

# Honor Killings: Remnants of the Past, or Consequences of Recreating the "Other?"

by Jennifer Zelnick  
Haverford College

---

## *Abstract*

This paper seeks to excavate the cultural significance of honor killings in Turkey. By drawing upon relevant scholarship as well as firsthand ethnographic experiences, this paper examines the ways in which Turks understand honor killings in both the global context as well as within Turkey's unique sociopolitical history. As the relatively young nation-state grapples with issues of identity in the global context, processes of othering and reinscription are illuminated as a means of furthering the country's goal of being viewed as a "modern, Western, European" country.

## *Olca: An Introduction to Honor Killings in Turkey*

I met Olca Karalarli in Ankara on my first day in Turkey. She was our tour guide for the Anatolian Civilization Museum as well as the Ulus (old city of Ankara). Olca introduced herself as a graduate of Sociology from Middle Eastern Technical Institute (METU) in Ankara. She is a self-proclaimed feminist, and a strong Kemalist advocate. Before our tour began, Olca insisted that we ask her any questions we might have about Turkish history, culture, and politics.

True to her self-identification as a feminist, Olca interwove examples of what she called "Turkey's liberal gender politics" into the greater history of Anatolia, the Ottoman Empire and the young nation-state of Turkey. From the Hittite's innovations with women's rights in the second century BCE to Ataturk, Olca repeatedly insisted that, contrary to anything we might have heard or thought about Turkish culture, women were indeed equal citizens.

After the tour was officially over, I had the opportunity to sit down with Olcay privately. I explained to her that I was majoring in anthropology, and was currently enrolled in a course on Ethnographies of Turkey. She asked me what I was studying, and I explained my interest in gender and sexuality. Olcay then reminded me that she considered herself a feminist and an expert on women's rights in Turkey. She offered to answer any questions I might have regarding the subject. I expressed my interest in honor killings in Turkey. Her facial expression immediately changed from one of curiosity to one of confusion.

I explained that while I appreciated the extremely sensitive nature surrounding the discussion of honor killings, I wanted to ask her some questions about her personal opinion on the topic in order to better understand the issue. I hoped to analyze different perspectives on honor killings by both Turkish citizens as well as the western world Turkey seeks to emanate. Olcay's facial expression changed: she was once again engaged. She began by saying "Honor killings are rural. They happen all over the world, [because] people have possession of women and girls. Especially Kurdish people, in the eastern parts of the country." I then asked Olcay why she thought honor killings take place in Turkey. She responded, "men say it's to protect their honor, but this is nonsense. It's about labor and bride price." Olcay insisted that, in spite of the occurrence of honor crimes in certain rural areas, metropolitan Turkey is currently going through a social revolution of sorts: love marriages, rather than arranged marriages, are on the rise. Additionally, she insisted, when honor killings *do* occur, the government (allegedly) no longer turns a blind eye. Due to new state laws passed in 2004, honor killings are now being punished more severely. "Now we're killing men for killing women," she remarked.

Olcay and I continued to discuss the changing cultural values surrounding love, sex, and marriage in Turkey. When I asked her about virginity exams, she assured me that, like honor

killings, these exams were rare and isolated to specific ethnic groups living in rural Turkey. She had personally never heard of anyone she knew getting a virginity exam. According to Olcay, the exams were remnants of “the old, old times, some stupid families- about one or two percent of Turkish society- still do it.”

Suddenly, Olcay got up, explained she was late, and said she had to leave immediately. I quickly thanked her for talking to me, apologizing if I had made her feel uncomfortable. She assured me that this was not the case; she was merely due back at the museum to give another tour. Thus our conversation ended.

### ***Honor Killings and the Social Construction of Namus in Turkey***

Honor killings are an international phenomenon, occurring “in communities where the concepts of honour and shame are fundamentally bound up with the expected behaviours of families and individuals, particularly those of women.” (International Campaign Against Honour Killings 2010) Honor killings are committed, typically by male relatives, when a woman transgresses in such a way that the family’s honor is seen as damaged or ruined. *In Honor of Fadime: Murder and Shame*, by anthropologist Unni Wikan explains this is because while “men were in charge of the honor of the family... women, as sexual beings, were potential threats.” (International Campaign Against Honour Killings 2010) A woman may be killed in order to restore her family’s honor for any number of reasons, ranging from divorcing or leaving a spouse, to being raped, to choosing love over arranged marriage, or even dating someone her family disapproves of. Honor killings are designed to restore “men’s power in families.” (International Campaign Against Honour Killings 2010)

