

# Discourse of Islamic Love in Present Day Turkey<sup>1</sup>

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Love constitutes an important dimension of socialization and interaction among people. It has influenced, be it positively or negatively, many events in human history. As we know, love is a vast subject. In this article, I will consider only a very small part of the vast topic of love and focus on “Islamic Love.” In fact, I will limit the topic even further by focusing my magnifying glass on the Islamic love discourse as depicted in Halit Ertuğrul’s love manual titled *Aşk Böyle Yaşanır* (Love is Lived Like This).

In today’s Islamic love literature in Turkey, love is used mainly in two senses: “divine” and “human.” “Divine love” is generally perceived as “true” or “real,” while “human love” is considered “figurative” (*uzrı*), that is, “temporary” (for example: Ertugrul 2004, Yalcın 2004, Ulvan 1998). This difference is very important when trying to comprehend those books that we may define as “Islamic love manuals.” With Halit Ertuğrul, we will concentrate more on “human” love.

*Writer Halit Ertuğrul*

If one wanted to describe the author of *Aşk böyle yaşanır*, it would not be wrong to state the following: Halit Ertuğrul is a paradox who can be described as “an unknown Islamic best seller” or “an important representative of Islamic popular culture.” He is a best seller, for by 2004 his book sales had reached one million one hundred thousand copies. Considering that Orhan Pamuk, a renowned writer both nationally and internationally, had sold 800,000 copies (Korap 2004), this figure is a serious record. However, in spite of this record, Halit Ertuğrul is not known in Turkey because he is very rarely featured in the popular mass media.<sup>2</sup> He could be described as an Islamic writer as well, though he objects to this designation. Indeed, he addresses, with his Islamic<sup>3</sup>/ Nurist (*Nurcu*)<sup>4</sup>/Sunni-

<sup>1</sup> A shorter version of this article has been published in Turkish in: *Muhafazakar Düşünce*, Issue 9-10, 2006: 203-222.

<sup>2</sup> There has recently been only one news article about him in the leading newspapers of Turkey (Korap 2004).

<sup>3</sup> In this paper, I use the concept “Islamic” in a very broad sense and mean everything that is linked to the religion of Islam and all those Muslims who show interest in the religion of Islam. On the other hand, the concept of “Islamist” describes many dimensions of “political Islam.” Further in this article, for instance where I describe Halit Ertuğrul as a “moderate Islamist,” these concepts overlap a bit. However, this overlapping should not be perceived as a conceptual ambiguity since religious and political values often make up a

conservative discourse, a Sunni-conservative setting.<sup>5</sup> Besides, his books are published through a Nurcu publishing house.<sup>6</sup>

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Halit Ertuğrul was born in the Besni district of Adiyaman in 1956. Growing up without a father, his childhood years passed in poverty, and he was only able to receive education with some help. He received his primary schooling in the town where he was born, and attended middle school and teacher's college in Kırşehir. Later, he graduated from Niğde Education Institute and Gazi Education Faculty. He completed his MA at Cumhuriyet University in Sivas and his Ph.D. at University of Sakarya in Adapazarı. He was a faculty member and administrator in various universities. Because his first occupational formation is teaching, he worked as an elementary school teacher and a school principal at various places in Turkey. Later on, he assumed the duties of the National Education District Directorship and the National Education Directorship. In addition to all this, he worked as an expert and a consultant to a minister. Currently, he is a faculty member at Kırşehir Education Faculty.

In addition to his professional life of diverse interests, he can also be described as a very active writer. As he explained in a personal interview<sup>7</sup>, he picks up his pencil not as an Islamist or Islamic writer, but as a scientist, a sociologist, a psychological consultant and a teacher. As far as the Islamic dimension of his writings is concerned, this emanates, according to him, from the Islamic lifestyle of people. With this identity, the 49-year-old writer has written 29 books. Since

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whole. And since the nonpolitical essentially acquires a political dimension from the moment it is transferred to the social domain, this ambiguity is suitable for the nature of our subject.

<sup>4</sup> *Nurcular* is a community. In academic literature, this community is generally described as a religious school that developed in Turkey. The spiritual leader of the Nurists is Bedizaman Said Nursi, and the collection that consists of more than 130 of his works is known as *Risale-i Nur*. Written in a repetitive style, these works carry an utmost importance for the Nurist community and are read in all the religious conversations.

<sup>5</sup> Some concepts need to be defined here: With the concept of "Sunni-conservative" I not only describe the Islamist setting in Turkey, but also all those conservative-right groups that bring the Sunni understanding of Islam to the social platform. The Sunni classification emphasizes that this phenomenon is unique to the dominant Islamic sect in Turkey in contrast to the Alevi minorities and the few Orthodox Shiites. The conservative classification is concerned with the place and/or religious interpretation that said groups occupy in the political spectrum. In summary, the Sunni-conservative setting can be described as very heterologous.

<sup>6</sup> *Nesil Yayımları* is a known Nurist publishing house (Çakır 1992, Ferşadoglu 1995). According to Halit Ertuğrul, he has no connection with the identity of his publisher: "My connection with *Nesil Yayımları* is because I am a writer. To me, there is no difference between *Nesil Yayımları*, *Timaş Yayınları* or any other publisher for that matter. It worked out the way it did, because they were the ones who took my books into consideration" (personal interview).

