

# NEW DESIRES, NEW SELVES

## INSTRUCTOR'S GUIDE

*New Desires, New Selves*  
**SEX, LOVE & PIETY**  
*among Turkish Youth*



**GUL OZYEGIN**

As Turkey pushes for its place in the global pecking order and embraces neoliberal capitalism, the nation has seen a period of unprecedented shifts in political, religious, and gender and sexual identities for its citizens. In *New Desires, New Selves*, Gul Ozyegin shows how this social transformation in Turkey is felt most strongly among its young people, eager to surrender to the seduction of sexual modernity, but also longing to remain attached to traditional social relations, identities and histories.

Engaging a wide array of upwardly-mobile young adults at a major Turkish university, Ozyegin links the biographies of individuals with the biography of a nation, revealing their creation of conflicted identities in a country which has existed uneasily between West and East, modern and traditional, and secular and Islamic. For these young people, sexuality, gender expression, and intimate relationships in particular serve as key sites for reproducing and challenging patriarchy and paternalism that was hallmark of earlier generations. As Ozyegin evocatively shows, the quest for sexual freedom and an escape from patriarchal constructions of selfless femininity and protective masculinity promise both personal transformations and profound sexual guilt and anxiety. A poignant and original study, *New Desires, New Selves* presents a snapshot of cultural change on the eve of rapid globalization in the Muslim world.

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*Introduction**Pages 1-46*

## SUMMARY

Overviewing transformations in Turkish society since its inception as a republic in 1923, the introduction provides a historical and theoretical frame for understanding the book's principal actors: Turkish youth negotiating the tension between new desires for sexual modernity and neoliberal self-making, and a longing to remain connected to traditional, familial sources of identity. While these young Turks may enact projects of self-making based in global neoliberal ideals of autonomy and self-realization, the introduction argues these projects are shaped by culturally specific forces including gender, class, and, importantly, the continuing centrality of connectivity in the process of self-production in modern Turkey.

## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- The opening pages of the introduction present two of the book's key themes: "fractured desires" (3) and "façades" (5). Offer your own definition of each of these concepts. What are some façades foreshadowed in the introduction? How do they help manage the subjects' "fractured desires"?
- The introduction traces the shift in Turkey from "assertive secularism" at the inception of the republic to increased Islamization of public life following the 1980 military coup. Define "assertive secularism"/laicism. How is it different from "passive secularism"? In what ways have women's bodies been markers for these aspirations - secular and Islamist?
- According to Suad Joseph, in what way(s) do Western models of selfhood fail to account for how people understand their identities in cultural contexts such as Turkey? Joseph offers a model of "connectivity" as an alternative to the Western model of the bounded self. Explain this concept briefly. What are some examples provided in the text of the ways that connectivity is expressed in modern Turkey?
- Define "pure love" as it differs from narratives of "passion" and "romantic love" according to Anthony Giddens. What ideals does pure love embody? In a "pure love" relationship, how is intimacy related to self-making?
- The introduction signals an approach to class "as a cultural practice rather than purely an economic designation" (21). In what ways is class "practiced"? Why does Valerie Walkerdine suggest that upward mobility is a site of ambivalence?

## Chapter 1: *Virginal Façades*

Pages 47-92

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### SUMMARY

Drawing on the narratives of Boğaziçi women, this chapter explores the changing and at times fraught attitudes towards virginity and romantic relationships among young women in Turkey. By and large, these women define their personal and romantic aspirations against the lives of their mothers, rejecting maternal selflessness and forging new ideals of egalitarian relationships with men who reflect and support their personal ambition. Rejecting earlier generations' insistence on virginity before marriage, this generation views the decision to engage in premarital sex as a personal choice and morality as a matter of internalized self-control, not adherence to strict external regulation. Yet as this chapter shows, this transition to "modern sexuality" is not without its tensions, especially for young women from modest class backgrounds and sexually prohibitive households. Engagement in premarital sex or serial dating is often a source of intense guilt for these women, and they go to great lengths conceal their sexual and romantic lives from their parents. Tragically, the shame of this secrecy leads many of these women into submissive relationships where enacting traditional models of female sacrifice allows them to "atone" for failing to be "good daughters."

### QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- What is meant by the expression "virginity is not between the legs; it resides in the brain" (54)? How does this expression help us understand the significance of the "motor girl" as a symbol of female sexual transgression later in the chapter?
- This chapter argues that the "ideal man" as constructed by these young women contains a "highly specific blend of conformism and transgression" (59). Citing specific examples from the women's narratives, in what ways does the ideal man conform to a traditional model of masculinity? In what ways does he transgress this model? Why is it necessary that he do both?
- For women from modest class backgrounds like Sonay, Sena, and Mehtap, feelings of guilt figure prominently in sexual and romantic narratives. What factors does the text suggest contribute to the disproportionate amount of sexual guilt these women experience in relation to their peers from different class backgrounds? What factors allow certain women, such as Feray, to defy this trend?
- In the introduction, "connectivity" and "pure love" were introduced as important concepts guiding our understanding of young Turks' self-making. Review your definition of each. Provide at least two specific examples from narratives in this chapter where these concepts seem to be at play.

*Chapter 1: Passive Resistance and Class in Lesbian Self-Making: Alev's Story*  
*Pages 93-106*

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#### SUMMARY

Alev is a lesbian and self-identified feminist in her early twenties. She employs what she calls “passive resistance” in her self-making vis-à-vis her family, who view homosexuality as an abomination: using façades such as changing female lovers’ names to male ones to be seen by her parents as heterosexual, while also openly engaging in intimate contact with female friends in her parents’ presence to prevent her sexuality from being completely hidden. Alev’s struggle to fully enact her lesbian identity is also complicated by her relationship with a young woman named Pembe, whose working-class, macho ethos at times threatens Alev’s conceptualization of a discrete lesbian identity based on her own middle class ideals of egalitarianism, androgyny, and participation in lesbian social and political spaces.

#### QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- Why does Pembe’s class background impede Alev’s ability to make her lesbianism fully visible to her parents? How might it be different if Alev was with someone from her own class background?
- What specific aspects of Pembe’s identity construction sit uneasy with Alev’s ideals of lesbianism? Why does the text suggest Pembe may be uninterested in assimilating to Alev’s ideals?

## SUMMARY

In stark contrast with their fathers, the young men whose narratives make up this chapter long for identities based on self-expansion and personal enrichment. Mirroring Turkish society's pivot away from state-based paternalism, these young men see themselves as embarking on projects of "entrepreneurship of the self" (107) where old ideals of paternal selflessness are replaced by new ideals of individualism, ambition, and pleasure seeking. As these men reject the traditional modes of masculinity modeled by their fathers, they explicitly seek new types of affective relationships with "selfish" women who break from the traditional models of female selflessness. Yet even as these men seek recognition and support for their own self-making from women who are equally ambitious and independent, they cannot completely repudiate the maternal model, longing at the same time for "positive," "selfless" girls who subordinate their desires to the needs of the relationship. The tension of this paradox is felt most acutely by men from conservative and rural family backgrounds whose new identities as upwardly mobile high-achievers necessitate recognition from equally high-achieving women, but who are unable or unwilling to completely relinquish their need for male dominance and control in order to make such relationships successful.

## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- The young men of this chapter frequently employ "memur kafası" to describe a facet of their fathers' selves that they do not wish to emulate. What is the rough translation of this term provided in the text? Make a list of words associated with this disposition in the men's narratives and a correlating list of words associated with their new ideals for selfhood. What specific changes in Turkish society does the text suggest has influenced the emergence of these new ideals?
- According to this chapter, the construction of the "new man" in Turkey is dependent on interactions with both "selfish" and "selfless" women. What are the key characteristics of a "selfish" woman and what does she contribute to these young men in their self-building? What are the key characteristics of a "selfless" woman and what does she contribute to self-building? Cite specific examples from the young men's narratives.
- Explain what the author means by "vulnerable masculinity." What markers identify "vulnerable" men for the purposes of this chapter? Why do romantic relationships, more than sexual relationships, form an especially important dimension of self-making for these men? What does this tell us about the relationship between economic mobility and social/cultural mobility? In your

answer be sure to draw on Jessica Benjamin's concept of recognition.

