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## Chapter 13

### The Daring *Mahrem*:

#### Changing Dynamics of Public Sexuality in Turkey<sup>1</sup>

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As social transformations and new forms of sexualities are studied with close interest by social scientists, the question regarding the content and the formation of heterosexual culture that makes and remakes itself on a daily basis through forming boundaries and normalities remains theoretically less explored. Yet such a concern calls for further elaboration of the very boundaries in sexuality that differentiate public from private, intimate from distant. Indeed, in their pioneering article, Berlant and Warner discuss sex and sexuality as something “mediated by public” and argue that heterosexual culture creates privacy in order to identify and operate itself and preserve its own coherency. Albeit private, intimacy “also involves an aspiration for a narrative about something to be shared (1998:281).

This chapter looks at the heterosexual culture in Turkey as a system that creates its own institutions of intimacy and privacy, which regulate their sexualities and bodies in public through creating borders, normalcies, and privileges. In order to address this question, I focus on the culture of *mahremiyet* (the Islamic notion of privacy and intimacy) as an “institution of intimacy” (1998), and gazing and hiding are the two fundamental components of this culture. I also share two vignettes that trouble the culture of *mahremiyet* in seemingly unrelated, but in fact deeply connected ways: the headscarf-wearing cover girls of *Âlâ* magazine and the kissing protest in Ankara, both of which threaten the power dynamics of gazing and hiding in the culture of *mahremiyet*. I argue that the culture of *mahremiyet* is central to the ways in which

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<sup>1</sup> A much shorter version of the kissing protest section of this chapter is published on the *Cultural Anthropology* blog under the title “Kissing the Mahrem in Ankara.” Fieldsights—[Hot Spots, Cultural Anthropology Online, October 31, 2013](#).

both public and private sexuality are imagined, regulated, and screened in everyday life. Gaze, whether it is cross-gender or same-gender, is still a very prevalent phenomenon in contemporary Turkey, shaping women's control of their bodily movements in public life. The aggressiveness of the gaze leads to a multi-layered process of guarding privacy and protecting heterosexual intimacy through cultural scripts, normative spaces, and gendered acts in urban spaces in Turkey. Women's strict management of their bodies in terms of public sexuality is multilayered and multifaceted, shifting depending on space and context. I suggest that studying *mahrem* as an institution of intimacy will allow us not only to understand the conditions that make and remake the intimacy, but also to question the very nature of "secrecy" and "porousness" in it. The culture of *mahremiyet* as an Islamicate institution reflects the technologies that not only interlink public and private aspects of heterosexuality but also make and remake itself in the context of Turkey.

The term "Islamicate" is borrowed from Babayan and Najmabadi (2008), who adopted the term from historian Marshall G.S. Hodgson and used it to "highlight a complex of attitudes and practices that pertain to cultures and societies that live by various versions of the religion Islam" (Babayan and Najmabadi 2008:ix). It refers to the contexts in which Islam is lived as a religion in society, although it may not be imagined within the same interpretations or followed by each and every individual at the same level of devotion. The term allows researchers to locate the values associated with Islam with local fractions within its historical and geographical limitations, without necessarily essentializing those values at the center of the lives of those who are living in that context. Islamicate nicely fits into the purpose of this chapter, as it aims to develop a comprehensive understanding of the ways in which sexuality operates in everyday life and the agencies of the individuals who are in continuous negotiation with border-making institutions, enactments, and imaginations, through dimming, obscuring, and obliterating those borders.

### **Mahremiyet**

*Mahremiyet* is a word that is not translatable into English, as it simultaneously refers to multiple words in English, including privacy, secrecy, and domesticity. It is derived from the word *mahrem*, which literally means "forbidden."<sup>2</sup> The word, in Turkish, commonly denotes a private, often sexual realm in the lives of

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<sup>2</sup> The ending -iyet in *mahremiyet* acts like a derivational noun suffix and turns it into a categorical term.