<sup>7</sup> This personal interview was carried out by an interviewer according to a questionnaire developed by the author of this article.

the list of books is very long, devoting even a single sentence to each book would exceed the scope of this article. Therefore, in order to give an idea about this writer's works, I would like to briefly present his three best selling books.

*Kendini Arayan Adam* (The Man in Search of Himself), which was printed in 1994 and has gone through 300 printings is according to Halit Ertuğrul's own judgment his most important book. *Kendini Arayan Adam*, in Halit Ertuğrul's words, is "the novel of what was lived."<sup>8</sup> *Kendini Arayan Adam* is faithless, distressed and depressed, and after meeting with our writer, he discloses to him his suspicions and hesitations. Finally, following the discussions between them, he embraces Islam and reaches peace.

Halit Ertuğrul's best selling second book *Düzzeli Mehmet* (Mehmet of Düzce) has a similar scenario. *Düzzeli Mehmet* is "neither fantasy nor fiction, but a purely lived true"<sup>9</sup> story of transformation about an ordinary youth who rejects spiritual belief and rules. *Düzzeli Mehmet* was first printed in May 2000 and has had 110 printings so far.

The book titled *Aysel* (female name), which was based on one of numerous letters from his readers, has been printed 110 times since February 2002. The book tells us the lifelong struggle of a young girl, who, having been left both motherless and fatherless, is raised in an orphanage only to have her youth ruined at the hands of malevolent people, and who eventually develops cancer. This book questions the relationships between people, the problems of youth and the phenomenon of "social degeneration," and it tells us the story of the salvation of a young girl and her turning to Islam.

If we are to generalize at this point, we can say this: The scenarios we have just described are not a Halit Ertuğrul phenomenon. Such identity crises and "transformation stories" are the subject of many Islamic/Islamist novels. We could present Şule Yüksek Şenler's *Huzur Sokağı* (Tranquility Road) or Emine Şenlikoğlu's *Maria* (Maria) or *Bize Nasıl Kiydimiz* (How Much You Hurt Us) as novels of this type. However, if these novels and their writers are compared, one paradox stands out: The novels of the scholar Halit Ertuğrul are not much different from the novels of the less educated Şule Yüksek Şenler and Emine Şenlikoğlu. Their language, style and the way in which their stories are told have many points in common.

### *Aşk Böyle Yaşanır*

*Aşk Böyle Yaşanır* was first published in March 2002, and, according to Halit Ertuğrul, is only his sixth or seventh most important book. Halit Ertuğrul's assessment reflects the sales figures. *Aşk Böyle Yaşanır* has been printed 54 times so far,

<sup>8</sup> [www.halitertugrul.com](http://www.halitertugrul.com)

<sup>9</sup> [www.halitertugrul.com](http://www.halitertugrul.com)

and thus is below the sales figures of the books mentioned above. As far as the topic is concerned, our writer attaches great importance to love.

### *Importance of Love*

The book begins with the importance of love. I would like to convey his thoughts in his own words:

Whereas “love” is a feeling to be made a crown on one’s head, to be hidden in the purest places of one’s heart, unfortunately, there have been those who have turned it into something vulgar. However, those who have made their loves vulgar have unfortunately become vulgar themselves (Ertuğrul 2004: 7).

As this citation shows, love is generally perceived as something important, pure and sacred. However, his use of the term “whereas” indicates that love does not have this glorious place anymore. Something has changed. Some people have made it vulgar, “brought it down to the level of the feet.” In other words, neither all of humanity nor all of society, but only some people have degraded it. And this is not all: in the course of degrading it, they themselves have become miserable as well. Those who miscomprehend love and think that it is something else are being deprived of love and, indirectly, of the many “lofty” qualities true love harbors. For “love purifies the human soul, matures it, equips it with sublime feelings” (Ertuğrul 2004: 7).

As we can see, a very deep insight into life is hidden in these short citations. Considering the general mood of the book and the interview I had organized with Halit Ertuğrul, the importance of love and his perspective on the world can be summarized as follows: With modern life, degeneration takes hold in people’s lives. The mass of people who pursue an ostentatious and free lifestyle, called *Tele-Vole* (Tele-Volley) culture, have already penetrated the remotest corners of Turkey. The essentially conservative Anatolian youth have been affected and also shaken by this process. Since they do not know how to deal with the problems this lifestyle presents, they often resort to suicide. He writes especially to help this group. Indeed, according to the writer, “the most significant source of their mistakes is love. The walls placed in front of their traditions, the obstacles, also arise from love” (Ertuğrul 2004: 8).

### *Love and Religion*

According to Halit Ertuğrul, religion is the remedy for the occasionally confused Anatolian youth. For, according to him, it is the element that relaxes a person the most. Here we are faced with an interesting sociological analysis: Ertuğrul tries to rehabilitate the relation the Anatolian youth, who is essentially religious but has been moving away from religion and tradition and therefore experiencing problems, has with religion. In this context, one may speak of a proposal

based on turning to religion, a struggle to make religious identity permanent. This tendency can also be seen in the subject of love.

If we go back to the “human” love/“divine” love dichotomy that I mentioned in the introduction, Halit Ertuğrul’s work is dedicated without doubt to “human” love. The human dimension in an Islamic work certainly includes an Islamic dimension. In fact, as the writer indicated in a face-to-face interview, he wants to “make worldly love divine” and “embed it in a divine fiction.” A kind of dramaturgic element stands out in stories and letters of this genre: with their beliefs and, as will be emphasized later, the teachings of *Risale-i Nur*, people who have firm (i.e. religious) personalities now, live love in the “right” way.<sup>10</sup> This rightness encompasses a significant hierarchy. Divine love is superior to worldly love in every sense. In this context, the writer is saying “If people realize that true love is to know Allah and to prostrate oneself before him, to be with him in an eternal universe, they would never stoop to the level of worldly love” (Ertuğrul 2004: 71). As can be seen here, people manage worldly loves as if with divine power.

