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SHE IS NOT PURE ANYMORE: THE PURITY CONCEPT IN Ö. ZÜLFÜ LİVANELİ'S *BLISS*

O ARTIK SAF DEĞİL: Ö. ZÜLFÜ LİVANELİ'NİN *MUTLULUK* ROMANINDA SAFLIK KAVRAMI[1]

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ABSTRACT

This article focuses on the concept of female purity in the context of honour killings by exploring Turkish writer Ö. Zülfü Livaneli's third novel *Mutluluk* (2002) / *Bliss* (2007) and by addressing the ways in which the discourses of purity and impurity are constructed in the narration. The classification systems which label the main character, Meryem, as both dirty and pure are examined by focusing on Meryem's childish and feminine purity as well as her perceived impurity. Also, the ways in which Meryem's supposed sexual impurity stains the family's honour and ultimately leads to an honour killing attempt are investigated. Through an analysis of different constructions of purity in *Bliss*, it is argued that Meryem's purity or impurity is a matter of perception and that varying discourses of purity determine whether she is pure or not. This reading of *Bliss* helps us to make sense of different constructions of social norms and expectations according to certain discourses of purity. This article argues that *Bliss* provides depth and nuance to our understanding of how the notion of purity operates in the context of honor killings, while also demonstrating how literature can be a valuable tool to enhance our understanding of social phenomena.

Keywords: *Female Purity, Honour Killings, Literary Analysis, Cultural Constructions.*

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ÖZ

Bu makale, Türk yazar Ö. Zülfü Livaneli'nin üçüncü romanı *Mutluluk* (2002) / *Bliss* (2007) üzerinden namus cinayetleri bağlamında kadın saflığı kavramına odaklanmakta ve anlatıda saflık ve kirlilik söylemlerinin nasıl inşa edildiğini ele almaktadır. Ana karakter Meryem'i hem kirli hem de saf olarak etiketleyen sınıflandırma sistemleri, Meryem'in çocuksu ve kadınsı saflığına ve algılanan kirliliğine odaklanılarak incelenmektedir. Ayrıca, Meryem'in varsayılan cinsel kirliliğinin aile onurunu nasıl lekelediği ve nihayetinde bir namus cinayetine teşebbüse nasıl yol açtığı araştırılmaktadır. *Mutluluk'*taki farklı saflık kurgularının analiziyle, Meryem'in saflığının ya da kirliliğinin bir algı meselesi olduğu ve değişen saflık söylemlerinin onun saf olup olmadığını belirlediği ileri sürülmektedir. *Mutluluk'un* bu okuması, belirli saflık söylemlerine göre toplumsal normların ve beklentilerin nasıl inşa edildiğini anlamamıza yardımcı olmaktadır. Bu makale, *Mutluluk'un* saflık kavramının namus cinayetleri bağlamında nasıl işlediğine dair anlayışımıza derinlik ve nüans kazandırırken aynı zamanda edebiyatın toplumsal olgulara dair anlayışımızı geliştirmede değerli bir araç olduğunu göstermektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Kadın Saflığı, Namus Cinayetleri, Edebi Analiz, Kültürel İnşa*.

I. Introduction:

The aim of this article is to analyse the relationship between the concept of purity and honour killings as represented in Ö. Zülfü Livaneli's third novel *Bliss* which was published in Türkiye in 2002 and quickly became an international best-seller. In *Bliss*, Livaneli tells the story of a fifteen/seventeen-year-old girl, Meryem, who is sentenced to death by her family in order to cleanse her family's honour after she has been raped by her uncle who is implied to be a fake sheikh leading the Cemaliye Sufi order.

The geographical setting serves as an organizing device, enabling three simultaneous stories in different locations centered around the main characters: Meryem in Van, Cemal in Eastern Anatolia, and Professor İrfan Kurudal in Istanbul. When Cemal returns from military service, his story intertwines with Meryem's until they meet the professor. Set around 2000, the novel reflects Türkiye's contemporary political history, including prison hunger strikes and student protests against the headscarf ban. The narrative is mostly chronological, with flashbacks revealing the characters' personal crises. The main events occur over a few months, beginning with Meryem's rape, which she cannot remember. Her uncle, the family's patriarch, decrees an honor killing. Meryem is locked in a barn, expected to hang herself; when she cannot, the responsibility falls to Cemal upon his return from military service. To avoid attracting police attention, they set out for Istanbul, but Cemal pities her and cannot go through with the killing. They then escape to the Aegean region to hide from the family. There, they meet Professor Kurudal, who is also escaping his life in Istanbul. Their paths cross coincidentally while Meryem and Cemal are working at a fish farm.

Among the main characters, Meryem emerges as the primary focus. Each character feels societal pressure: Meryem is full of life and does not want to die. Cemal suffers from post-military trauma and tries to believe in the sacredness of the killing missions that were given to him, both by military authorities to kill Kurdish rebels and by his family to kill Meryem. The Professor is depressed, thinking that he has not lived a life that he really wanted but a life which society had required. Despite their desire to escape their circumstances, the emphasis remains on Meryem.

After meeting Meryem and Cemal, the Professor employs them on his sailboat. During their journey, Meryem gains self-confidence and embraces Western ideals, with the Professor educating her in their free time. The change in Meryem's position is narrated through Cemal's perspective. Cemal thinks: "In the village, it would have been her duty to serve him […] On this boat on the Aegean shore, it seemed as if she were the superior being" (Livaneli, 2007, p. 427).

