

The Body

SABINE STRASSER

Impurity as Criticism Reports from a Black Sea Village in Turkey

Essays on gender relations in rural Turkey end up all too often in the pitfall of fixed ascriptions that portray women mainly as victims of their own society. The following is an attempt to challenge this discourse of victimization and fixity by drawing on female bodily expressions. Women in rural Turkey¹ counteract social expectations and male dominance through bodily crises. This case study shows the potential for change that is inherent in spirit possession, which is commonly considered backward or traditional. Bodily crises in this sense are conceptualized not only as an expression of weakness, but also as a female counter-hegemonic potential to express the unspeakable.

Canım sıkılıyor! (My soul is bored!) is the term by which women in rural Turkey describe their bodily crises. *Hasta* (being ill) or *rahatsız* (restless) are other terms used to express suffering and anxiety. Villagers, especially the elderly, are convinced that doctors are not able to do anything about these conditions. In their opinion, there is no biological or medical cause, and these crises are considered *cincilik*, an issue for a *hoca* (healer). Men and women who experience such attacks are mainly seen as *perilenmiş* (possessed by demons) and since they no longer meet social expectations, they are sometimes referred to as *akılsız* (unreasonable, crazy) and not *temiz* (decent, clean), or even as too *akıllı* (intelligent, clever).²

Dilek: a woman from the town³

Dilek did not feel welcome in her husband's house: because she had been brought up in a nearby town, she was considered a stranger (*yabancı*) in her new village. Having to stay with her widowed mother-in-law, with whom she did not at all get along, Dilek suffered terribly – not from village work but from loneliness and desire. Her husband was then working outside the village and sometimes did not return for weeks at a time. After being married for about two years and still without child, Dilek worried that she would never conceive. She was convinced that a child would have supported her in overcoming the difficult situation in which she was living. She could not turn to her own family either, because she had run away from her father's house to follow her husband (*kız kacırma*) to the village.

Dilek's 'attacks' began after a dispute with her mother-in-law for not allowing her to visit her parents. While retrieving water from the well, she suddenly had a vision of her mother and as she ran over to welcome her, fell to the ground and lost consciousness. From then on Dilek is said to have behaved strangely: it appears that she would, at times, lay her head on her husband's lap in public, cursing or crying for her mother like a child. She began to talk to invisible people and often lost consciousness. Oddly enough, after such an episode, she could not recollect disrespectful or strange behaviour, but could only remember feelings of relaxation once she came to.

Finally, her own father (though her husband's family was ultimately responsible for her) took her to a *hoca* where she was examined and received treatment. The *hoca* con-

cluded that there was a *muska* (spell) affecting her, which was also preventing her from having a baby. The *muska* was put on her by her first fiancé, whom she had rejected. Dilek explained that the *hoca* was told by the *peri* (demons) that she should stay with her parents for a while and not be brought back to her husband's village immediately. After several weeks, she nevertheless decided to go back to join her husband's family, where she again began to feel lonely and eventually suffered a relapse.

Dilek was convinced that living in town with her parents would have been the best remedy, and that a baby would have been supportive, since she would have someone for whom to live. She strongly believed in the *hoca's* treatment, but was still afraid of becoming ill again. The *hoca's* rituals, Dilek stated, strengthened her so as to cope with the situation, but of course could not change it. Her seizures continued.

Several months later, her husband came back home from his military service and decided to rent a house in a town close to Dilek's family. She became pregnant for the first time soon after.

Gül: a girl on her own

Gül was 19 years of age. She had always known that her father's support and control would be very important at that age, but her father had died years before. His death not only meant suffering from the loss and economic shortages, but also suffering from the strict social control by her brothers and *amcaoğlu* (father's brother's son). Girls without a father are believed to show less respect to elderly people and men.

Gül was actually very much concerned about her behaviour and thus rejected these ascriptions. Seen as unprotected by a father, she herself felt instead unprotected from public opinion. Women looking for a suitable bride for their sons would not prefer girls such as Gül, who in turn feared the very idea of being married to a poor farmer in need of a labourer, or a widower looking for a woman to bring up his children.

When feeling insulted or excluded, Gül would initially become angry and aggressive, but would then faint. People began to say she was *perilenmiş* (possessed by demons) since she was under shock at her father's funeral. She, on the contrary, was convinced that the anxiety about her reputation, the brother's strict control and her fear of being married to somebody she did not love had caused the crises. She went to a *hoca* and kept stressing that she felt better after the treatment. However, she also insisted on a medical examination, which her family could not afford. Several years later she was married to a young man in the city of Trabzon. Since that time Gül's body has remained quiet.