### *General Observations on Style*

As far as the style is concerned, a simple and easily understood language is used. Both Halit Ertuğrul and his letter-sending readers convey their experiences not in a colorful and literary language, but in daily language itself. This language also contains a number of conservative elements. For example, issues of sexuality are expressed in conservative language: “to get close” (*yakınlaşmak*) instead of “to make love” (*sevişmek*), “innocence” (*masumiyet*) instead of “virginity” (*bekâret*), etc.

When religion is being discussed, a number of religious expressions turn up; one often encounters words like “God” (*Allah*) and “My Lord” (*Rabbim*). Furthermore, one sees, very frequently, religious expressions like “Let my Lord be a friend and a helper” (*Rabbim yar ve yardımçı olsun*), “All prayers are with you” (*Dular sizinle*) or “Let Allah not give such a hard test to anyone” (*Allah kimseye böyle ağır bir imtihan yaşatmasın*). Unlike the language used in many other Islamic and/or Islamist works, this religious language does not contain complex, Ottoman Turkish expressions. It is simple and similar to the one used in daily life.

In the style of the book, the references to *Risale-i Nur* and to the writer’s own books are also noticeable. These two are mentioned favorably in nearly every story and are recommended to the readers as a manual on life, as a source of energy or, in their own language, a “source of inspiration.”

It is interesting that in spite of the content and all the qualities mentioned above, Halit Ertuğrul does not describe the book as “a manual on Islamic love.” Although the writer accepts that he acts as a guide, he is, on the other hand, quite uncomfortable with the concept of “Islamic:”

<sup>10</sup> For *Risale-i Nur* go to footnote 3.

(This is, BP) not a love manual because I am not a theologian. I am not an erudite person in Islamic literature (...) I am a sociologist, a scientist studying society; I give meaning to people's behaviors in social life (...) In *Aşk Böyle Yaşanır*, one (some, BP) of the examples of thousands of behaviors fully within the society (is/are presented, BP). Since he/she lives in an Islamic atmosphere, I wrote this book accordingly. (Interview)

Owing to his professional formation, Halit Ertuğrul positions himself differently from the theologians. Since he specialized in the fields of sociology and psychology, he wants to be active in these fields. In this context, he repeatedly gives psychological and sociological information during the interview that was conducted for me. As was emphasized before, he also wants to be a guiding light for people, and thus (as was and will be seen better later) he acts, with his religious identity, as a guidance counselor on life. According to him, the Islamic love manuals, since they contain Islamic literature, are theoretical and scientific and indirect, and are thus detached from real life. Because he takes as his starting point a love that is lived and alive, he finds his works more useful in coping with social problems.

Apart from this, in Nurist circles, the concept of Islam is used very cautiously in public discourse. Since the “Islamic” elements are often confused with “Islamist” elements in contemporary Turkey, the Nurists, who see themselves outside/against “political Islam,” use concepts very cautiously in order not to politicize Islam. They see themselves as the representative of the living folk Islam. They do not see religious life, as I have shown it before, just as a condition. They present Islamic values – in fact, according to Said Nursi’s special interpretation – as a social solution. According to him, the discourses of representation are nothing other than a political hide-and-seek.

### *Listified Advice*

In *Aşk Böyle Yaşanır*, there is another element worth considering. As emphasized by Halit Ertuğrul, it consists of letters from his readers. Because of the “best-sellers” I described above, Halit Ertuğrul has a large circle of readers. What is even more interesting is that these readers write him not only about their thoughts on his books, but also about their own lives. With books like *Kendini Arayan Adam* and *Aysel*, Halit Ertuğrul became a counselor on life. As he also points out, he receives countless letters and phone calls from his readers looking for advice and suggestions; besides, he gives students psychological support in the university where he works. As he finds some of the life stories he hears for various reasons suitable for book projects, he invites people to write their own stories. In this way, the book becomes, as he also indicates, based on “true” and “lived” love affairs. In this context, he states the following in an interview about the book *Aşk Böyle Yaşanır*:

Had I told them that this is the definition of love, that it is separated into the following topics, that love is this and that, that such and such a scholar perceived it in such a way, that some pedagogue said the following about it, then nobody would open the cover of this book. However, what the subject in this book is is a segment from each love affair that these young people have lived. The young reader says "Oh! This one describes exactly how my relationship is. This is how the relationship I am living today will end up; because these people experienced it like this and they ended up like this (Interview).

Owing to the way the book is constructed, in other words, because it is based on the evaluation of letters coming from his readers, his own words are rather few. Apart from the few paragraphs making up the introduction, an interview, short commentaries and a list of points to which one needs to pay attention, the actual text of the book belongs to the readers. What is interesting about this book is that the good and bad examples given by readers who frequently write back are also in the form of lists. The first list is by a woman who knows the secret of a happy love.