- In the conclusion the author calls self-construction a "two-way street" (152). Explain. Can you draw any connections between the ideals the men express for their self-making and the ideals expressed by the women of the previous chapter? Use specific examples.

*Chapter 2: Vulnerable Masculinity and Self-Transformation: Ali's Story*  
*Pages 153-166*

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CHAPTER 2

SUMMARY

Raised in a what he refers to as a “closed milieu,” Ali embarked on a total questioning of his conservative upbringing when moved to Istanbul to attend Boğaziçi University. Over the course of his four years in Istanbul, Ali has come to inhabit a “flexible” self - one that allows him to distance himself from his upbringing while in the company of his middle-class, high-achiever peers, yet remains malleable enough for him to maintain his connection to his family and place of origin. Given the uneasiness of Ali’s claim to urban, middle-class masculinity, success in romance is an important domain by which Ali judges and understands his success in self-making. In this regard, Ali’s failure to build a long-term romantic coupling with a young woman named Arzu becomes a major source of anxiety and tension in his search for a new middle-class, masculine subjectivity.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- Like the women of the previous chapter, Ali employs a variety of façades to maintain a “flexible” self. What specific strategies does Ali use to straddle his community of origin and the new upwardly mobile community he inhabits?
- Near the end of the chapter, the author writes “becoming the object of desire was [Ali’s] desire” (162). Explain. What does this suggest about the different significances that romance and sex have to the development of middle-class masculinities?

*Chapter 3: New Pious Female Selves**Pages 167-227*

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## SUMMARY

Contesting the boundary between private religiosity and public secularism in Turkey, the women whose accounts make up this chapter seek to develop identities that are consciously Muslim, public, educated, and cosmopolitan. Although the majority of the women were raised in secularly Muslim households where female family members were not religiously covered, all have adopted the Islamic headscarf as means of constructing and communicating their piousness. Subject to a ban in schools and public offices, the headscarf emerges as a salient symbol in this chapter - both of the women's renunciation of their parents' acquiescence to state secularism and of their attempts to publicly challenge the stereotype of devout Muslims as uneducated and backwards. Preoccupations with love and romance form a critical dimension of these women's self-making. Because the enactment of love must lead to marriage, these women see falling in love as a threat to the continuation of their elite education. Yet paradoxically, because in Islam women achieve full subjecthood only through marriage and motherhood, finding a suitable partner - one who is consciously Muslim, open-minded, and with whom passionate love can be shared - centrally occupies these women's projects of becoming a new type of devout Muslim.

## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- Parental weakness is a common theme in many of the narratives in this chapter. What two factors does the text suggest contribute to these women's impression of their parents as weak?
- Although unambivalently covered, many of this chapter's women voice discontent over the how the headscarf positions them vis-à-vis their Muslim male counterparts. What are their complaints?
- What critiques do the women have of the male-dominated gender order among conscious Muslims? Why are the women so invested in redefining Muslim male identity?
- The author argues that the pious women of this chapter "more than any other group of young Turkish women, have high stakes in redesigning the meaning of marriage and the relationships within it" (204). Why is love such a fundamental part of identity-building for these women? What specific qualities are they seeking in a partner?
- What surprised you about these women's values and ambitions as pious women? How have their secular educations positioned them to reimagine what it means to be pious?