In Turkey, “namus” is the social construct of honor as it relates to women’s sexual activity, virginity, and marriage. Often viewed as a historical remnant of the pre-modern

Ottoman Empire, *namus* invokes family values, and specifically, desires to control and suppress female sexuality. In conjunction with its emergence as a modern nation- state in 1923, Turkey reinvented social, political, and legal conceptualizations of the body and gender identities. Through various means of regulation, the body became a locus for the government to control its citizens. Wikan explains that because “honor depends on control over the female [body,] violence is endorsed if it is necessary to maintain that control. Brothers and cousins are their... female relatives’ keepers” (Wikan 2007, 272).

As Nükhet Sirman states in “Kinship, Politics and Love: Honor in Post- Colonial Contexts- the Case of Turkey,” *namus*’ role in modern Turkish culture is the “[reproduction of] the modern patriarchal gender regime in Turkey” (Sirman 2004, 42). This quotation serves as a reminder that in spite of all the progress the modern nation-state of Turkey has made towards gender equality, inequality is still a reality, and true equality has yet to be realized. Sirman explains that, although the rise of the nation- state signified the evolution of the family unit from loyalty to houses to loyalty to the conjugal unit, this shift from subject to citizen did not eliminate but rather reproduced the state’s need for control. The political structure of the nation- state is reproduced through the construction of the nuclear family. *Namus*, therefore, is a means of linking women’s sexuality to familial integrity. This elevates the importance of the family above that of the individual- just as the house was valued above the subject before the inception of the nation-state of Turkey- because the authoritative relationships present in a family mirror those of the state.” Wikan reiterates, “disgrace or dishonor afflicts not just individuals but the collective [family] as a whole” (Wikan 2007, 272). Furthermore, contrary to Olcay’s insistence that honor killers were now being punished more severely for their crimes, as anthropologist Mikael Kurkiala remarks in “Interpreting Honour Killings: The Story of Fadime Sahindal (1975-

2002) in the Swedish Press,” even high- profile cases resulted in lenient punishments. After publicly beating Fadime, her “brother was sentenced to one year’s probation... the [crimes] were culturally sanctioned and designed to uphold a specific moral order” (Kurkiala 2003, 6-7).

In accordance with this power hierarchy, Michel Foucault’s *The History of Sexuality, Volume I: An Introduction*, states that because sex exists within the structure of society, it functions as a means of control. Sex is thus institutionalized, and, consequently, all sex acts are embedded with moral judgment. Foucault explains, “Power is essentially what dictates its law to sex... sex is placed by power in a binary system: licit and illicit, permitted and forbidden... power prescribes an “order” for sex” (Foucault 1978, 83). Although Foucault’s theory applies worldwide, its relevance in modern Turkey is undeniable. Because sex is “a thing to be... managed, inserted into systems of utility, regulated for the greater good of all... [as] a thing one administered,” (Foucault 1978, 24) transgressions from proscribed family values in regards to namus threaten the family’s overall power hierarchy.

As Ayse Parla explains in “The Honor of State: Virginity Examinations in Turkey,” preserving namus, specifically through controlling women’s sexual activity, is vital. Like theorist Max Weber’s conception of the state as the one modern institution that monopolizes legitimate violence, (Weber 2005) “virginity examinations must be viewed as a particularly modern form of institutionalized violence used to secure the sign of the modern and/ but chaste woman, fashioned by the modernization project embarked on by the Turkish nationalist elite under the leadership of Kemal Atatürk” (Parla 2001, 66). This quotation reaffirms the state’s desire to maintain control over individuals, specifically women, in order to protect the family. Like Sirman, Parla highlights “a woman’s purity as an icon of family honor” as the rationality behind honor killings (Parla 2001, 77).

In 1994, the Human Rights Watch's Women's Rights Project published an article entitled "A Matter of Power: State Control of Women's Virginity in Turkey." As a non-governmental organization (NGO) with worldwide credibility known for their expertise in regards to human rights issues on both national and international levels, this report provides a unique perspective on honor killings in Turkey. This article explored the use of virginity control exams, or "gynecological examinations undertaken to determine the status of the hymen" as a means of enforcing power hierarchies (Human Rights Watch 1993, 2). The article noted that virginity control exams were done both per police officials' request as well as at the request of school administrators and family members. Women accused of prostitution as well as infidelity were subjected to these exams regularly in order to determine not only whether a woman is a virgin, but also if she has recently engaged in sexual activity (Human Rights Watch 1993).