1. First of all, I grew up in a well-ordered family atmosphere. I established a good dialog with my parents. I shared every problem and received their support in every difficulty.
2. I was raised a girl devoted to our traditions, family values, moral feelings and national values. Through these feelings, first a sense of confidence in myself (...) was formed...
3. As I was known as a girl devoted to her spirituality (...) and with a settled worldview, the men around me could not be ordinary people either (...) Young people who liked my style wanted to communicate with me. This had created a very important advantage for me (...) They were at least not the kind of people who were irreligious, unbelieving, unspiritual, idle or who saw life as made up of daily pleasures.
4. I met my spouse in such a setting. He approached me while paying attention to my moral feelings and worldview (...) The wishes in our heads and hearts met each other and they overlapped (...)
5. I questioned myself after I met my spouse (...)
  - Why do you want this young person?
  - Can he provide me with the kind of life I would like to have? (...)
  - How much does he want me? (...)
  - Are his spending habits, dreams, his thoughts about the future consistent, in harmony, with mine, and do they inspire confidence in me? (...)
  - Does my family approve? (...) (Ertuğrul 2004: 123-4).

Our first step in interpreting this list should be to emphasize that love is perceived as being the same as marriage. Therefore, this list contains advice not for living a romantic love, but for having the right marriage. For a good marriage, we see that family roots are mentioned in the first part (Point 1). It is emphasized that the family roots form the psychological and social background of the individuals. While doing this, the institution of family is given two important meanings: Whereas attention is paid to the individual's family, it is also indicated indirectly that the family being formed and the right decisions in this process are equally important (Point 2). But it does not end with this: The social background

presented by the family symbolizes a worldview and reinforces the personalities of the individuals. Here it is emphasized that a settled identity is not just an individual value; a settled identity means a social selection as well. For, as the female writer of this list tells us, “ordinary people” would not approach her because of her spirituality. Therefore, we realize that said selective mechanism is also a protective mechanism keeping away undesirable relationships and the wrong type of love (Point 3). For the fourth point, the writer of our list tells us that the conditions for a happy marriage should not only be understood as theoretical propositions. By talking about her life, she emphasizes the applicability, the practical nature, of these proposed conditions. In the last point, the writer invites people to build a happy home by inviting the person in love to examine him/herself. Here, happiness is presented as a logical and problem-free relationship. In this section of the list, the duties one expects one’s spouse to perform are also investigated. When one looks carefully at the list of spousal duties, it becomes apparent that this list was written by a woman and for women. In this context, one fact stands out very clearly: Women can reinforce the traditional roles. In fact, as can be seen in this example, we understand that women expect that a man should take on traditional roles and duties such as providing for the family. If we are to evaluate the whole list briefly, it can be said that it does not contain too many Islamic elements and stays in the framework of the general conservative discourse.

Another reader who describes the love she experienced as “wrong” gives many other pieces of advice in her letter. As we can see, her advice is less of the “do this, do that” kind of clear encouragements or recommendations and more in the nature of “do not ever do this or that” type of warnings.

1. Girls should not enter this kind of relationship like “bam,” not in a hurry, [but] be careful and selective (...)
2. Do not go with your feelings and emotions. At least know to wait, to be patient and not to be hasty (...)
3. When you meet for the first time and during the period of engagement, try to watch him carefully and get to know him.
4. Do not do everything he wants, he asks (...) be hard to get (...)
5. Do not ever make a mistake you cannot reverse (...)
6. His smoking, drinking and some bad habits were the biggest threat to our marriage, too (...)
7. Now I understand how necessary family support and approval are.
8. A person brought up without any belief, any spirituality, sees life merely as consisting of pleasure and desire and makes great mistakes. Whereas the one who knows Allah (God) (...) makes fewer mistakes... knows duties, worship, (...) more or less. He/she tries to be happy through knowing Allah, afterlife and heaven (...) (Ertuğrul 2004: 108-111).

When we look at this list, we realize that it is written by a woman and for women. We also see in this example that sexuality and, as Halit Ertuğrul puts it, lost “innocence” are in the forefront of the list of mistakes. Sexuality or, more

particularly, traditional sexual morality is mentioned at various places in the book *Aşk Böyle Yaşanır*: As can be seen in the following citation, a significant difference is established between male and female sexualities.

Imagine you are in a relationship. But later, you are separated from each other without turning [your relationship] into a serious marriage. Let us now think whom this relationship would hurt more. Certainly, the girl (...) For no man would face anything like "You were in a relationship; therefore your initial innocence is gone, and you are no good for us." Nothing will change for him, even if he goes through a hundred relationships (Ertuğrul 2004: 107-108).

This is the predominant understanding in the bad example list. In fact, although points 1 to 5 are not clear, they are concerned with female sexuality. It is seen that the woman conveying her experiences had a premarital emotional relationship and now regrets it. She now presents sexuality as something to be left for marriage, for true love, and she sees premarital relationships as something harmful to women. As can be understood from the expression "Do not ever make a mistake you cannot reverse (...)," she sees sex as a "mistake" when experienced in the wrong setting. In this context, premarital virginity is approved and recommended. The male and female roles are presented as we know them: males are demanding and females are submissive. The submissive female is asked to use reason (invitation to reason) in order to protect herself from the demanding male. Emotions, on the other hand, exist only for a man's pleasure and can indirectly mislead the woman. All these suggestions reinforce the conservative worldview existing in Turkey. The sixth and seventh points are also part of the Sunni-conservative values. The bad habits are presented as a threat to the institution of family. Moreover, it is stated that the approval of the family elders is important for a happy home. The importance of the family elders is perceived, as can be seen in the other parts of the book, as a social insurance: A woman should not offend her family so that there is a place to return to in case there is a problem in the newly established family. Religion and belief are mentioned last: The message is quite clear. Since religious people act according to religious and traditional values, and since religion offers a clear framework in many areas, they will make fewer mistakes. Consequently, because they suffer less, religious people become happier. Although this understanding contains a religious perspective, it cannot be attributed solely to the Islamist/Islamic groups but to large social groups in Turkey.