#### SUMMARY

Aknur, a 23-year-old college student and devout Muslim, actively aspires to be "sade" (pure, simple, frugal) in all aspects of her self-making. Critical of both secularism and the rise of the pro-capitalist Islamic bourgeoisie, Aknur seeks a life trajectory based on religious devotion, altruism, and anti-materialism. Although she is well-educated and driven, Aknur has difficulty envisioning her post-graduate life. She aspires to put her education to use in an altruistic career but is aware her commitment to religiously covering will limit her employment opportunities. Her lack of a suitable marriage prospect - someone who is both consciously Muslim and non-domineering - also raises concerns for Aknur about whether she will be able to consummate her religious devotion through marriage and motherhood.

#### QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- Drawing on examples from Aknur's story and the main chapter, what are some of the ways Islam has become intertwined with capitalism in contemporary Turkey? In what specific ways does Aknur seek to construct her identity against this intertwining?
- Why does Aknur disidentify with the term "feminism"? In what ways does she nonetheless express a "feminist vein"?
- In the section on the history of the secular headscarf ban in the main chapter, the author writes that for many in Turkey the headscarf "is the primary signifier of female submission and subjugation" (171). Yet in Aknur's account and in the main chapter, the headscarf ban paradoxically emerges as a source of subjugation. Discuss.

*Chapter 4: Desire between “Doing” and “Being”**Pages 243-269*

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## SUMMARY

Chapter 4 explores gay (gay) identification in Turkey with an emphasis on the way connectivity regulates gay identity construction for young, upwardly mobile males. A borrowed global category, “gay” has helped reorganize homosexuality in Turkey in recent decades from a category of behavior into a discrete identity with its own patterns of living and thinking. For the young men fashioning their selves after this global gay subjectivity, being gay is about more than having sex with other men; it is about forging relationships based on versatility of sex roles, egalitarianism, and intimacy. Class also emerges as an important mediator of gay identity for these men - dressing a certain way, visiting particular cafes and bars, and displaying other markers of middle-classness all help constitute one as “gay,” while lower-class markers signal belonging to other stigmatized homosexual categories. Yet these young men’s identification with global gay ideals is complicated by the strong role family connection and honor plays in their life. For them, coming out as “gay” can mean abandoning family connections or risking bringing shame to their loved ones.

## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- Define “minoritizing” and “universalizing” as they pertain to accounts of homosexuality. Which account does the global gay identity tend to reinforce? Identify at least two examples from the narratives that suggest identification with a minoritizing account. Identify at least two examples that suggest a universalizing account.
- Alongside “gay” what other terms exist to categorize homosexuality in Turkey? What attributes are associated with each of these categories? In what ways are these categories stigmatized?
- The gay ideal of versatility in sex roles has diminished the binary between active (aktif) and passive (pasif) in Turkey. Does this binary still exist? Cite specific examples from the text.
- How do gay men use ideals of versatility, egalitarianism, and intimacy to help distance themselves from stigmas associated with homosexuality?
- What are some specific examples in the men’s narratives of the role of connectivity in their lives? Why does the author argue that connectivity and a minoritizing account of homosexuality may not be completely compatible?

#### SUMMARY

Cem, Can, and Devrim are three professionally successful, upwardly mobile gay men in their early thirties living in Istanbul. Their interview explores themes of “coming out,” family connectedness, class, and love as they relate to fashioning gay identity. “Out” to varying degrees and in different contexts (familial, professional, etc.) the men bring into question the notion that being “out” is a static state or that it is essential to being gay in Turkey. Like the men and women of the previous chapters, they adopt façades to simultaneously conceal and reveal their identities as gay men. More than recognition and acceptance for being gay, what these men long for is to have their romantic relationships recognized and affirmed. Having a male lover accepted into their family lives as a female lover would be remains a fundamental and elusive goal for them in their self-making.

#### QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- In what ways are the men’s family members complicit in maintaining their façades? Cite specific examples from the interview. Cem, the only one of the three who is out to his family, suggests that disclosing one’s gay identity can, paradoxically, result in more restrictions. Explain.
- During the men’s discussion of being “out” at work, Can says “if you find the right man, every obstacle can be overcome” (290). What does he mean by this? Locate other passages from the text where the men suggest that “finding the right man” helps living out one’s gay identity.
- Is being “out” a key component of gay identity construction in Turkey? In what ways do the men’s stories trouble the idea of “outness” as a static designation?
- What three dimensions of class privilege do the men’s accounts explore? Why did the author choose the title “The Classless Penis” for this interview?