Livaneli depicts Meryem as an innocent and naive girl like a child throughout the novel as can be seen in the scene when the midwife of the village visits Meryem in the barn: '"Child." Gulizar sighed, caressing Meryem's hair. "My poor child. […]" (Livaneli, 2007, p. 111). Also, the novel is full of metaphors, which reassure that Meryem is pure and innocent such as she is named after "Virgin Mary" (Livaneli, 2007, p. 72). There is a dynamic of two opposing ideas in the novel. One of them is that Meryem should be purified; the other, that Meryem is already pure. At the end of the novel, the idea confirming Meryem's purity becomes dominant. In this regard, I will explore how feminine purity is represented in the novel and whether the book productively challenges or reinforces the norms of feminine purity in Turkish society. Meryem is depicted as a loveable character and a paragon of purity for most readers: so, in one way, Livaneli challenges the idea that rape or sexual knowledge can tarnish purity, as Meryem preserves her pure status throughout the novel. Yet, due to the stress on her purity, I argue that while the novel criticizes social form, it praises feminine purity as a feminine quality.

The concept of purity in honour crimes is vitally important seeing as one of the central causes of honour crimes is the presumed stain on one's (family's, tribe's, clan's) honour. Many perpetrators and advocates of honour crimes defend their actions as morally correct in that it removes the stain brought upon their honour. The things considered impure and which may cause the stain on honour are prohibited to protect the physical and spiritual purity of individuals and society. This notion of purity in the context of honour crimes is mostly related to the sexuality of women. A. Nevin Yildiz Tahincioglu (2011) asserts that in the specific context of Türkiye, the sexual purity of all women is controlled by men in the name of *sheref* of the tribe, family or men. For the sake of sexual purity and to claim the protection of sexual purity, the rights of women are revoked or restricted when referring to the sexual ethics which are shaped according to the honour codes of society. When honour depends on the sexual purity of women; even the victims of sexual abuse who do not have any consent or control over the sexual act feel themselves dirty and

guilty as they cannot satisfy social expectations. If we widen the lens, Shalhoub-Kevorkian's (1999, p. 1284) case study 'The Politics of Disclosing Female Sexual Abuse: A Case Study of Palestinian Society' reveals how abused girls internalise the social expectations of society and work hard to fit the codes of appropriate female behaviour and how they feel themselves dirty because of their loss of virginity.

One of the victims put it this way:

> I can't believe I am no longer a virgin! What else does a girl have except her virginity? I lost my purity… the purity that all girls feel proud of… How can I go on with my life when I am no longer a pure virgin girl?

Mary Douglas (2002, p. xvii) states that "there is no such thing as dirt; no single item is dirty apart from a particular system of classification in which it does not fit" Hence, in this article the classification systems which label the main character in *Bliss*, Meryem, as both dirty and pure will be analysed.

This article focuses on two main concepts of purity; the first is Meryem's childish purity; the other one is Meryem's feminine purity. In *Bliss*, the theme of purity is prominent considering that characterisation of the leading character, Meryem, is clearly associated with purity and innocence of children and she is named after the symbol of sexual purity, the Virgin Mary.

II. Meryem is Pure like a Child

As a fifteen year-old, Meryem has a limited experience of life and a lack of sexual knowledge. She is seventeen years old in the Turkish edition. The English edition makes Meryem's character more in tune with her behaviour. With this change, Meryem's age is the same as that of the innocent bride who is the protagonist of a story told in the novel. The inner story has symbolic importance for Meryem's character which becomes more visible towards the end of the story when Cemal confuses the innocent bride with Meryem. This story symbolically discloses Meryem's sexual purity. Despite being seventeen in the Turkish edition, Meryem is depicted almost like a child, portrayed as innocent and incapable of sin or wrongdoing.

This raises the question: Are children pure and innocent or are they sinful and corrupt? This question has had different answers in different times, cultures, and religious discourses. According to some Christian doctrines that follow the idea of Saint Augustine on purity, human beings are contaminated by the original sin of Adam and this sin is inherent (McGrath, 2011). Contradictory viewpoints have also existed about children being angelic and devilish at the same time. David E. Stannard points out that in the same year, 1928, as John Earle, Bishop of Salisbury, was speaking highly of children's purity, Puritan John Robinson was writing on the sin and corruption of children (1974).

Similarly, although Judaism does not accept the doctrine of original sin in general and regards children as being pure (Shwartz, 2006), in Talmudic times there were some Jews that thought that death was a punishment on account of Adam's sin (Kolatch, 1985); additionally, in some Qumran texts of ancient Judaism, humans (even Adam and Eve) are born in an impure state and they bring impurity into the world (Harrington, 2004).

In Europe at the time of the Italian Renaissance, children were depicted as being divinely pure. It was also during this time that child-like angels emerged; in Estelle M. Hurll's words (2008, p. 115), the "face and form of innocent human childhood" was used "to represent the perfect innocence and purity of an angel." During the English, French and German Enlightenment periods, the idea of original sin was opposed vigorously. Voltaire and Rousseau criticised the doctrine on the basis of encouraging pessimism (McGrath, 2011). Rousseau's ideas led to the Romantic discourse of child innocence and afterwards, it was this image that prevailed in the West (Kehily, 2009).

Although the pessimist Schopenhauer doubted the innocence of children and Freud contradicted their sexual innocence, children are generally associated with purity and innocence in most modern societies. Chris Jenks characterizes these contradictory childhood images as Apollonian and Dionysian: "Apollonian, which deriving [sic] from romantic foundations, sees children as innocent and pure and to be nurtured, and Dionysan, which sees children as the bearer of original sin and creatures to be tamed and formed into civilised beings" (Jones, 2000, p. 38). The Apollonian point-of-view with regard to children has prevailed in many modern societies for the past century.

In Türkiye, the modern Western perception of childhood innocence combines with the Islamic tradition which accepts that children are born and remain sinless until puberty; hence, children are inclined to be equated with purity and innocence in Turkish culture (Delaney, 1988). From an Islamic standpoint, there is no concept of original sin because, according to Islam, Adam and Eve had been forgiven before they were sent to this world. The religion of the parents does not matter: "Islam teaches that [...] every child is certain to gain paradise if he or she passes away before reaching puberty" (Yildirim, 2006, p. 70). Accepting children as being sinless gives them an angelic status. Lack of knowledge, ability to reason, and a limited experience of life are mostly regarded as positive features of children which protect them from being sinners.