In this book, there are two similar lists devised by Halit Ertuğrul. One of these lists is about the person loved, and the other one consists of the questions the reader needs to ask him/herself.

#### What Qualities Should Be Looked For In the Person with Whom One Falls In Love?

1. Is he/she worth my love?
2. Is he/she an experienced person?
3. Is his/her spirituality strong?

4. Does he/she have the material capability?
5. Can he/she be a confidant on the most difficult day?
6. Does he/she have the knowledge, desire and ability to make a living?
7. Does he/she have adequate education?
8. Does he/she have beautiful morality and chastity?
9. Is he/she a loyal friend?
10. Does he/she share the same culture and traditions?
11. Is his/her age suitable?
12. Is he/she single?
13. Does he/she value family?
14. Does he/she have an illness or a habit that would make life difficult?
15. Is love based on material reasons or personality and character?
16. Does he/she share the same philosophy of life with me?
17. Is he/she moderate and careful in his/her spending?
18. Does he/she value the opposing party and respect it? (Ertuğrul 2004: 131-132).

The “What Qualities Should Be Looked For In the Person with Whom One Falls In Love?” section of the list can be summarized in four categories: (1) religious identity, (2) being a good/suitable person, (3) socioeconomic status and materialism and (4) being a bachelor. In fact, questions 3, 8, 9 and 10 are about religious identity, questions 1, 2, 5, 11, 13, 14, 16 and 18 are about being a good/suitable person, questions 4, 6, 7, 15, 17 are about the socioeconomic status and materialism, and question 12 is about being a bachelor. When one looks carefully at this categorization, religious identity and being a good/suitable person overlap considerably. This overlap shows that being religious is equated with being a good/suitable person and vice versa. Since questions related to being a good/suitable person and religious identity are important categories for both women and men, the questions about the socioeconomic status and materialism are, though not clearly expressed, for men. Therefore, what is suggested here is not social sexual roles based on equality and sharing, but the allocation of the traditional roles.

These perceptions that we have taken into consideration up until now are not surprising, since we have been talking about a Sunni-conservative writer and a Sunni-conservative audience. We can also add that these perceptions are common among the Sunni-conservative groups. On the other hand, the 12<sup>th</sup> question of the list we have been analyzing constitutes an important exception. In fact, the question whether or not he/she is a bachelor (single/unmarried) shows that the writer rejects the idea of multiple marriages. What is interesting is that even though the issue of multiple marriages is a reality among the Sunni-conservative groups, it is not mentioned in the other sections of the book. The writer explains this omission, in an interview conducted with him, by indicating that he intends to write a separate book on multiple marriages. He is generally against multiple marriages, since, he adds, he has not seen happiness in multiple marriages. The viewpoint he describes deserves attention because multiple marriages are not rejected as clearly as it is indicated here within the Sunni-conservative

groups.<sup>11</sup> Since multiple marriages as an institution of family are encountered especially in Sunni-conservative and Islamist settings in Turkey, the writer's attitude about this issue merits attention. Indeed, although he seems to be interested in organizing society as seen in his other suggestions, in this area, he does not reinforce traditional values – to the contrary, he tries to break with traditionalism in this area. This break is, as one would expect, not an Islamic attitude – on the contrary, it represents the modern worldview. This phenomenon is very important, because, as Nilufer Göle, starting from this point, determined, the Islamist groups do not modernize life while implementing Islamic activities. Sometimes, as can be seen in Halit Ertuğrul's love discourse, they directly adopt values thought to belong to the secular world. As we see in Halit Ertuğrul's second list, the author also invites the individuals to question themselves.

#### Questions about one's own self

1. What am I doing? Does what I am doing make sense to me? Am I aware of the fact that I am doing something very important?
2. Who am I getting ready to be with? Is this person worth sharing my life with?
3. Do I have enough knowledge and examples to deal with this serious task?
4. Have I talked to people with similar experiences and asked for their opinions?
5. Have I talked to an expert?
6. Have I informed the family elders and gotten their support? (Ertuğrul 2004: 132).

The questions in the “Questions about one's own self” section are very similar to the previously considered questions in “invitation to reason.” Indeed, the writer invites those who have fallen in love to act according to reason based on conservative morality and conduct.

If we are to compare Halit Ertuğrul's list with those of his female readers, we notice that the women write for women while Halit Ertuğrul takes on roles addressed to both sexes.

With his suggestions he invites his readers, once more, to be more logical than emotional. Since, according to him, what is legitimate is that a person can fall in love with someone from the opposite sex only once, love becomes a very serious task. This seriousness is attained through the self-examination people conduct.

The popular cultural products of the Islamic publishing sector generally give their readers very clear advice. It should be considered natural that due to their didactic functions these publications present their suggestions in lists. Indeed, with their rhetoric and didactic nature, these lists direct people towards the desired direction in a very definite manner.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Legitimacy of multiple marriages is generally emphasized only in exceptional cases. An abundance of women, e.g. widows, as often seen after wars, is presented as one such exception. In Islamist/Sunni discourse, not being a child is enough to legitimize being taken by men as a second wife (Dilipak 1995).