Hatice: a woman abroad

Hatice had been married to a relative living in Vienna, Austria, where she was staying for about 10 years when her bodily problems began. At the climax of her crises she frequently suffered from cardiac arrhythmia and numbness of the limbs. She was brought to a doctor several times and once

even to the hospital. Medical examination, however, did not lead to any results but rather confirmed that Hatice was physically healthy. Hatice's husband was convinced that 'there's nothing wrong with her, she's *calgılı*, *perilenmiş* (possessed by demons) and the whole affair is a matter for the *hoca*. I will send her to Turkey, there is nothing they can do about it here.'

I accompanied her to Turkey and she insisted on seeing a *hoca* in the area of Adapazarı, where we were staying in the house of her father-in-law. This was surprising because I knew that Hatice usually used these trips to Turkey to see her sisters and aunts in Trabzon. It was, as I realized later on, not the outstanding capacity of the *hoca* which led us to this area but Hatice's capacity to negotiate a delicate situation.

The *hoca's* interpretation after the Islamic treatment of the *cin* (demon) was clear enough. He first explained the fear, which led to these crises, he spoke about the suffering of women in foreign countries (*gurbette*). And in the following interpretations of this suffering it turned out that Hatice's husband 'had left the way of God' and was involved in a relationship with an Austrian woman. Hatice's mother-in-law got the point, took her responsibility and called her son to account. Two months later Hatice was pregnant again and gave birth to a third son. Since then she did not have any bodily expressed problems anymore. Hatice couldn't talk about her husband's behaviour to anybody, she was too scared of getting divorced. But she found a way to let her body and the *hoca* talk.

Cincilik: confirmation or criticism?

At that time, most villagers believed that demons could cause various complaints. Women are much more often affected by crises than men, a *cinci-hoca* once stressed, because they menstruate, become pregnant and give birth. In Islam, these events are all signs of fertility but also of gender-specific impurity. Body fluids are connected to demons in general. Sperm, menstrual blood, vaginal fluids, urine and faeces are considered impure and, when leaving the body, may attract demons. But whereas men are able to control their body-fluids and may restore their state of purity at any time through purification rituals, female impurities must be suffered cyclically for a period of time. Spirit possession occurs mainly after the first menstruation, before or after marriage and before the first pregnancy, periods during which respect for social rules is particularly important.

Narratives on *cincilik* in this sense not only report about women's bodily crises but also express their criticism of normative values and their longing for social change. All women mentioned in this contribution are married today and all, even Dilek, have children. The crises passed by, as soon as the women changed the social situation they were living in. These women were using the languages of their bodies to express their suffering. We do not yet know what kind of language the next generation in Turkish villages will use facing new challenges in an

ongoing global integration after the Cold War. But I am convinced the body will be important in finding a language for counter-hegemonic strategies. ♦

Notes

1. In this context 'rural' or 'local' does not mean timeless and tradition-bound, but a constantly changing place.
2. For a further discussion of the connection of fertility, impurity, female fainting and spirit possession in the context of Islam, see also Boddy, Janice (1989). *Wombs or Alien Spirits. Women, Men and the Zar Cult in Northern Sudan*. Madison (Wisconsin): The University of Wisconsin Press; Strasser, Sabine (1995). *Die Unreinheit ist fruchtbar! Grenzüberschreitungen in einem türkischen Dorf am Schwarzen Meer*. Vienna: Wiener Frauenverlag; Strasser, Sabine (1998). 'Ambigüité de l'impurité: Corps de femme, moment critiques de la vie, et possession par les esprits dans un village de la côte est de la mer Noire en Turquie'. In *Le corps humain. Supplicié, possédé, cannibalisé*, Maurice Godielier and Michel Panoff. Amsterdam: Overseas Publishers Association, pp. 29-54.
3. The following examples stem from my field research in a Turkish village conducted between 1989-1993. The village, I call Yeşilköy (Green Village), is situated within the district of Trabzon.

Sabine Strasser is a research fellow at the Institute of Social and Cultural Anthropology, where she also teaches feminist theory, postcolonial and migration studies, University of Vienna, Austria.
E-mail: sabine.strasser@univie.ac.at

Hoca designates several social functions but always indicates well-educated and literate persons: teachers, imams, people who are able to read and interpret the Koran and also different kinds of healers. Depending on the urgency and duration of the case, local healers (reading the Koran) or distant but well-known *cinci-hoca* (masters of demons) are consulted. Their services are demanded in the case of infertility, impotence, fainting and other bodily expressed crises.