individuals, couples, or families and is therefore confined by normative boundaries. Although the word *mahrem* is originally Arabic, derived from h-r-m, which simultaneously means sacred and forbidden, I will be discussing *mahrem* in relation to the ways in which it is used in the Turkish language for this research. Depending on the context in which the word *mahrem* is used, it may or may not refer to the sexual realm, but it always denotes confidentiality that the insider is expected to preserve and an outsider is expected not to violate. In one of the most prominent works related to contemporary forms of *mahremiyet* in Turkey, Nilüfer Göle (1996) attempts to link the concept to the political realm in order to further analyze visible Islam's relationship with modernity and secularity. Göle underlines the impossibility of fitting the "insider-outsider" dichotomy of *mahrem* into the Western public vs. private binary.<sup>3</sup> She says, "*mahrem* literally refers to intimacy, domesticity, secrecy, women's space, what is forbidden to a foreigner's gaze; it also means a man's family" (1996:7). This chapter, however, is going to focus on the culture of *mahremiyet* as an individual understands it in relation to sexuality in everyday life, as a border-making mechanism that creates borders between spaces, between individuals, and within the body of the same individual. In fact, the query on *mahremiyet* and the prerogative to infringe on such boundaries, then, is the key aspect of this chapter. Veiled models posing for fashion magazine shoots and urban couples kissing to protest the banning of public expressions of intimacy are troubling because they both infringe on *mahrem* boundaries in contemporary Turkey.

*Mahremiyet* is a governing idea in contemporary Turkey that leads to institutions of intimacy (Berlant 1998), and the daily techniques that individuals, and women in particular, use to regulate spaces in everyday life. The daily techniques are created to handle interactions with various people in a range of settings from the bus to the streets, or while shopping or working. Thus, the way Islamic *mahremiyet* is analyzed here does not necessarily involve a theological or legal analysis *per se*. The emphasis is instead on an anthropological analysis that relates to individuals' own conceptualizations and imagination and how gendered they are.

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<sup>3</sup> In fact, the literature of anthropological studies has attempted to go beyond the public-private dichotomy to further understand socialities and proximation in non-Western societies and question the applicability of such dichotomy, not only in non-Western, but also in Western settings. Edward T. Hall, for instance, suggested the term "proxemics," non-verbal communication in intersubjective relations in multiple social settings.

*Mahremiyet* is constituted through cultural scripts, normative spaces, and gendered acts in the Islamicate contexts of the Middle East. Thus *mahremiyet* is defined, made, and remade in daily life as part of the institutions of privacy that Berlant says are “created to stabilize” and “normalize particular forms of knowledge and practice and to create compliant subjects” (1998:286,288). The culture of *mahremiyet* creates a practical knowledge deeply embedded, not only in the *mahrem*’s (often women’s) embodied sexuality in public, but also in the way individuals imagine gender relations within the heterosexual culture in which they have found themselves. Sexuality is regulated through regulation of the body, not only through covering but also through a series of organized behaviors, movements, and attitudes in order not to attract attention, looks, and gazes.

### **Gazing as Penetration**

The significance of gaze in the Turkish cultural imagination, combined with the *nazar* (strong eye),<sup>4</sup> complicates the culture of *mahremiyet* as an institution of privacy, and it convolutes the layers of privacy even further, more deeply and in a more entangled way, so that it is quite difficult to fully comprehend Turkish everyday life through theories on gaze and looking in the Western world. An important component of the literature on gaze appears in performance studies in Western scholarship, which often call for a visit to the Foucaultian gaze in relation to the visual domination in the operation of power and its relation to space (Urry 1992:176–77). Yet the Foucaultian gaze provides little basis to understand how gaze operates in self-formation in intersubjective relations. From the psychoanalytic perspective, practices of looking are considered to be an important part of the processes in the formation of the subject. Gaze was one of the terms Lacan used (*le regard*, almost exclusively translated into English as “gaze”) when he referred to looking or staring, often with desire. Thus, the concept Lacan uses is more than just seeing—it conveys a relationship between the one who looks and the one who is looked at. Moreover, Lacanian gaze is both physical and imagined. As he states in *objet Petit a*: “The gaze that I encounter...is not a seen gaze [that is, not an eye that I see looking at me] but a gaze imagined by me in the field of the Other...” (Lacan 1981:84,82). In Turkish culture, on the other hand, gaze has non-human agency, with its capacity to bring misfortune or illness through *nazar* as it can touch on people (*nazar değmesi*). The physicality of the gaze,

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<sup>4</sup> Despite the common misunderstanding and mistranslation, *nazar* in fact refers to a strong look at another, whether it conveys envy or love.

therefore, is much more concrete, so it creates powerful and ambient rules, emotions, or beliefs around itself.

While I was writing this article, a new video campaign was popular on social media amongst feminist circles of Turkey.<sup>5</sup> This video was created by Whistling Woods International, to raise awareness of rapes in India. The video did not try to achieve its goal by sharing statistics on rape and sexual harassment. Instead, it depicted various scenes where men are staring at women's bodies with strong desire, in a harassing manner. Then, the women put a mirror in front of whatever parts of their bodies men were staring at, and the men felt *uncomfortable* when they saw their own reflections. The gaze was reversed, and the message was conveyed—except the video was against rape, not public harassment. Moreover, none of the men in the video were harassing a woman with their words or by touching. Still, the *gaze*, and especially the *male gaze*, had a particular sexual significance in the culture where this video was made (India) and where it was being shared (Turkey), so that women were able to see a direct relationship between rape, sexual harassment, and the male gaze. In that sense, the video treated the male gaze like a micro-reflection of rape.

