). Protecting one's reputation with a virginal facade comes with a heavy price. This loss of empowerment among young Turkish women find its powerful expression in virginal facades, technical virginity and surgically reconstructed virgin identities as private enactments of hidden subversions – not collective/public challenges. These hidden practices of modern sexual honor point vividly to the contradictions between emerging individual strategies that foster new sexual subjectivities and the limits of a multifaceted patriarchal order.

## NOTES

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1. The focus of this article is those young Turks in my study who self-identified themselves as heterosexual.
2. This article is part of a larger study that includes interviews also with the new pious Muslim women, and gay and lesbians. They are not included in this article.

3. Similarly, Goksel (2006: 58) notes that men 'associated modernity and Westernization with the ability to approve of, or at least tolerate, women who engaged in premarital sex'.
4. See Altinay (2000) for a personal account of feminist activism on virginity and Seral (2000) for legal issues surrounding virginity testing.
5. James Farrer (2002) discusses remarkably similar attitudes among Shanghai youth.

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