*Conclusion**Pages 309-326*

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## SUMMARY

The conclusion intertwines a review of the book's principal themes and theoretical arguments with details of the author's own coming of age in a staunchly secular Turkish household in the 1960s and 1970s. Arguing that the AKP's 12 years in office have been characterized by the abandonment of the democratic ideals of their campaign platform in favor of top-down Islamization and the criminalization of dissent, the author suggests that this generation's youth - and particularly the pious youth now favored by the law - must insist on pluralism and a democratic political future. Romantic and sexual relationships have emerged in the book as significant sites for both challenges to and reproductions of patriarchy in Turkey. Across identity categories, the young men and women in these pages have rejected the selfless feminine and protective masculine roles embodied by their parents in favor of identities based on self-expansion and self-determination. Yet as the author reminds us, they are frequently reproducing female submission and male domination in their own romantic relationships. To this end, the author argues that it is the alternative discourses provided by feminism and liberated female role models that allow women to transcend patriarchal models and in turn incite the men with whom they form relationships to do the same.

## Overall Reflection and Discussion Questions

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### QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- From the young women who fashion themselves ambiguously between non-virgin and virgin, to the gay men who hide their homosexuality just below the surface, *New Desires, New Selves* is filled with examples of young people using façades to manage their identities. But are these façades, which enable new ways of being at the same time as they reinforce older value systems, ultimately empowering or disempowering? Draw on specific examples from the text to make your argument.
- In the conclusion the author suggests that it is those vulnerable high achievers from provincial or conservative backgrounds who “give the gender and sexual transformations in Turkey their central dynamic” (324). Who were these actors in the text? What surprised you about their stories? Why does the author argue they are the central actors for gender and sexual transformations in Turkey?
- Challenging the conventional notion that men want sex and women want romance, *New Desires, New Selves* features young men pursuing romance and recognition over sex and young women animating their intimate lives with erotic ambition, not a longing for romance. What ideals or ambitions lead some men to value romance and some women to value sex? Are there certain characteristics (religiosity, class background, etc.) that the men and women inverting these conventions share?
- On pages 318-319 of the conclusion the author shares her impression of her own mother’s relationship to conventional gender roles. What was that relationship? How does it complicate our understanding of female submission? How does the selfless mother emerge, paradoxically, as an agent for change in the text?
- What evidence does the author provide for the AKP’s Islamist agenda? What does the weakening of the secular Muslim identity imply for social cohesion in Turkey? In what ways do the young people in this book contribute to or combat social fracturing in modern Turkey? Draw on specific examples from the text, including the author’s discussion of iftar dinners in the conclusion.
- One goal of *New Desires, New Selves* is to foreground the way culturally specific forces shape young people’s interactions with global hegemonic ideals for self-making. In what ways do the self-making projects of the young people in the text overlap with such projects in your own cultural context? In what ways do they diverge? In your discussion, be sure to consider how class, urban/rural distinctions, and family/kinship operate

*Overall Reflection and Discussion Questions*

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differently or similarly in your context.

- In the introduction the author announces her intention to enable “alternative readings of the narratives for the reader” (46). Choose one chapter or one theme (class, urban/rural distinctions, selflessness etc.) and use details from the narratives to make some of your own observations.

## *Appendix I & II*

*Pages 327 - 331*

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### SUMMARY

Appendix I provides tables of the complete results from surveys discussed in early chapters.

Appendix II gives a detailed explanation of the book's sampling procedure.

*About the Author*

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Elizabeth Ferris is a writer, editor, and independent researcher. A graduate of the College of William and Mary, she is currently working on an oral history project about mothers and daughters.