In Türkiye, regulatory tools like TV and internet censors protect childhood innocence by preventing children's access to inappropriate content. TV programs and internet packages for families aim to shield children. It is common to see that childish women are idealised, or normalised, in Türkiye. Nilüfer Göle (2007, p. 125), who analyses articles of the 3 September 1987 edition of Zaman newspaper, deduces that Islamic male columnists, who have the title of professor or doctor, use "the power of science" in order to impose the image of women as being childlike by using "the archetypes of 'strong man' and 'childish woman,' 'emotional women' who need to be protected." They claim that

women are ‘’in between a child and a man.” This is not the case just for Türkiye, as Fatima Mernissi (1982, p.185, p.187) argues that Arab men want to force Arab women to tremble “with purity and innocence” on the eve of’ their wedding. If the woman has medically restored her virginity, she must “display childish behaviour” so as not to raise any doubt about her innocence because this is what is expected from women: to be pure like a child. These men want to see that their wives' sexual attractiveness is saved only for their husbands. Desiring childish innocence is not only limited to the countries where sexuality before marriage is a taboo. Jenny Kitzinger (1988) emphasises that childish purity and innocence in the West is a sexual commodity which becomes a fetish, not only because of the porn sector, but also because of the advertising sector. One way which the advertising sector implies that childish purity is sexual, for instance, is by naming one of their nightdresses for adult women “baby-doll”. They encourage men and women to believe that childish purity is desirable.

Livaneli portrays Meryem as pure and child-like from the very start of the book. The novel opens with the rape scene which is narrated from Meryem's point-of-view as if she is partaking in the tale of the Phoenix:

> In a dream as deep as the waters of Lake Van, fifteen-year-old Meryem was flying through the air, her pale naked body pressed against the neck of the phoenix. The phoenix was as white as in colour as Meryem's own slender form, and it flew as lightly as a feather […] Clasping the bird's neck, Meryem felt full of bliss. […] This was the bird of her grandmother's stories […] (Livaneli, 2007, p. 11).

Meryem is happy until the bird asks for her milk and flesh and the tale ends like a nightmare: ‘The giant bird plunged its bloody beak between her tights – into that disgusting and accursed place of sin. ‘I'm just imagining it,' Meryem reassured herself. ‘It's just a nightmare, that's all. It can't be real (Livaneli, 2007, pp. 11–15).'” It can be said that Livaneli depicts an Apollonian childish character in the body of a teenage girl who escapes from the real world into the world of the dream.

Nicola Ansell (2005, p. 11) lists Apollonian child properties as different from the Dionysian in that “childhood is a time for play, and not for work”; “children need protection from the world; children are innocent”; “children are passive”; “childhood should be happy”. Aspects of being an Apollonian child fit Meryem's depiction as a playful, vulnerable and passive character in the pursuit of the eponymous bliss. As a raped girl, there is emphasis on her defencelessness as well as her former purity and innocence. Her escape into a dream world is the outcome of her needing to be protected from the atrocities of the real world.

When narrated from İrfan's point of view, Meryem is likened to a child who even makes the professor feel like a child, as seen when he tries to teach her how to swim:

> […] This was perhaps one of the most joyful moments of his life, and strangely enough, sexual desire was not part of it. Carnal desire would spoil their childish, innocent fun.
>
> He remembered that night as two children at play. He had become a young child like her […] (Livaneli, 2007, p. 433).

One day, Meryem goes into hysterics and the professor infers from Meryem's words during her hysteric crisis that she was raped by her uncle. After the professor understands that Meryem was raped, the Apollonian depiction of Meryem highlights her vulnerability: 'The sobbing girl fell asleep on İrfan's knee. So Meryem was one of those who had somehow been spared from suicide or death. Her figure looked so vulnerable in the moonlight" (Livaneli, 2007, p. 437)

When Livaneli talks about Meryem's beauty, he does not attribute any sexuality to Meryem's innocence. Sexuality is not a part of Meryem's being at the start of the book; however, her biological sex is shown to be the source of her problems. Meryem explores her sexual instincts only after she experiences the lives of other women and men who are not suppressing their sexual desire. When Meryem sees other girls in a small Aegean coastal town "running around half naked" and "a group of giggling girls and boys" who eat ice cream, she feels like a "real woman". "She wanted to be near those boys. Even the 'sinful place' between her legs did not seem so dreadful, because she realized that the girls here were not ashamed of their 'sinful places'" (Livaneli, 2007, pp. 396–397).

If we refer to Judith Butler's (1988, p. 528) argument that the self is "'outside', constituted in social discourse", we can see that, when the social context changes, Meryem does not feel her sexuality being suppressed in the same way she used to. The environment that changes Meryem is a new society where sexual drives are accepted as normal, and one can have these drives while still being seen as good, innocent, and pure.

Although Meryem gradually discovers her womanhood, her inner child persists, consolidating her purity through her childish behaviours. First, she escapes reality by living in a dream world. Second, she initially lacks sexual knowledge. Third, her knowledge of the world is very limited until the professor begins to educate her.