<sup>12</sup> Priska Furrer observes the same phenomenon in “Islamic” novels (Furrer 2001).

In order to show how wide a spectrum the Sunni-conservatives in Turkey represent, I would like to consider briefly the list of another writer:

My conditions in the order given are as follows:

1. I do not demand from you any condition in the form of furnishings or gold (...): If you do not have money, we can buy a mat or kilim. In return, you will not want from me the kind of dowry the girls whose main interest is to show off bring with them and accept whatever I bring (...)
2. If you are to provide house furnishings, I do not want expensive and fancy furniture. I was not created to serve objects. Objects must serve me. Therefore, the number of objects must match our needs. We should not waste.
3. I want an Islamic wedding.
4. After I am married, I will teach the Kur'an and pray at least five times a day.
5. I do not go anywhere without permission from my spouse; I expect loyalty from my spouse... I cannot imagine a spouse who is out at coffeehouses until twelve at night.
6. You should stop me if I make concessions from Islam.
7. Since you want me to show respect to your family members, I expect the same respect for my own family.
8. If I make a mistake, and I am sure I will, I would like you to tell me first, I would not want anyone else to hear it before I do.
9. Every night, at least for one hour, I would like you to give fikih (canonical law) lessons to me and whoever else may be in the house. Otherwise, I would like to read.
10. Though not frequently, I would like to stroll in solitary places as a couple (...) This strolling is not for pleasure, but resting (...)
11. I would want my spouse to share his problems with me.
12. I would want him to support neither me against his family, nor his family against me. I only want justice (...)
13. I will try to do my cooking and house work to the best of my ability. In the meantime, I do not want my small mistakes blown out of proportion, but to be told of my mistake in a manner appropriate to Islam.
14. I do not get out of my mahrem [sexuality of woman's body] for anyone else.
15. I will wear old clothes, old shoes, but I will never wear external clothes that make concessions (...) [opening her body to the outside gaze]
16. I want everything to be done with kindness. When there is a quarrel, which is a natural human condition, I will not talk back, but if I am blamed for what is not my fault, then I will defend myself (...)
17. If we make concessions from namaz and the other religious duties required of all Muslims by Allah, my respect for you will decrease.
18. As a mihr, I ask for permission to have a student educated. If we reach disagreement and separate, I want 50 Reşad gold pieces (Şenlikoğlu: 244-247).

I took this list from Emine Şenlikoğlu's novel titled *Bize Nasıl Kıydmız*; the heroine of the novel writes this list to her future spouse. In this context, one does notice a stylistic difference, when the above list is compared with Halit Ertuğrul's list. However, I believe another element is even more important: This difference shows that these lists change according to the worldviews of their authors and how they comprehend Islam. In fact, compared to Halit Ertuğrul, Emine Şenlik-

oğlu makes more political and radical suggestions. In connection with this, the lists overlap with their authors' general worldviews/ideologies: While Emine Şenlikoğlu, who represents the populist voice of political Islam, nearly demands a social change, Nurist Halit Ertuğrul, on the other hand, makes suggestions that are personal and are accepted in Turkish society by wide Sunni-conservative circles. The different positions these writers have are related to the worldview of the groups they represent. This reminds us how even subjects like love, which is thought to be "light" and to belong to the private sphere, can be very political. Both writers – which is the point we wish to emphasize here – present "alternative" "love" models to what they define as "modern" or "urban liberal" life and what they perceive as "modern" or "urban liberal" love and marriage conceptions. Although these writers are searching for different alternatives, their ideas overlap with many of what are accepted as general values in Turkey.

### *The Story of Aşk Böyle Yaşanır*

*Aşk Böyle Yaşanır* is a 154-page work. It is composed of a preface and fourteen love stories. Most of the stories (13) consist of readers' letters. The book's first and longest story is presented as an interview.

The name of the first story and the title of the book are the same: *Aşk Böyle Yaşanır*. This life story is the longest section in the book; it makes up nearly 30% of the book. It is also the only interview in the book. All these characteristics make this story very important in its own framework. Taking this importance into consideration, I would like to present a brief summary of it:

İffet and Hikmet are two young people who know each other from secondary school. They live in the same town and the same neighborhood. Their social statuses are very different: while İffet is the rich girl of the neighborhood, Hikmet comes from the poorest family there. Because of the status difference and the general rules of conduct both accept, the two youths cannot divulge their feelings to each other.

A year later, the two youths both see an old man in their dreams. This man tells Hikmet "My son, you will have this girl, but it will be very difficult. Do not give her up; she is a very nice girl" (Ertuğrul 2004: 11). The girl has the same dream and on the same night, but since İffet is not attending the high school, the two youths are not able to see each other any longer. However, when these two come to Istanbul for various reasons, they walk into each other in a hospital. There, they exchange their new addresses and telephone numbers. Hikmet gets a letter to İffet, and a new phase starts in their relationship: They go through a friendship/flirtation period. In the meantime, the two start becoming more devout Muslims than they were before: They get to know *Risale-i Nur*, attend meetings and take part in readings.

Following her return to the town where they both grew up, what İffet has been afraid of all this time happens: men who want to marry her start coming to her house. After she refuses all the suitors, her father decides to marry her against her will. İffet can find only one way out of this: She sends Hikmet a letter and tells him to abduct her. Luckily, since the groom her father has chosen dies in a traffic accident, İffet's problem ends. In the meantime, nothing is heard of Hikmet because something bad happens to him: While helping an old woman, he is hit by a truck and loses both legs. Since he thinks he now has no chance of ever marrying İffet, his whole world collapses and he never writes to İffet again.