Oftentimes, women in custody are compelled to submit to virginity exams, allegedly "to avoid future accusations of police abuse during interrogation" (Human Rights Watch 1993, 12). If the woman does not agree, the officers oftentimes threaten to rape her and then force her to get a virginity exam (Human Rights Watch 1993, 14). In academic settings, administrators often recommend that parents submit their daughters to virginity testing if the girls have been seen communicating inappropriately with boys. This can include any behavior not approved by the family, such as conversing or spending time with boys in unmonitored environments. Oftentimes the girls preemptively commit suicide upon hearing they will be taken to the doctor for virginity testing (Human Rights Watch 1993, 2).

Both Sirman and Parla recognize the inherent inconsistencies of namus-related virginity exams and honor killings. Although they can indeed be argued as a protective measure, or even as expressions of modernization through reimagining state control, they can also be seen as

new symbols of gender inequality. Because women of the new republic were charged with being “unveiled and yet pure, the new woman was to be “modern” in appearance and intellect but was still required to preserve the “traditional” virtue of chastity” (Parla 2001, 75). Thus, although the formation of the Turkish nation- state brought about many facets of modernity, gender equality was still not a reality. The state and the family still controlled women’s bodies and sexuality.

### ***Reconciling an “Outdated Custom” with Current Practices: The Function of Blame***

Like Olcay, everyone I discussed honor killings with in Turkey insisted that they are an isolated phenomenon associated with specific cultural subgroups and geographic locales. In Eskişehir, Demet, a student at Anadolu Üniversitesi, told me that honor killings were a “Kurdish problem, [caused by] the PKK [wanting] to divide the country and create a new country in the East.”<sup>1</sup> Demet’s opinions directly parroted those of other university students I spoke with from METU in Ankara to Boğaziçi Üniversitesi in Istanbul.

This opinion is not isolated to the undergraduate community. All literature I encountered, scholastic and fictitious, by Turks as well as by Westerners, equated Turkish honor killings with very specific demographics, such as Kurds and rural villagers in the East. I believe these works drew such strong connections in order to better depict the problem, however I fear that, in placing the blame on these groups, honor killings have been ultimately dismissed as the problem of the minority or “others” within Turkish society.

One case in particular, that of Fadime Sahindal (1975-2002), directly equated honor killings with Kurdish people. In her essay “Rethinking Honor in Regard to Human Rights: An Educational Imperative in Troubled Times,” Wikan begins by informing readers that, while Fadime and her family had been living in Sweden for the past twenty years, her death was viewed as a product of her cultural background, or more specifically, because she was Kurdish

---

<sup>1</sup> Demet, interview with the author, March 8, 2010.

(Wikan 2007, 272). She remarks that, while “honor killings have [typically] been associated with faraway places and tribal societies, [the assumption that honor codes]... would vanish with the development of modern state structures in which the welfare of citizens no longer depends on their ability to derive support and security from kin connections”(Wikan 2007, 272).

As is evident in Fadime’s murder, this has yet to become a universal truth. The article goes on to explain that although Fadime’s family had been living as immigrants in Sweden for two decades, her parents barely spoke the local language, and did everything they could in order to avoid assimilating into Swedish society (Wikan 2007, 281). Thus, Wikan argued, her family purposefully chose to isolate themselves from the culture in which they lived, and chose instead to cling to their Kurdish traditions. Although they had not lived in Turkey for over twenty years, the Sahindal family remained bound to and marginalized by a system of honor associated with their Kurdish ethnicity.