The first chapter narrating the rape starts like a fairy tale of Meryem's childhood; she is naked yet not in an eroticised way, but, rather like a holy image. She flies on a white phoenix like a white feather through the clouds. The angelic characterisation of Meryem ends when the dream turns out to be a nightmare. After the rape event Meryem always reassures herself that it was just a dream. Whenever someone talks about rape, she changes the subject as if she has never heard anything. Apart from her trauma, this can be understood as her attempt to protect her purity, as once she remembers the event, she tries to wipe all the images from her mind and "become as pure as a child once more"—but

she cannot do so(Livaneli, 2007, p. 470). She believes her purity is gone because of having been raped. This shows how she has normalised the sense of relating purity with sexuality. She even goes so far as to blame herself because of the rape. Meryem thinks it happened to her because she peed in the holy place of Seker Baba's tomb when she was a little girl and now Seker Baba is punishing her from her place of sin. She never condemns her uncle; instead, she tries to find the crux of problem in her body and her sexual being. She identifies the thing between her thighs and the signifier of her sexuality as being the source of the problem.

Meryem is portrayed as a fantasy-prone personality, such that "fantasy and daydreaming represent socially desirable ways in which the individual escapes the troubled and frightening reality where the child lacks control" (Purcell & Arrigo, 2006, p. 41). Meryem's fantasies and daydreams function as a remedy to not only the stress but also the problems of her life and her trauma. Moreover, as fictional "trauma narratives" position readers "in ethical dilemmas analogous to those of trauma survivors", (Vickroy, 2002, p. 1) the effects of the trauma and the stress on the reader is also relieved and controlled by means of these fantasies and daydreams.

Meryem transforms reality into fantasy, not only by perceiving her rape as a dream but also by reimagining historical events like the Armenian deportation. She believes the Armenians from Van flew into the sky on a windy day, envisioning Armenian girls playing in the sky while their parents called them back to the clouds, saying, "It's getting late, children. Come back to your clouds" (Livaneli, 2007, p. 35). Meryem chooses to ignore the tragic stories and remains optimistic, waiting for a miracle, certain that her grandmother's spirit will rescue her. Although her village knows girls are taken to Istanbul for honour killings, Meryem dreams of living in the golden city, ignoring this possibility. Even on the day Cemal takes her to her death, she reminisces about playing with him, resisting thoughts that could overshadow her childlike innocence.

Meryem's sexual purity is metaphorically linked to the purity of the innocent bride, a character in a famous regional erotic tale told by village boys. This tale emphasizes the novel's purity theme. The innocent bride grows up secluded, ignorant of the outside world until age fifteen, to shield her from the "knowledge of the shameful things that could happen between girls and boys" (Livaneli, 2007, p. 54). On the eve of her marriage, Hasan tries to protect the innocent bride's innocence by claiming to have something unique, then reveals his genitals and they have sex. While Hasan is in the military, his friend Mehmet realises Hasan's lie to his wife and exposes the lie to the innocent bride, claiming to have the same thing and proving it by having sex with her. This continues until Hasan returns, at which point the bride is angry with him for his deception.:

> "You are a liar! You told me that you were the only one who had that strange part in front of him."

> "My God," Hasan thought to himself. I have lost my innocent bride!"
>
> He then asked her who else had this strange thing, and she told him about Mehmet."
>
> Feeling desperate and not knowing what he could do, Hasan had recourse to another lie. "I used to have two of them, so I gave one to Mehmet."
>
> […] The innocent bride punched Hasan in the stomach as she wailed sadly, "Why did you give him the better one?" (Livaneli, 2007, pp. 53–56)

Although Hasan realizes his wife has had sex with his friend, he cannot be angry with the innocent bride because she is unaware of any norms forbidding sex and feels neither dirty nor guilty. Even when Hasan believes his wife's innocence is lost, he does not blame her and tries to purify her mind, believing she doesn't meet the criteria for punishment. Like an infant unaware of wrongdoing, the innocent bride retains her innocence and is exempt from defilement.

As put by Jamie Mullaney (2006, pp. 75–77), purity in the context of abstinence (not doing) involves three concepts. These concepts are helpful to understand how the innocent bride's defilement is nullified. The first is that purity exists "as a lack of contamination", the second is that it exists "as a contract to an innocent state", and the third is that it exists "as a strategy of order". Purity "as a lack of contamination" entails "an idea of abstinence as an untainted, unadulterated, or 'clean' state" mostly referred to as physical purity but which may embody spiritual and moral levels. Purity "as a contrast to innocence" demands that the state of purity be "prior to awareness of some expectation of doing". Mullaney borrows Tennessee Chaflin's (a women's rights activists of the nineteenth century in American society later known as Lady Cook) definition of purity to make the concept clearer: "Purity is not the untried innocence of childhood, but the sustained virtue that passed unpolluted through the temptations of maturity" (Cook, 1985). Purity "as a strategy of order" involves a "cognitive element in that it relies on perceptions of order" (Mullaney, 2006, p. 78). This concept echoes Douglas's model. Douglas argues that, in order to call something dirty, there should be an ostracizing "classification system" (2002, p. xvii).

The innocent bride's shift from innocence to purity 'as a contrast to innocence' is not presented in the story as she is not aware of any sexual restriction or social expectation. She remains in child-like innocence (in that she is not aware of any intention of any wrongdoing) but becomes a victim of not knowing. The innocent bride's innocence is restored by her husband by purifying her mind from contamination after the sexual act for, as far as she knows, a sexual act is only possible with her husband's organs; besides,

for her, there is still no classification system which calls her impure—it is in this way that she acquires purity. Mullaney (2001, p. 19), in her article 'Like A Virgin: Temptation, Resistance, and the Construction of Identities Based on "Not Doings"', which analyses nineteenth century British novels, notes that "audiences to these acts determine whether individuals may continue to enjoy (or regain) the positive consequences of a 'pure' status or whether they must relinquish such social re-wards." The resistance to partake in impure actions or thoughts on the characters' parts affects the reader's perceptions. Although the innocent bride does not show any resistance, (in order to judge her as retaining her purity) the reader is reminded of her naivety, as well as the child-like status of her lack of awareness.