Gaze and gazing at bodies produces a sexual script. Gazing penetrates when it trespasses the *mahrem* borders, therefore violating the privacy of the seen. Once it trespasses these set borders, the gaze becomes penetration and therefore sexually active—a perspective that has existed in Turkish understanding of sexuality for centuries, according to Dror Ze'evi (2006). In his historical account, Ze'evi refers to such duality of the aggressive, masculine, and penetrating versus the meek, feminine, and penetrated in Ottoman society. The *mahrem*, the forbidden private one, is enclosed; it veils, covers, and hides, whereas the masculine stares, trespasses, opens up, and enters. Ze'evi says: "The body, by virtue of its composing substances rather than any divinely appointed soul, would have a strong or weak sexual urge, a feminine or masculine, active or passive, penetrating or penetrated type of sexuality" (2006:22). The curious, penetrating gaze, therefore, is a micro-level reflection of the cultural heterosexual imagination of the

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<sup>5</sup> Kanupali, Deepa, "This Ad from India Shows Men Exactly How Creepy They Are when They Stare at Women on the Street," Upworthy, <http://www.upworthy.com/this-ad-from-india-shows-men-exactly-how-creepy-they-are-when-they-stare-at-women-on-the-street?c=cur1> and Whistling Woods International, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SDYFqQZEdRA> .

masculine position. It satisfies curiosity, gives victorious pleasure to the gazer—the pleasure to transgress—and creates a strong discomfort in the one who guards the borders, especially if those borders are on that person’s own body. Even if the *seen* is not aesthetically appealing, the satisfaction of breaking the boundaries may involve some pleasure of trespassing into prohibited zones.

One of the main components of the regulations derived from this principle is visible in space-related arrangements in history. *Harem*, for instance, was a space where female guests were hosted, and occasionally blood-related male relatives were allowed in. In houses where there was *harem*, it was often the case that *harem* was located at the interior of the house, where insiders could see outside (garden, street, main room) but outsiders could not see inside. As opposed to the common misunderstanding, *harem* actually refers not to the zone of women *per se*, but to the domestic sphere where male relatives can socialize with the female ones, such as fathers, daughters, sons, and siblings. Moreover, seeing appears as a central component of this space regulation. Insider-outsider-ness or regulating who can see whom has been an important component of the spatial structure of *harem* (Lad 2010) and has parallels with public-domestic dichotomies in other contexts as they simultaneously feed each other and secure the existing system (Strathern 1987, 1990). In Lad’s analysis, the gazing relationship between outsider and the segregated zone is to “cautiously avert” the gaze from there, “rather than steal a glimpse inside” (2010:147). Schick (2010) suggests a Foucaultian reading of *harem* from the perspective of space and power. He incorporates the possibilities of thinking about the ways in which certain Islamic heteroerotics are enabled with the use of spatial regulations to mediate seeing.<sup>6</sup> It is therefore important to analyze the significance of gazing in contemporary Turkey, where visual culture filled with revealing images is so widespread. Moreover, how should one understand the institutions and technologies of intimacy in contemporary Turkey?

### **Vignette 1: Headscarved Cover Girls as the Daring Mahrem**

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<sup>6</sup> In his former and more extensive work framed by the ontologies of sexuality and space, Schick (1999) develops an elaborate analysis of multiple (often eroticized) depictions of *harem* that he refers to as “alteritist” (rather than orientalist) and symbolic violations of the *mahrem* borders by “*making transparent* of its walls” (Emphasis original, 15). What Schick refers to as walls are what I call *mahrem* borders in this research. By problematizing the voyeuristic nature of those previous works, Schick simultaneously points out the gaze as something that penetrates those borders for pleasure.

It is a humid day in Istanbul and I am sitting in the café of a shopping mall with a key interlocutor from the field. Her name is Firuze and she is giving me information about the latest trends in the lives of the Islamic bourgeoisie of Istanbul. During our conversation, she says, “So, have you seen *Âlâ*?” I first thought she was speaking about one of the soap operas on Turkish TV, so I was disappointingly indifferent to her question. Realizing my disinterest, Firuze pointed out a fashion magazine lying on the table of two young women sitting two tables away from ours. She insisted that I check it out and asked permission to borrow the magazine from the two women.