Zulfu Livaneli, a popular Turkish author, chose to write a novel on the issue of honor killings in Turkey in hopes of bringing the problem to the forefront of the public’s attention. In a speech given in 2006 at New York University, Livaneli remarked that, although appropriate legislation was necessary, laws alone would not solve the problem of honor killings. Instead, he suggested, “what is needed is a change in consciousness, and it can only be achieved through education on the one hand, and economic development on the other” (Livaneli 2006). Livaneli hoped his book *Bliss*, although fictional, would help in this process of education. *Bliss* tells the story of a young teen Meryem who lives in a rural village in the East. At the beginning of the novel, Meryem is brutally raped. The plot follows Meryem in the aftermath of her rape, as her family deliberates about her ultimate faith. The family decides her cousin Cemal, recently returned from military service, will kill her. Meryem was told she was “being sent to Istanbul”



(Livaneli 2006, 106). The book presents Meryem and her family in sharp contrast to the various modern people she and Cemal meet over the course of their journey to Istanbul. Additionally, Livaneli portrays Cemal as morally conflicted over his familial obligation. Cemal's love, Emine, reminds him of the legal consequences of killing Meryem, which further complicate the situation. Thus, Livaneli effectively depicts Cemal as a victim of his culture, alongside his cousin Meryem (Livaneli 2006).

Ayşe Onal, a Turkish journalist, conducted a series of interviews with convicted honor killers, resulting in the book *Honour Killing: Stories of Men Who Killed*. Onal explains she embarked on the project in order to gain the killers' unique perspectives on their crimes. Her interviews explored a vast array of killers: from sons to brothers, the seemingly guilt-free to those utterly consumed by regret. Through these interviews, she found that, just as Livaneli depicted Cemal as morally conflicted in *Bliss*, the majority (if not all) of the men imprisoned for killing their sisters, mothers, cousins, and daughters expressed feelings of uncertainty, guilt, or even regret in relation to their crimes.

Murat, convicted of killing his mother Hanim, initially appeared to be particularly unburdened by his crime. However, as the interview progressed, Onal found Murat to be extremely remorseful. He admitted that he killed his mother to stop those who knew of her infidelity of gossiping about his family and their disgraced honor (Onal 2008, 73). Murat described honor killings as a "nightmare that has such tragic consequences for both the person who dies, and the person who kills... you too die with the person you kill... the person you have killed has the same blood as you" (Onal 2008, 72). Thus, Murat expressed his loneliness in prison, and the sadness that he was now eternally burdened by. This interview showed that, while Murat did not directly express regret or guilt about having committed matricide, his moral

compass was not set permanently to one side. Murat exhibited compassion, if only for himself and his personal suffering.

Another scenario left an especially distinct impression on Onal as particularly tragic. This was the story of Ilyas, who had murdered his sister. Ilyas had recently been transferred to an agricultural work- prison in Edirne, and, according to Onal, he was a true “victim of fate” (Onal 2008, 126). Onal admitted that before conducting her interviews, she had not believed such a condition to be legitimate. Onal even admitted that prior to speaking with these men, she believed them all to be essentially devoid of morals and good. However, upon meeting and interviewing Ilyas, her opinion clearly changed. Onal remembers Ilyas’ desire to have his story told. Ilyas explained, “perhaps, if you broadcast my story, it will help some of those who see it not to do what they are planning to do. And so my sins might be forgiven” (Onal 2008, 127).

Ilyas killed his sister because of gossip- it was rumored that she was not a virgin, and furthermore, was promiscuous and possibly even a prostitute. Although she denied these rumors, they ate away at Ilyas (Onal 2008, 134). Ultimately, Ilyas became so consumed by these rumors as threatening to his honor that he strangled Aysel in her sleep (Onal 2008, 139). Tragically, Aysel’s autopsy revealed, “[Ilyas’] sister, about whom so much had been rumored for months, had been a virgin... his sister had been a virgin ‘prostitute’” (Onal 2008, 143). This detail is perhaps the most tragic part of Ilyas’ story. Already plagued by regret over killing his sister, the postmortem discovery that Aysel had, after all, been a virgin, completely consumed Ilyas with guilt.

Like *Bliss*, many of the interviews in *Honour Killing* force readers to reconsider preconceptions about convicted honor killers. The story of Ilyas and Aysel was just one of many interviews in Onal’s book that questioned the moral absolutes typically socially imposed on

honor killers. While none of these interviews suggested that the convicted men were innocent, or even in the right, the book forces readers to reexamine prejudgments about these killers and question whether their character can be judged solely on one defining action. Furthermore, they raise the question: are such men, in actuality, cultural pawns and victims of circumstance?