As for Meryem, although she knows that men and women are different, she would not dare to gaze at any man in her village. She only discovers her sexual instincts after their escape with Cemal to the Aegean coast when she sees boys and girls flirting: "For the first time, she regarded the young men with interest – their slender bodies and charming smiles; the way they hugged the girls […] Meryem had discovered a new and completely different world" (Livaneli, 2007, p. 396). In this sense, the village Meryem before her rape is similar to the innocent bride before marriage; both are unaware of sexuality. The Meryem of the Aegean region, after her rape, is technically not a virgin but in a state of not doing any intentional wrongdoing or sin. Her victimhood, naivety and child-like innocence gain the reader's sympathy and ensure her textually pure status. Upon Meryem's discovery of her sexual instinct, her innocence shifts to purity 'as a contrast to innocence'. This depends on her innocence but requires that she deliberately abstains from any sexual act. Meryem, in a pure state, only flirts with a boy, Mehmet Ali, within his familial environment. It is implied in the text that this flirtation is with the purpose of starting a serious relationship (ultimately marriage) since Meryem has been accepted by his family: "Meryem smiled knowingly to herself when the old woman said, 'You have brought us such good fortune […]'" (Livaneli, 2007, p. 488). In Türkiye, the phrase "he/she has brought good/bad luck to our family" is generally referred to those who have newly joined the family: i.e. the new born babies or brides (Kalafat, 2010, pp. 270–279).

Meryem's purity —which depends on her untainted innocence— is symbolised in the novel through her similarity to the innocent bride. The innocent bride, who symbolises sexual innocence, is the one about whom village youth fantasise. Cemal always sees her in his dreams, yet at the end of the novel when he is traumatised and sleeps for days, he is unsure whether he has dreamt of the innocent bride or actually had real sex with Meryem. His blurred mind likens Meryem to the innocent bride. This is a sign that Meryem, as an avatar of the innocent bride, has not lost her innocence and is in a pure state.

Sexuality remains a taboo socio-political subject in Türkiye in all classes of society. Pınar İlkkaracan (2008) suggests that, regardless of the ideological stance of political parties—whether conservative or progressive—topics such as sexual relationships among young people and issues related to sexual orientation continue to be considered taboo. For the

majority of Turkish people, talking about sexual issues is taboo and sex is constructed in a very complex and variegated way (Aras et al., 2007). It is not easy to make direct links between any one region, socio-economic background, educational level or religious perception with regard to the flexibility of the taboos. It can be deduced that, the notion of what is normal or abnormal, immoral or moral and what is "pure" or "dirty" changes according to one's state of knowledge (Douglas, 2002, p. 8). According to Foucault's analysis of knowledge, power and knowledge are correlated and it should be admitted that:

> power produces knowledge (and not simply by encouraging it because it serves power or by applying it because it is useful); that power and knowledge directly imply one another; that there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations (1977, p. 27).

As it can be understood from the excerpt above, Foucault sees power and knowledge as interlinked but, ultimately, the source or initiator of knowledge is power. Power not only creates knowledge but also uses the knowledge it has produced to legitimize itself. It can therefore be inferred that power is self-interested. This would be better understood if we look at Douglas's (2002) argument about taboos and how power produces accepted knowledge in society. She emphasizes that the rules of taboos are flexible according to the wishes of the leading members of society; as the controllers of ideas, they can suppress criticism and make whole areas of life unthinkable or unspeakable or, if they wish a different way of life, taboos can lose credibility depending on their selected view. In *Bliss*, for Cemal, Meryem was dirty when they set out on their journey, but in the end, Meryem becomes innocent because of the new knowledge he has learned and because they are away from the classification system which characterised her as being dirty. Cemal's father's authority loses its power within the new context of knowledge.

Cemal's father, a religious leader, wields decision-making authority by using religion to construct unquestionable knowledge. He maintains his power by restricting access to knowledge, such as banning TV and preventing girls from attending school. He defines morality with the concepts of sin and holiness, making adherence to these boundaries desirable to avoid being stigmatized as sinful. Foucault (2007, p. 55) asserts that power does not work only by suppression and punishment but penetrates inside slyly, that it "creates desires" and "provokes pleasures" and "produces knowledge."Cemal's father's power deeply influences his behaviours within this complex web of knowledge. However, his authority weakens after Cemal speaks with another sheikh who contradicts his father's views on purity and honour killing. When Cemal learns about the rape, the sheikh's authority loses all credibility, and Meryem becomes pure like the innocent bride in Cemal's eyes.

Another issue which reinforces Meryem's child-like status throughout the novel is her limited knowledge about the world. The professor who educates Meryem through their voyage links Meryem's limited world experience and knowledge to her purity. When he is teaching her how to swim, he thinks Meryem is "[…] a beautiful, innocent girl – a pure, intelligent, excitable, rosy cheeked child, a child who had not forgotten how to blush – a baby dolphin" (Livaneli, 2007, p. 433). The novel even ends with Meryem's conversation with a donkey. Although Meryem is more self-confident and experienced, she holds on to her naïve fantasy world.

III. Meryem is Not Pure

Meryem's impurity is constructed throughout the novel in relation to her sex and location and is divided into two phases by the rape event. The impurity of Meryem before the rape is tolerable, yet after the rape, she becomes an object of intolerable dirtiness within her family and village. Although there are some who pity Meryem and want to rescue her, their voices are not strong enough to resist the discourse pertaining to honour. Before the rape event there already exists a notion of impurity related to Meryem. The impurity of being a woman after puberty, and the impurity of being a non-virgin after the rape event become a part of her life. Hence, the contexts of impurity in relation to being a woman and being a non-virgin will be discussed in this section as the puberty and rape events are the turning points in Meryem's trajectory.