Firuze is a pious woman, sensitive about her spiritual life, and does not want to fall behind the trends within her circles, mostly upper-class Islamic circles of Istanbul. She connects with her high-school friends, her neighbors, her friends, and her family through weekly religious meetings (*sohbet*), as well as through social media, mainly Facebook, twitter, Foursquare, and Instagram. According to this pious middle-class housewife, *Âlâ* represents a non-pious stream and a trend-setting popular culture icon in Islamic circles, which is something she finds almost entertaining. She thinks that *Âlâ* is not simply a non-pious magazine, it is also curiously successful: “It was sold out within the same week,” she says, looking right into my eyes, with a surprised face. *The New York Times* characterized *Âlâ* as “Vogue of the Veiled,”<sup>7</sup> referring to the fusion of conservative Muslim values and high fashion.

*Âlâ* started its publishing life in June 2011 and sold the first volume during June and July. The volume Firuze fetched from the next table had a young woman, looking like a teenager (I later was informed by the editor of the magazine that she was 21), posing with a sweet smile in her white jacket and pink scarf on its cover. The issues covered in this volume included the art of stylish head-covering (silk scarves dossier and “Covering is Beautiful” essay contest), and homosocial enjoyments (having a holiday on a boat with an all-female crew).

Firuze was very curious about my response to the magazine, partly because she did not know how to feel about it. I was quite puzzled myself that I could not really formulate my thoughts or my feelings about it. It was obviously interesting as a research subject, the girl on the cover was pretty, but there was

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<sup>7</sup> Bilefsky, Dan, “A Fashion Magazine Unshy About Baring a Bit of Piety,” *The New York Times*. March 29, 2012, [http://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/29/world/europe/a-turkish-fashion-magazine-ala-is-unshy-about-showing-some-piety.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/29/world/europe/a-turkish-fashion-magazine-ala-is-unshy-about-showing-some-piety.html?_r=0).

something uncanny about it. Later on, I realized that it is this feeling *Âlâ* gives in its first encounter that is worth looking more closely at. It was confusing, bemusing, and for many, disturbing. Most people I talked to in Istanbul, whether pious or not, had strong feelings about the magazine, not necessarily because they have read it, but because they saw what I saw, somewhere at a shopping mall, on their neighbor's coffee table, or at the hairdresser's: a headscarf-wearing cover girl. The feelings they shared, albeit strong, were mostly unsure and bemused. In several other instances, when I carried the magazine around the city before or after an interview, I recognized negative responses. Once, I was sitting in a coffee shop in Maltepe, interviewing an interlocutor. The woman sitting beside us said, "Look at that," to her friend out loud, pointing out the magazine on our table. She continued: "How meaningless it is, what they do. They both cover their heads and pose in these magazines."<sup>8</sup> As a non-headscarf-wearing woman, she was trying to convey her message to two headscarf-wearing women—us. Her discomfort was not coming from a secular sentiment, either, as she was taking up the same criticism that Islamist authors in Turkey have articulated several times: that the women in the magazine were both covering their bodies and exposing them to the public eye (Gün 2007, Barbarosoğlu 2005). Whether secular or Islamist, women's public sexuality is expected to avert the gaze, especially the male gaze, which seemed to be a shared masculinist perception. I then thought about the meanings of posing, veiling, and revealing as fundamental parts of public female sexuality in Turkey and realized that the discomfort people had about the *Âlâ* cover girls is worth ethnographic attention.

### **The Uncanny *Âlâ* Girls: Headscarved Women Posing with Pride**

Women's headscarf is assumed to be a visual acknowledgment of the power relation of gazing and hiding in the culture of *mahremiyet*. In her extensive work on headscarf-wearing women in cities in the 1990s of Turkey, Nilüfer Göle visits the historical development of the public debate regarding the female body in public spheres from a sociological point of view. She says, "The female body, which long established the boundaries between the realms of *mahrem* and *namahrem*, still influences the social projects" (1996:35). Göle convincingly demonstrates the continuation of women's privacy (*mahrem*) as something to be preserved, from the Tanzimat Period of the Ottoman Empire in the late 1800s till the Islamist movement of

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<sup>8</sup> Field Notes, 22 January 2012.

the 1980s. As I will argue here, the realms of *mahrem* and *namahrem* not only influence the social projects, but also, as Berlant and Warner put it, create and signify a community that “is imagined through scenes of intimacy.” The public learns and relearns what might be characterized as the “normal” intimate, the *mahrem*, and is able to judge it with reference to the culture of *mahremiyet* that created its own norms.