### ***Excusing or Marginalizing the “Other?”***

While both *Bliss* and *Honour Killing: Stories of Men Who Killed* may successfully bring Turkish honor killings to the foreground, just like Fadime’s story, they equate honor killings with the cultural, ethnic “other.” While this may be statistically accurate, such an association is extremely problematic. In *Fear of Small Numbers: An Essay on the Geography of Anger*, Arjun Appadurai explains that the sheer existence of the minority is a symbol that the majority has yet to achieve complete homogeneity within society. The result is the majority’s anxiety towards the minority, or “other” (Appadurai 2008, 50). One way the majority expresses this fear is through further distinguishing themselves from the minority, and thus, blame enters the equation. The majority group identifies and highlights differences between themselves and the minority, and posit their fear of heterogeneity onto these differences.

Anthropologist Jenny B. White confirms this theory in *Islamist Mobilization in Turkey: A Study in Vernacular Politics* that the process of imagining or creating the “other” ultimately leads to the extremely problematic marginalization of that group. Although the book specifically explores the controversy associated with reconciling the competing ideologies of Kemalism and Islamism in Turkey, the theory extends to the process of creating the “other” through distinguishing cultural groups such as the Kurds or rural villagers in eastern Turkey. White explains that, “[legitimizing] the idealized characteristics of one by demonizing the perceived opposite characteristics of the other” is entirely counterproductive in reconciling different

cultures, and ultimately leads to the reestablishment of what the opposing groups view to be irreconcilable differences (White 2002, 29).

### ***Deconstructing Honor Killings as Crimes of the “Other”***

Honor killings still occur in Turkey, even if they are infrequent, and only within very specific subcultures and geographic groups. In urban and metropolitan areas of Turkey, those places generally considered to be “Western,” it is customary to refer to such killings as problems that happen far away to religious, traditional, or otherwise primitive people. As demonstrated in the extensive quantity and style of texts about honor killings (academic discourse, non-governmental organization reports, interviews, and works of fiction), recently both Turks as well as Westerners have made concerted efforts to raise awareness about this issue. However, these efforts, while made with the best intentions, reassert honor killings as a problem of the “other.” This is problematic in confronting its occurrence.

While new laws mandating more severe punishments for those convicted of honor killings and honor-related crimes may be curbing the occurrence of such incidents, this has proven ineffective in eradicating its occurrence in Turkey. As Livaneli remarked in a speech about Bliss and honor crimes in 2006, “what is needed is a change in consciousness” (Livaneli 2006). Ironically, this change must include figures such as Livaneli, who through efforts to educate society about honor killings, are, in fact, responsible for its perception as a problem of the “other.” If honor killings are to be eradicated, they must be addressed as problems not of the Kurds, or the rural villagers, but rather as a problem concerning all Turkish citizens.

### ***References***

- Appadurai, Arjun. 2006. *Fear of Small Numbers: An Essay on the Geography of Anger*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Human Rights Watch. 1994. “A Matter of Power: State Control of Women’s Virginity in

- Turkey.” *Women’s Rights Project* 6, no. 7:1-38. International Campaign Against Honour Killings, ‘Honour’: *Stop Honour Killings*, <http://www.stophonourkillings.com/?q=node/3783>.
- Livaneli, Zulfu. 2002. *Bliss*. New York: St. Martin’s Press,
- Livaneli, Zulfu. 2006. *Honor Killings and Violence Against Women in Turkey*, New York University.
- Onal, Ayse. *Honour Killing: Stories of Men Who Killed*. 2008. Berkeley: SAQI Books.
- Parla, Ayse. 2001. “The Honor of State: Virginity Examinations in Turkey.” *Feminist Studies* 21:65- 88.
- Sirman, Nühent. 2004. “Kinship, Politics and Love: Honor in Post- Colonial Contexts- the Case of Turkey.” *Violence in the Name of Honor: Theoretical and Political Challenges*, edited by Nahla Abdo and Shahrzad Mojab, 39-56. Istanbul: Bilgi University Press.
- Weber, Max. 2005. “Politics as a Vocation.” *Social Theory: A Reader*, edited by Jonathan Joseph, 146- 151. Edinburg: Edinburg University Press.
- White, Jenny B., *Islamist Mobilization in Turkey: A Study in Vernacular Politics*, Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2002.
- Wikan, Unni. 2008. *In Honour of Fadime: Murder and Shame*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Wikan, Unni. 2007. “Rethinking Honor in Regard to Human Rights: An Educational Imperative in Troubled Times.” *Learning in the Global Era: International Perspectives on Globalization and Education*, edited by Marcelo M. Suárez- Orozco, 272- 290. Los Angeles: University of California Press.