III. a) The Impurity of Being a Woman

With the onset of adulthood, the perception of the natural purity of childhood begins to alter. To accept someone as adult first of all they should complete their puberty period. From girlhood to womanhood there are physiological changes yet menstruation is one of the most important signifier of becoming a woman, as physiologically the first menses "signifies the end of 'childhood' and the beginning of adulthood" (O'Connell, 1997, p. 1391). For this reason it would be helpful to explain the impure conception of menstruation in order to understand the varying shades of purity in women. We can witness an association between menstruation and impurity in most societies. As Rene Girard (1989, p. 34) puts it, menstruation is considered as "the most impure of impurities"; he assumes that this reaction is related to the "sexual aspect of menstruation".

From an Islamic standpoint, menses symbolise the end of childhood; thus, "sin begins to accumulate with the onset of puberty, described as production of semen in boys and menstruation in girls" (Delaney, 1988, p. 80). If there are no psychiatric problems which prevent their reasoning, after puberty, children are accepted as having reached the age of reason and, according to Islamic rules, they become responsible for their sins. The reproduction ability in humans is seen as the signifier of having sexual ability and being

an adult. Hence, they start to be in need of purification processes like the purification of the full body wash (*ghusl*).

According to Guterman *et al*.'s (2007) study of the menstruation taboos among religions, Islam is comparatively moderate in its views on the impurity of menstruation as there is not any menstruation hut or isolation of women as in tribal religions, Hinduism, or Russian Orthodox Christianity; likewise, they do not have as strict rules as Orthodox Judaism. Menstruating women are considered impure in each of the major religions: "Some religions view the impurity as strictly spiritual; others fear physical danger and harm as well."

Meryem, as a poorly educated woman who lives in a rural village and who has grown up in a family which has a strict, negative interpretation of Islam and negative traditional values regarding womanhood, accepts menstruation as a trouble which is caused by women's "sinful part". Physically and spiritually, menstrual blood has negative connotations for Meryem. She believes if she does not wash the piece of cloth she places between her legs to absorb the blood immediately after use the cloth will get wormy (Livaneli, 2007, pp. 237–238). Spiritually, Meryem equates being a woman with being a sinner and thinks that any bodily change which signifies womanhood takes away from her ideal human condition:

> When her chest sprouted twin buds and her body found its curves, when the bleeding started between her legs, she knew she was different from Cemal and Memo. They were human, and she was a transgressor. It was considered proper for her to cover herself and hide away, to serve others, and to be punished. This was the way things were. She was now one of those creatures called women, for whose transgression the world was doomed (Livaneli, 2007, pp. 237–238).

Meryem's attitude is not the common Turkish woman's viewpoint; yet the views concerning menstruation as a punishment may be held especially by the rural uneducated people of Türkiye. According to Ayşe Sayan Çevirme et al.'s (2010) study, menstruation-related behaviours and attitudes are greatly affected by beliefs. The participants in the survey obey traditional and religious teachings about menstruation. According to Delaney's (1988) study, which was conducted in a central village of Türkiye between 1980 and 1982, both women and men believed that menstruation was a punishment because of Eve's disobedience to Allah. However, Çevirme et al.'s (2010) study, which was conducted in 2007 in the centre of an Eastern Anatolian city called Malatya, shows that only 2.2% of the participants considered menstruation as a punishment from God. As reported by the study, there is a meaningful relationship between education level and the attitude which considers menstruation as being a punishment. Less educated people are inclined to think that menstruation is a punishment.

Due to the teachings of her uncle, Meryem grows up in an environment where womanhood is cursed; hence, she hates being a woman. She always hears things like: 'To be born a woman was a punishment enough in itself. Women were devils, dirty and dangerous. Like their forerunner, Eve, all of them got men into trouble" (Livaneli, 2007, p. 25). Eve's supposed "corruption" of perverting Adam from the right way is a familiar belief among Muslims, albeit one never mentioned in the Quran. In the Quran, the guilt is shared.

According to Mernissi's (1987) description of the implicit theory of women's sexuality, which is the *qaid* power of woman in Islamic societies, sexuality brings *fitna* to the ideal social order and women are accepted as the guilty parties. Acknowledging women as the potential tempter and guilty party is a common belief in Türkiye and this belief is passed down from one generation to another with proverbs like "If the bitch doesn't wag its tail, the dog doesn't follow" (Livaneli, 2007, pp. 160–161). Meryem's uncle uses this proverb to accuse Meryem after the rape. He speaks of another common Turkish proverb "Get them [(women)] constantly with child and regularly give them a good hiding" (Livaneli, 2007, p. 25), which legitimises violence against women so as to control them because women are seen as potential trouble makers. Livaneli uses these proverbs to show Meryem's uncle's perspective, which is typical of the traditional and customary aspects of violence which are deeply rooted in Turkish society. Livaneli (2007, p. 467), however, through the words of the professor, claims that "women are seen as guilty and sinful in the Western culture, too" as the name of evil comes from Eve.

III. b) The Impurity of being a non-virgin

Pre-marital sex is stigmatized in most major religions and being a virgin is idealised as a characteristic of being chaste. Virginity can be defined as:

> the condition of being or remaining in a state of chastity; abstinence from or avoidance of all sexual relations; bodily chastity, as a virtue of great commendation, or as conferring especial merit or sanctity; the mode of life characterized by this, esp. as adopted from religious motives (Virginity. World English Historical Dictionary, n.d.).

When we analyse the major religions (especially the monotheistic ones) in terms of virginity, premarital sex is defined as sinful because it is considered fornication. Hence the important thing is not the loss of virginity but having sex out of wedlock, which is a sin regardless of the sex of the committer. However, in societies where virginity is important, since women have hymens which are usually torn mostly because of penetration into the vagina, the hymen is accepted as proof of purity.