Following Göle’s account, a religiously headscarved female body is generally imagined to be the *volunteered mahrem*, a body that acknowledges the power of the *namahrem* male gaze as something to be avoided, both in the minds of the public, and in academic works (Kılıçbay and Binark 2002). Since the headscarf is almost immediately associated with acknowledgment of *mahrem* bodies as (potential and even volunteered) objects of male desire, recent fashion trends among headscarved women are difficult to understand. According to this secularist (and simultaneously masculinist) perspective, “the wearing of the veil ensures that the norms of publicness and privacy are absolutely subordinated to the power of the male gaze, the authority and privilege of which are granted and justified by Islam” (Çınar 2005: 77).<sup>9</sup> This perspective, according to Çınar, was often used by secularist feminists in order to rationalize headscarf bans at universities in the early 2000s.

What Çınar refers to as a feminist approach that expects avoidance of the male gaze as the inherent impulse of a veiled female body shares curious parallels with the Islamic conservative perspective, which reveals why I trace shared masculinist tendencies in both perspectives. They both locate headscarf-wearing as an idealistic act of a *mahrem* body, which should prioritize discreetness, according to several Muslim conservatives (Şişman 2006, Barbarosoğlu 2005, Gün 2007). In her book *Imaj ve Takva (Image and Piety)*, Barbarosoğlu questions the rising interest in fashion amongst headscarf-wearing women. In Barbarosoğlu’s account, fashion becomes problematic, not only in the bodies of headscarf-wearing women *per se*, but in the ways in which it is carried on the streets, in public life. In other words, it is a subject of criticism for Barbarosoğlu when headscarf-wearing women walk on the streets in colorful and tight clothes

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<sup>9</sup> I would like to note here that in spite of the common understanding, women’s veiling should not be read solely based on restricting sexual desire. Muslim veiling is adapted not only in the presence of *mahrem* opposite sex, but also during prayer, which indicates that it has a spiritual aspect as well. My discussion here, however, aims to focus on the intersubjective aspect of the culture of *mahremiyet* and its impact on particular normative sexuality.

in an attractive manner. They attract gaze, mainly the *namahrem* male gaze, which is at the heart of Barbarosoğlu's criticism. She uses the term "*dikkat çekici*," which is the proper translation for "attractive," and it literally means "attention-grabbing." She starts her work by describing the centrality of avoidance from gaze, especially the male gaze, in relation to modesty and the religious headscarf, and explains how it is inherently problematic that headscarf-wearing women, who are supposed to avoid the gaze, are attracting it in today's world.

After over two decades of Göle's work and a number of other studies in Turkey on women and the headscarf in Turkey (Gökarıksel 2009, 2012, Kömeçoğlu 2009, Özcan 2012, Bilge 2010, Gökarıksel and Mitchell 2005, Ozdalga 1998, Shively 2005, Navaro-Yashin 2002), it is unripe to suggest that women wear the headscarf simply because they are fully submissive to the culture of *mahremiyet* as volunteer *mahrem*s or accept the norms of the culture wholly. On the contrary, we keep witnessing moments that indicate a more complex dynamic between the culture of *mahremiyet* and headscarf-wearing women. They appear on TV, on the streets, and in the newspapers in colorful and tight outfits, in heavy makeup, using a daring body language. Those moments imply that women do not seem to be willing to fit into the social projects, and keep confounding, puzzling, and even troubling the norms, discourses, and perceptions about them. Indeed, *Âlâ*'s headscarved cover girls are covering parts of their bodies but simultaneously uncovering by posing for the gaze, thus following and violating *mahrem* norms at once.

The editor of the magazine, Hülya Aslan, explains to me that the cover girls are in fact professional models she personally selects from the portfolio of their agency. She dresses them up according to the theme and the colors of the volume. *Âlâ* became the topic of hot debate<sup>10</sup> when it invited Eastern European models to pose suggestively in luxurious haute couture and bright scarves.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> *Âlâ* has a history of sparking controversies and attracting criticisms, including the disquiet of religious scholars about the flaunting of femininity, the discomfort of the secular Turkish public at what they perceive to be a case of hypocrisy of mixing religion with extravagance, and the annoyance of Muslim intellectuals at the extremes of conspicuous consumption and commercialism.

<sup>11</sup> Aslan explains their choice to me in purely professional terms—how it is important for the magazine to have to pick the model from the portfolio to fit into the coming volume and dress the models up as they wish. She also mentions that Eastern European models are able to stay positive and provide good photos even after extended hours of shooting.