Time goes by and new people appear who want to marry İffet. She rejects her suitors. Suspicious of her behavior, her mother asks her "if there is someone she wants" (ibid.: 25). When İffet explains what is going on, her mother simply restricts herself to saying "Be careful, don't let your brothers and father hear about this; otherwise they will kill us" (ibid.). Upon this, İffet sends a message saying "Abduct me" to Hikmet through a friend, but she is not aware of Hikmet's situation at this point. Although he does not see much chance, Hikmet sets out to get İffet, telling himself "I will marry her if she accepts me like this" (ibid.: 27). However, the tragedy does not end here: He gets into another traffic accident on this trip and loses both eyes. Consequently, marriage becomes a dream that he will never attain, and he moves in with his family in Istanbul and starts living an isolated life in a slum house.

Meanwhile, suitors keep coming to İffet's house. When another secondary school friend, Selami, seeks her hand in marriage, İffet tells him her problem. Selami tries to help her. He first finds out Hikmet's telephone number, and then helps them meet through a secret telephone call. İffet learns about Hikmet's condition during this telephone call. Her reaction is as follows: "If your eyes are gone, I have mine. If your legs are gone, I have mine. They will be enough for both of us" (ibid.: 34). Upon hearing this, Hikmet abducts İffet with Selami's help. On the way they have a religious (Islamic) marriage ceremony performed, so that "there will be no sin;" later, they have an official marriage ceremony and settle in the slum house in Istanbul. They start living a humble but happy life with their daughter, born a year after their marriage. İffet's father tries to break off this marriage, but he never succeeds.

At first, it is impossible not to liken this story to the popular Turkish love films that are often seen in Turkey. However, there is one difference, namely the emphasis that is put on *Risale-i Nur*. Apart from this, the succession of tragic events, the characters in the story, the fatalism of the woman in love, the kind-heartedness of the victimized man, the general moral principles, and finally the humble but happy ending are very familiar elements. In fact, when I was retelling this story during the symposium titled "Social change and human relations in the Turkish world," the audience wanted to know what the specifically Islamic dimension of this story was. As with the other stories in this book, the writer's

“Islamism” is restricted to piety, fatalism, love of Allah and the teachings of *Risale-i Nur*.

From the point of view of dramaturgy, the other stories in this book are less tragic and much more banal than this one. These stories are set in comparatively more “normal” frameworks: One woman does not marry again after her husband’s death because she still loves him. Another woman regrets having married her teacher (ibid.: 83ff). One man says “My mother’s love was my father (...) and my father’s was the motherland” (ibid.: 136), etc. Although the stories presented in the book all differ from one another, they do have some points in common. The most important of them are the following:

In general terms, the book consists of “good” and “bad” stories. Although life is presented in very rosy terms in the “good” stories, the people never lose their direction in life. They overcome difficulties with their faith. On the other hand, the people in the “bad” stories find the “right” path after some turning point they experience. The turning point and the rightness appear as two key concepts. In this context, the “right” path is always the one that is humble, simple but peaceful, detached from worldly pleasures. It comes with a life full of deep emotions. The “wrong” life, on the contrary, consists of a series of pleasures, superficial and empty. Besides, there is always a turning point in a wrong life, and after this point, what is “bad” becomes “good.” The turning points generally consist of human tragedies such as traffic accidents or serious illness such as cancer; and these tragedies are the cause behind irreligious people’s developing religious identities. Even those people who lead happy lives in the wrong path take these disasters as signs that they need to change their lives; and, of course, eventually they become happier than they were before. Therefore, as “a symbol of unpredictability,” these disasters play an important role in this book and invite the reader who is happy in the “wrong” path to turn to the “right” path. We can perceive this open invitation as one of the principal discourses of this book.

In parallel to the “right” and “wrong” path discourse, there is also an “us” and “them” discourse in almost every story. In the “us” category are those Sunni-conservative people who are devoted to their religion, nation and traditions; the “them” category contains people who are urbanites and have more liberal and individualistic values. Even though at first sight the others (“them”) seem to be more modern and contemporary, the truly important values belong to the Sunni-conservative groups.

In various sections, the book also reinforces traditional sexual roles. While attributes such as brave, hardworking and honest are very important, the desirable qualities for women can be summarized as “nice,” “innocent,” “chaste” and “self-sacrificing.” Woman’s role as “helper” is also emphasized. The most obvious example for this is the story summarized above. The woman tells her legless and blind lover “If your eyes are gone, I have mine. If your legs are gone, I have mine. They will be enough for both of us (ibid.: 34).” Her eyes and legs are pre-

sented as spare parts. The names İffet (virtue) and Hikmet (wisdom) alone present a sense of traditionalism and a clearly sexist distribution of roles.

Although in the “good” stories the couples do not come together through matchmaking and act against their parents’ will, still, a dignified and conservative courtship is followed. The words that are said and the steps that are taken all occur within a conservative framework. As can be seen from the advice lists, what is emphasized is not acting only according to one’s emotions, but especially acting according to one’s logic. Despite all this, there is still passion, but this passion is different from the passion we know from romantic love. This passion is presented as a feeling of faithfulness, of self-sacrifice that grows with and finds strength in loving Allah. In this passion, it seems as if the person with whom one falls in love is in the background and the elements of spirituality (that is, the desire to pass Allah’s test, fatalism, etc.) are in the foreground.