In Islam, premarital sex is a sin, yet the adultery of a married person is accepted as being a greater sin because, according to the Qur'an and hadiths, there is a punishment of

flogging for the fornicators who are not married (Ali, 2004); however, according to hadiths, stoning is the punishment prescribed for the one who has illicit sex (Bukhari & Jabir, n.d.). As stoning is not written in Qur'an and as the justification of fornication or adultery requires four witnesses who literally see the penis in the vagina, according to moderate Muslims, the physical punishments of *zina* are in reality unjustifiable (Bennett, 2005). Furthermore, according to Islam, punishments should be enforced by state authorities—not by ordinary people. Hence, honour killings perpetrated in Muslim societies actually cannot be justified by Islam; we should note in particular that, there is no punishment of killing people who have had premarital sex. Yet, in most societies, the one who suffers most is the one who loses their virginity since the hymen blood is accepted as the seal of protected honour. "The concepts of honour and virginity locate the prestige of a man between the legs of a woman." Hence, the status of a man is secured "by controlling the movements of women related to him by blood or by marriage, and by forbidding them any contact with male strangers" (Mernissi, 1982, p. 183). Although there is no specific focus on the issue of hymens in the religion of Islam, by misusing religion as a justificatory reason, many women are killed in the name of honour.

In the case of Meryem, religion and custom are the means used by her uncle to justify his verdict of honour killing. Although he is the rapist, he claims that Meryem has ruined the family's honour and she is "guilty in the sight of both God and man" (Livaneli, 2007, p. 160). The sheikh does not accept that Meryem can be guiltless because, according to him, if women do not seduce, men do not rape. Even if Meryem did not commit any wrongdoing, there is another powerful law which requires her punishment. That is custom. Cemal's words show how custom cannot be violated:

> He pitied the girl for a minute, but everyone knew that customs are customs and had to be followed. Meryem had no chance to survive. Even if her father forgave her, and the sheikh did not interfere, she still could not live. Even if everyone in the village came together to forgive her, she could not be saved (Livaneli, 2007, p. 162).

Livaneli makes it clear that the pollution discourse in the novel is mostly constructed by customs and by the misuse of religion. By adding another sheikh to the novel, Livaneli contextualises the fact that real Islam does not order honour killing. When Cemal's friend takes him to his sheikh in Istanbul, the sheikh, by making references to al- Mai'dah Sura, clarifies that the killing of an innocent person is a great sin and that those who save the innocent ones will be rewarded: "Whoever kills a person guiltless of killing others or of setting people against each other will be seen as the killer of all humanity. Whoever lets that person live or saves him from death will be seen as the savior [sic.] of humanity" (Livaneli, 2007, p. 361) The sheikh adds that, even if one person is guilty, forgiving is advised and the ones who forgive will be rewarded by God.

According to the novel *Bliss*, the concept of pollution which leads to honour killings is

constructed by customs and these customs belong particularly to the eastern rural part of Türkiye. When Meryem goes to west Türkiye, she becomes an idol of purity for the characters who have Western values, which is close to the perception of the projected audience. Livaneli's ideas are in the same vein. He verbalises his thoughts about the issue, in an interview about the book:

> In certain parts of Eastern Anatolia, patriarchal norms and hierarchies can still be found in their harshest and most anachronistic forms and women are denied all of their rights.
>
> In recent decades, as a result of migration, honor killings have started to become more common in Ankara, Istanbul, Izmir and other major cities in Turkey (Reading Group Gold Attachment, 2007).

According to Livaneli, honour killings arrived in the west of Türkiye as a result of migration. He refers to the 'report prepared by a commission appointed by the Turkish National Assembly' which evaluates data from 2000-2005 and declares that, even though the majority of the honour killings take place in western Türkiye, the majority of the victims and suspects are from eastern Türkiye. (Reading Group Gold Attachment, 2007). According to this data, there were 1091 formally recorded honour killings between the years 2000-2005. The division by region for the scenes of the crime is as follows: 19 % is in the Marmara Region; 19 % in the Aegean Region; 18 % in the Central Anatolian Region; 14 % in the South-Eastern Anatolian Region; 13% in the Mediterranean Region; 9 % in the Eastern Anatolian Region; and 8 % in the Black Sea Region. The division by the birth place and registered province of the perpetrators are as follows: 24 % from the South-Eastern Anatolian Region; 21 % from the Eastern Anatolian Region; 15 % from the Central Anatolian Region; 11 % from the Aegean region, 11 % from the Mediterranean Region; 10 % from the Black Sea Region; and 8 % from the Marmara Region (Tahsincioglu, 2011). This data shows that it would be misleading to allege that the problem is exclusively an Eastern Anatolian problem. *Bliss*, however, reproduces the prejudice which links honour crimes to eastern culture and customs by making it clear that Meryem is categorised as impure in her village while being regarded as very pure by the traditional values of Western Türkiye.

Moreover, the message that 'Meryem should not be punished because she is pure' praises purity as a feminine quality. In the film adaptation of *Bliss* (2007), there are two cues which support my argument. One of them is that, before Cemal tries to kill Meryem, she says that she has never committed a sin in a grammatically wrong, colloquial way which reminds one of a child's speech (Oğuz, 2007). The other one occurs when the professor tells Cemal that Meryem is purer than all of us. Although these words are not written in the novel, these messages are given implicitly throughout the novel.

Stressing Meryem's status as a rape victim implicitly denounces those women who are in

a consensual sexual relationship in that they are sexually active by choice and, by implication, impure. Likewise, highlighting her childlike innocence stigmatises those who are not accepted as innocent. Kitzinger (1988, p. 80) argues that innocence is an inconvenient concept for sexual abuse:

> If the violation of innocence is the criterion by which the act of sexual abuse is judged, violating a 'knowing' child is a lesser offence than violating an 'innocent' child. It is this notion which allows abusers to defend themselves on the grounds that their victim was 'no angel'.