Yet as a photo-performance, whether they are of Eastern European origin or not, the headscarved cover girls go against the normativity of secular politics by representing Turkish women as unveiled/modern/progressive, and also against the pedagogy of Islamic appropriation of women's public embodiment and unruly sexuality. Their puzzling and perplexing performance promises a new becoming that refuses to hide itself from the public gaze and dares by posing. Moreover, models' use of their bodies as sites of expression and performance is meaningful, considering the ways in which women are expected to control their privacies when leaving the domestic space and entering the public arena. As Özyürek (2006) points out, the republican project also asked their women to control their privacy and sexuality in public. In other words, the culture of *mahremiyet* has been further reinforced by the secularist project as nationhood and its modern values have always been redefined and represented through appropriated female bodies.

The women of *Âlâ* are perplexing not because they are awkward, ungrammatical, or completely new. They are strangely familiar and yet unfamiliar, since they are almost misplaced, embodied oxymorons. The emotional response to their appearance is discomfort, if not anxiety, similar to the definition of "uncanny": "frightening precisely because it is *not* known and familiar" (Freud 1995 [1919]:154). Uncanny refers to an instance of cognitive dissonance felt because of the paradoxical nature of feeling familiar and strange towards an object (or a person) at the same time. In the case of *Âlâ* women, the uncanny is not a material object like a living doll, but a living person, and the "spectator" is the position of looking at their uncanny images, which are both familiar, with their traditional and Islamic scarves, and strange, with their poses and their daring eyes that look directly at the spectator. The headscarf is "familiar," "native," "belong[s] to the home" in Freud's terms (1995[1919]:154), and this familiarity falls into the "inside" of the *mahrem* border. Yet the women's full lips with shiny lipstick and their smoky eyes look strangely unfamiliar, like those of an outsider. These confusing oxymorons evoke a perfect uncanny moment that is not necessarily a contradiction, but only a complication (1995[1919]:152).

There is a bodily uncertainty about the headscarved cover girls that provokes uncanny feelings from both the secular and Islamist worlds: they are not pious, nor do they fit into the secular ideals. Indeed, there are over 20 groups and pages on Facebook alone that condemn the fashionable and attractive outfits of young headscarved *Âlâ* women. The criticisms here do not arise from the fact that the new veiled women

amalgamate two distinct appearances (Western and Islamic), but that they combine two opposing and conflicting positions on their female bodies. At the heart of these forms of discomfort lie the power and prevalence of the culture of *mahremiyet* in the minds of the public, which shape endless expectations about how women should behave, talk, walk, eat, laugh, look, or move. The reason *Âlâ* evokes controversy is that it violates the basic rules and expectations of this dominant culture of *mahremiyet*, thus instigating frowns, scorn, ridicule, and even condemnations. Nevertheless, as it will become apparent in the next vignette, arousing uncanny feelings is a mild reaction for a *mahrem* that dares to trouble the gazing/hiding dynamics of the culture of *mahremiyet*.

### **Vignette 2: Kissing the Mahrem in Ankara**

On May 25th, 2013, Ankara's Kurtuluş subway station witnessed Turkey's first kissing protest. The protest was called in response to a public announcement one week earlier at the very same station, which warned couples in the subway: "Please behave in accordance with public moral codes." The protest was organized and spread over social media, with demonstrators announcing, "We will be kissing in Kurtuluş subway!" Other slogans circulating on twitter and on Facebook were "God Damn Your Morals" (*Ahlakınız Batsın*) and "Time for Kissing in Ankara" (*Ankara için öpüşme vakti*, a witty remark that referred to Ramadan announcements for breaking fast, i.e. "iftar time for Ankara"). As was apparent from the slogans, the protesters were upset by the particular kind of Islamic moral codes slowly (but surely) taking over the public sphere and trying to regulate and intervene in private interactions between couples.

A counter-protest was immediately engineered by the Ankara youth branch of the AKP, the ruling government party, to "Stop the Acts against Public Moral Codes!" On the day of the protest, the angry counter-protesters brought out knives during the ensuing clash, and police intervened to quell the rising tension. That day from 6:00 to 7:00 P.M., there were concentric layers of people on the scene: the kissing protesters, the media, a few citizens present to witness and record the public kissing, the police, the enraged "moral code defenders," and the curious public surrounding the hubbub. From these screening layers of crowd and discord, two moments from the television news stuck in my memory: kissing couples encircled by photographers, and bloodstains on the underground steps where a protester was stabbed by an irked "moral code defender." What remains baffling about this fragment is that an instant of public sexual and

intimate expression could be met with such ferocity. What was at stake to have sparked such a hideous act of fury?