According to the writer, Hikmet and İffet’s love story needs to be interpreted in this framework. What could be interpreted as insanity, obsession and suffering from a different perspective is presented and praised as the product of an extensive spirituality. Let us question particularly the steps taken by İffet as a woman and the value system presented with this. Will women always sacrifice? Will women always adapt to a bad life for their great loves? Will women always be the “helpers”?... The writer looks at this issue from a very different perspective. According to him, what is praised in the story is not the general plot of the story. In this sense, he adds, the story of making it against all odds is “an exemplary story of self-sacrifice” rather than “an exemplary love story” (interview). And, in his opinion, these qualities are shown by both the woman and the man in the story since the male character is prepared to forgo his love because of his situation, and since the female character accepts her beloved in spite of all the difficulties. Apart from this, the author advises people of ordinary spirituality to act according to his list. He promises them that they will be happy once they find spiritual love and choose their worldly loves logically. Since in today’s world, people are too much, as he puts it, “into flesh and bone for the sake of love” (*ibid.*), the loyalty and self-sacrifice needed for true love should be emphasized even more. Hence the decision to publish the İffet-Hikmet love story in his book.

### *Love, Woman and Society*

The Sunni-conservative setting I described is very uncomfortable with the society in Turkey that is in the process of modernization and with the lifestyles that change with it. Since life is changing throughout society, the Sunni-conservative groups are active in every social area in order to develop an alternative (Kömeçoğlu 2007). They want to form an Islamic alternative in areas from politics to fashion, music and the way to spend one’s leisure time – and it seems that they have already formed such an alternative (Göle 2000). Although the aim is to

bring with these attempts an Islamic transformation / Islamic modernization, nonetheless, they try to maintain some of the traditional and conservative values as well. In this context, we may observe an “us” and “them” distinction.

We should evaluate the discourse concerning love in this framework as well. Referred to as *tele-volley* culture in daily Turkish speech, the affluence and free lifestyle of modernity have made their presence felt in every household in Turkey, especially through private television channels. According to many Sunni-conservative writers, the free relations seen in these programs are not only “immoral,” but also “confusing” to many young people.

Although the Sunni-conservative groups monitor and criticize the confusing nature of modern life in every area, they worry more about its “potential to confuse” in private life and family structure. The reason for this is the importance they place on family life and the role they attribute to women: They take family as the pillar of society. They see family as the institution assigned to protect society from negative innovations. Here, the actual burden is on the shoulders of those who work in the family, i.e. the women. Indeed, women are shown as the inner pillar of the home in all of the love, marriage and family manuals I could find. In this context, women are presented as self-sacrificing mothers, understanding and supportive spouses and fearful servants of Allah. (The men, on the other hand, are shown as the outer pillar of the home, providing for the family, and their qualities are given as bravery, hard work, honesty and of course piety—all separated from daily pleasures.) Especially the roles attached to the woman as mother and wife are, as put by Ayşe Kadioğlu (1998), very common in “great social projects” such as Kemalism, socialism and Islamism. Consequently, women are given the duty of shaping society, educating it. In this conceptual system, it is as if the women, who are perceived as the ones who can perpetuate the religious worldview the most, are taken into “a special protective field.” This area must be a very important matter for men – indeed, all the love, marriage and family manuals (unlike the novels) are written by men.

I believe that the reason the Sunni-conservative men are so concerned with family, love and marriage is the social mission they impose on women. This is how I explain the fact that all the love, marriage and family manuals I could find are written by men (Şelubi 1995, Çakmaklı 1996, Büyükcınar 2003). As a side note, it should be emphasized at this point that there is a difference between the Sunni-conservative women and men. While some women are demanding certain changes within crossgender relations and the traditional family structure, and trying to realize these changes, the men reinforce the traditional and patriarchal status quo even more.

At any rate, many texts are published in order to protect and/or encourage the above-mentioned religious values. The triangle of love-marriage-family is reinforced or shaped in accordance with the Sunni-conservative worldview through manuals on marriage and love and love novels, which contain clear advice.

## Conclusion

The Islamic love discourse, as seen in this article, is very different from the familiar romantic love. Here people's passions, sexual desires, and rosy fantasies are not in the forefront. Instead, what takes place is that worldly love is made more beautiful with the spiritual power that spiritual love provides. Moreover, worldly love is not perceived as a feeling that "needs to be caught" and "is desired to be caught." Worldly love is a functional element that helps generations to continue within the Sunni-conservative framework with which we are familiar. Despite all these features of the Islamic love discourse, we should not forget the following: Especially the love discourse of Nurists and "moderate Islamists" like Halit Ertuğrul overlaps with the conservative values that are widely encountered in Turkey. If we think of Islamic love as an alternative, we should also ask for what it is the alternative. The answer to this question is hidden in the examples given above – the "Islamic love" discourse of writers like Halit Ertuğrul does not constitute a desire for radical Islamization on the social level and, accordingly, a new understanding of brand new / radical Islam. On the contrary: The Islamic love discourse of writers like Halit Ertuğrul is a "rescue operation" in the private domain, aimed at trying to save the values that are still very widespread but are slowly being lost as a result of ongoing social change. Religious understanding is not experiencing a break in this discourse – on the contrary, Islamic love discourse is where the continuance of the religious values is sought.

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