Kitzinger also adds that the same notion of "deserving and undeserving victims" can be applied to adult rape events. Considering the atmosphere in Türkiye, this issue should have been approached more sensitively in the novel, seeing as a trial of the twenty-six men who raped a thirteen- year-old girl named N.C. ended with the court passing verdicts of minimum punishment based on the supposed consent of the child (Letsch, 2011).

This 'deserving and undeserving victim' perception helps us to better understand honour killings in the Turkish context. There is a tendency to believe that some victims provoke honour killings. This is especially true if the victim is a married woman, as the number of those who sympathise with the husband rises. Tahsincioglu (2011), as a case study, interviewed urban educated men in Şanlıurfa. Although most of them say they do not have honour codes and they are against honour killings, they accept adulteresses as the exception.

Within the context of the novel, the dominant reading of the text appears to be as follows: In Eastern Anatolia, an innocent woman becomes the victim of honour killing attempt because of malevolent patriarchal powers which misuse religion to legitimise violence and construct the notion of honour which depends on the sexual purity of the female members of the society. It is implied that Western knowledge and education can prevent the killings. According to the Goodreads reviews, this reading is welcomed by those having a Western-oriented perception both in and outside of Türkiye. Most of the commentaries accept the novel as a glimpse into another cultures. For instance; a Turkish reader in his review consistently reminds us that this is a non-fiction documentary of "horrible things happening in Eastern Turkey" (Gurgen, 2013). Although most foreign readers comment on differences in Türkiye, an American reader comments that the novel guarantees "to remind American women why it's so much better to have been born here than there [Türkiye]" (Susanne, 2013). According to the readers' comments, the issue of honour killings is perceived as the problem of the "other" both in Türkiye and overseas. Özgü Namal's statements, as the actress portraying Meryem, reinforce this message.

> In our film, a woman's struggle for freedom is portrayed. I hope '*Bliss*' will help women to achieve a freer life. Women, especially in the East, are suppressed in a catastrophic manner. They have no rights to speak,

> they are never equal. They are treated as second-class people. To say it in a single word, it is violence. Experiencing such problems in this era is heartbreaking. (Namal, 2002).

The message at the end of the novel is in the same vein as Namal's words. Meryem is liberated and happiest of all the three characters. The Professor decides to return back to his mother's modest home and gives an envelope full of money to Meryem. Meryem gives some of the money to Cemal and tells him to return to their village. She decides to stay in the coastal town where she has met a lover, wishing to stay with him and his family. Cemal resists Meryem's idea, since he feels sorry because of his father's guilt and wants to stay with her, but Meryem, fearless and self- confident, is determined to realise her plan. She leaves Cemal behind. Cemal is devastated but is certain that he will not return to his village, which he calls the "sordid place" (Livaneli, 2007, p. 514).

As Burcu Tokat and Seda Saluk (2008), in the film adaptation of *Bliss,* observe Meryem's transformation is portrayed as resulting from the affection she receives from men. Consequently, the narrative centers not on her empowerment, but on her acceptance through male love. This suggests that the film equates a woman's empowerment with her ability to be loved by men, implying that women gain recognition primarily through their relationships with men and this is also the case in the novel.

Emin Saydut (2009), a critic on the web page Sanatlog, criticises the happy ending of the novel for giving the impression that a woman receives happiness only by means of getting married and receiving wealth in that it is a highly held sexist belief in Türkiye that that is all that women truly need.

IV. Conclusion

To conclude, when the relationship between purity and honour killings as represented in *Bliss* is analysed, it can be argued that Livaneli emphasises how the discourse surrounding the stain on honour is largely shaped by customs and the misuse and abuse of religious beliefs. Furthermore, these beliefs can be modified if the ideologies underlying these notions are deconstructed, as exemplified by the evolution of Cemal's perspectives throughout the novel. Despite several areas where the novel could be critiqued for its representation of the issues, it remains a valuable resource for understanding this phenomenon. For instance, depicting Meryem as a rape victim who is not aware of any sexual drives the writer suggests that although Meryem is pure, some eastern customs label her as dirty. Hence, the source of the problem is customs because actually Meryem is as pure as a child and does not deserve any punishment. Thus, the following question should be asked: what would have occurred if she was not that pure? Would she deserve punishment if she had sexual relations willingly with anyone, including her uncle? Focusing on the victim, and the pure status of Meryem, stigmatizes others who do not meet the required purity level. If to be against honour crimes or sexual abuse depends on

the purity level of the victims, then this will automatically exclude those who do not meet the criterion of society.

Critiques and the commentaries on the novel and film make it clear that both of them have been perceived mostly as representing a problem that pertains to the other. Livaneli, by depicting an ethnically Turkish family, challenges the bias that honour killings are only perpetrated by Kurds; yet he reinforces the idea that honour killings are a problem of eastern Türkiye. This reinforces regional prejudices regarding honour killings in Türkiye. Also, a feminist critique of the novel would highlight Meryem's portrayal as a woman who gains self-confidence primarily through the approval of men, as her sense of confidence is significantly influenced by love and validation from them.

Livaneli may fail to take a strong position against some hegemonic ideas. While he makes some attempts to resist the dominant discourse, they are weak compared to the ideas that reinforce the prejudices of his Turkish and foreign Western readers. Despite the aspects of *Bliss* that can be criticized, the novel offers valuable insights into the complexity of honour killings. Passing beyond the boundaries of the text and characters, analysing the same issues in different societies adds to our understanding of how similar notions are constructed differently, in different times and locations. *Bliss* provides a framework for us to comprehend how the notion of purity functions within the context of honour killing. This article aims to contribute to an understanding of how a literary fiction, *Bliss*, illuminates different constructions of social norms and expectations according to certain discourses of purity. Also, to reflect and contribute to the existing debate of honour killing, the theme of purity has been the focus in its complex relations with literature and society, which reflects the dominant discourse surrounding the honour notion, including the discourse of cultural products reflecting back upon the issue, such as *Bliss*.

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