Berlant and Warner say, “Heterosexual culture achieves much of its metacultural intelligibility through the ideologies and institutions of intimacy” (1998:553). Heterosexual kissing is an intimate act that, according to the culture of *mahremiyet*, ought to take place somewhere it cannot be seen. The structural construction of the culture of *mahremiyet* requires this intimate *mahrem* interaction to be hidden.

Kissing protests are a well known part of global LGBT activism, taking the form of same-sex kissing that triggers parallel “out-of-place” perceptions (Hubbard 2012) and are considered a “threatening act” against public norms (Morris and Sloop 2006). Kissing as a form of protest holds “*political imperative*” (Morris and Sloop 2006:2, emphasis original), and the protests become commensurable through their ability to signify their messages in relation to the narrative, language, and the norms it stands up against. Due to the insider-outsider regulations and the boundaries embedded in the culture of *mahremiyet*, kissing of opposite sexes was also quite a “paramount political performance” (Morris and Sloop 2006:3). In other words, the Ankara kissing protest was not aiming to challenge heteronormativity, but protesting the ways in which the culture of *mahremiyet* has started to dominate the regulation of the public sphere. The *mahrem*, in this case the private act of kissing, was being performed as a public protest instead of hiding itself. Indeed, kissing in public, as a *mahrem* act, irritates and troubles hegemonic masculinity because it takes the penetrating power away from the male gaze, rendering the gaze passive and feeble through a public performance.

A curious moment that serves for further analysis, however, was when we witnessed one female couple kissing as part of the protest in Ankara. The female couple appeared towards the end of the protest. Interestingly, the two women were not the main cause of vexation. Very few newspapers put their photo on the hard-copy papers, and some of them uploaded their photo as part of the “photo stream” of the news on their websites. It was almost as if few were willing to look at the two women’s protest. Their kissing was not a threat to the *mahrem* public scenery, and was ignored by the moral code defenders. For the female couple, the *namahrem* gaze looked away, not to avoid an unruly pleasure, but to deny.

### **The Daring *Mahrem***

In *mahremiyet*, covering and hiding the *mahrem* against the gaze of the sexual superior (male over female, outsider over insider) is the main component of the gazing relationship. The curious gaze that has the power to penetrate, to monitor, and to be hidden from is therefore a micro-level reflection of the cultural heterosexual imagination of the masculine position in this heterosexual culture. Yet the culture is built on permeability. It is a border-making mechanism, yet the boundaries it creates are inherently porous, while the public nature of the privacy itself leads us to understanding the mechanisms that create such dichotomies. Indeed, “It is not the bullet that kills you, but the hole” (Braidotti 1994:7).

Nevertheless, in contemporary Turkey, the penetrating gaze is no longer able to kill, as we observe on the covers of *Âlâ* and during the kissing protest. *Mahrem* is performing and daring publicly, thus disempowering the gaze. It can no longer create discomfort, and it is the *mahrem* that takes this power away from the gaze by public performances. When the boundary is not defended by the *mahrem*, the power to penetrate is taken away from the gaze, hence it loses its masculine position and is left impotent, disabled, eunuch.

A public display of a *mahrem* sexual subject or act undermines the power of the masculine position in the heterosexual imagination. In both of the cases above, both the headscarved cover girls of *Âlâ* and the public kissing protest, we observe not necessarily hiding or veiling but daring *mahrems*. They deny their presumed female inferior position by performing, ignoring the gaze. By doing so, they publicly avert the gender binary, stealing away the penetrating role and disempowering a penetrating, active, and masculine type of sexuality and pushing it to the other end of the spectrum: penetrated, passive, and feminine. Having said so, posing is an act of reversing the power relationship between the gaze and the *mahrem*, in the way the relation places gaze with the masculine and the *mahrem* with the female. Such an act, whether in the form of a magazine cover featuring a headscarved woman or in the form of a kissing protest, triggers aggression.

Parallel with the prevalence of gaze, the culture of *mahremiyet* is still influential in regulating women’s behaviors and movements in public spaces in contemporary Turkey. It influences the social projects and public encounters between state agents and individuals, as well as how intimacy rules in everyday life are created and re-created in the minds of urban residents. Therefore, the culture of

*mahremiyet* continues to exist as a boundary-making mechanism in social life. The limits and the boundaries it create, however, are changing.

### **Conclusion**

As Moore points out, “[b]odies are the site where subjects are morphologically and socially constructed, they mark the intersection of the social and the symbolic; each subject’s relation with his or her body is both material and imaginary” (1999:168). Thus, in order to observe and analyze a change in sexuality culture enabled through and operated on bodies, it is crucial not to ignore the particular morphological, social, and symbolic constructions of the body in the context of Turkey. As explored throughout this chapter, in the context of Turkey, the way gaze operates in the *mahrem* culture, that is both material and imaginary, that is able to touch and even to penetrate due to physicality attributed to gaze, reifies sexed bodies.

The contemporary shifts in the culture of *mahremiyet* in Turkey, which have been enabled by a new visio-sexual culture, have spawned a new era in which the new veil is emerging, kissing protests are taking place, and headscarved women are posing with pride on the covers of fashion magazines. In Turkey, there has been a new rising sexuality culture that deserves to be further studied ethnographically. Although the change has not been referred to with any particular term, the curious subjects of the change have been a topic of popular conversations. The one popular culture reference I liked the most was “süslümanlar,”<sup>12</sup> which combines the words *süslü* (adorned, embellished) and *Müslüman* (Muslim), referring to (almost exclusively) women who embody upper-class trends, Western styles, and signifiers of Islam (often simply headscarf) simultaneously. That new era has almost been organically linked to the changes taking place in Turkey in relation to the rise of new relationships with Islam, neo-liberalism, and the expansion of the Turkish economy, combined with the continuous habit of investing in women’s bodies as a marker of change (Kandiyoti 1989). In fact, *Âlâ* was one of the most conspicuous markers of this new era. Headscarf-wearing women, even the ones who did not buy the magazine,<sup>13</sup> were talking about it as a symbol, as it

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12 “Kim bu Süslüman'lar?” *Gazeteci.tv*. May 19, 2003, <http://gazeteci.tv/kim-bu-suslumanlar-170125h.htm>.

13 Lower-class women were not able to afford the magazine, whereas upper-class women did not find the style in the magazine “tasteful.” The class dynamics playing around the formation of the particular taste my upper-class informants were referring to is quite interesting to look at more closely, although it is beyond the scope of this chapter.

denoted an almost unforeseeable change to headscarf-wearing women and girls posing on the cover of a fashion magazine with their colorful scarves and their young and cheerful faces.

In Ankara, however, the discomfort was greater than a simple disgust. This time, the conflict between protestors and furious party members was exacerbated due to the heterosexual institutions of privacies that were in operation as well as the political and affective nature of the protests. Consequently, it was more than a simple threat of masculine position in the mundane life of heterosexual normalcy. The protest was directly targeting the hegemonic masculinity and causing a momentary crisis to everyday masculine position in the culture of *mahremiyet*, thus the outburst of rage. Considering how the troubled normative boundaries result in violent rage in the context of Turkey, with honor crimes and trans murders, a political protest against the state intervention (the announcement in the Ankara metro) to contemporary and secular forms of intimacy and privacy, in the case of Ankara kissing protest, becomes a new form of the abject and therefore is confronted with the violent face of heteronormative privacy.

As I argue in this chapter, *süslümanlar*, *Âlâ* magazine, and the kissing protesters in Ankara are, in fact, the visible markers of the changing sexuality culture, the culture of *mahremiyet*, as they both challenge the power dynamics embedded in the culture. One important component of this new sexual culture is that it prioritizes the privacy of the individual over the privacy of an institution, such as the family or the state. Also, it tends to celebrate intimacy publicly, rather than cover or hide it. As in the case of *Âlâ*, even when there is a certain level of covering, the images perform sexuality within the limits the individual sets, as opposed to those set by the family, the state, or (a particular interpretation of) religion. Despite the differences in class background or political views, the conspicuous markers of the new sexuality culture, the daring *mahrem*s, are able to trigger the discomfort of the same normative supremacist gaze.

What we are witnessing is a more structural shift, a fundamental change in the culture itself. The long-established institution, the culture of *mahremiyet*, has been under relatively new, rising, non-traditional threats. A change in heterosexual culture in Turkey was previously documented by Ozyegin (2009), where she looked at the perspectives of virginity norms amongst heterosexual young women and observed a normative shift in their accounts of sexuality. A similar observation and thus argument is present in this article. The change at stake is conspicuous at particular fragments, approaches in virginity, on the cover of a magazine, or during a kissing protest, yet the change is about the shifting and

transforming boundaries of the institutions of intimacy, of which there are many in today's Turkey. The change at stake, as Ozyegin once put it, create "complex ambiguities of the moving boundaries of permitted and prohibited" (2009:119).

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