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Kızılıcak Şerbeti: Conversations of a Fractured Society

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Introduction

“Enemy of freedom”, “Enemy of civilization”, “Fascist”. These words are excerpts from a dialogue between a veiled woman and secular school principal headmistress in a luxury clothing store, displayed in the first episode and first trailer of the Turkish television drama “Kızılıcık Şerbeti” (“Bunlar da her yerde...”. 1:43) Starting to air in late 2022 on Show TV, Kızılıcık Şerbeti caused a big controversy with this scene. The cause of the debate between these two women was the intolerance of seeing veiled women in a luxury mall, which comes in sight with the headmistress’ first comment directed to the veiled character that starts the dispute: “These people are everywhere now...”

This trailer was released during the period where Turkish opposition leader Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu opened a debate on the headscarf, opposing its abuse for political ends by President Erdoğan and insisting on its legal protection of it. When I first saw this scene back in Istanbul, I was struck by the directness and especially the realism of the scene that cannot be seen in other television dramas. Because at the Islamist school, I’ve attended 13 years ago, a veiled classmate of mine told me the almost exactly same reaction she had received at the Armani store in a very luxurious mall in Istanbul. Kızılıcık Şerbeti struck not only me but several political elites, media commentators, and critics from different political opinions. The controversy Kızılıcık Şerbeti caused was furthered by the events that happened in the following episodes, and by the time I’m writing this text it was under examination by the Radio and Television Supreme Council of Turkey, RTÜK.

I believe the reception of this scene by audiences, and the many more scenes that depict conflicts and cultural clashes between the secular Arslan and Islamic bourgeoisie Ünal families that encounter each other through the marriage of their kids, and would be expected to be antagonistic to each other otherwise in the show, reveals fractures and opens a discursive space about anxieties of a society that is fractured and polarized by the authoritarian policies of Islamic government and tensions between and beyond of long-debated binary opposition seculars and Islamists with Turkish society in the contemporary setting. Many argued and protested that show portrays Muslims and Islamic practices as backward and wrong while others on the other side of the political spectrum thought it showed seculars as bigots. I argue that the discussion generated by the series parallels the current political tensions in Turkey.

In this essay, I want to position *Kızılıcak Şerbeti* as a cultural text among the other Turkish TV dramas, on the topics of gender and women's representation on tv, especially the representation of veiled women in Turkish dramas, cultural identities, and religious practices to understand and decode the attraction and debates that it caused. While doing that, I use the dichotomy between secularism and conservatism as an ethnographical tool to explain the basic ingredient of Turkey's social imaginary (Sirman 2000). The normative order of the plot changes through the conflict situations and resolutions of these frequently-occurring conflicts which touch upon the most “nerve-sensitive” issues of the already polarized society.

Television dramas can contribute to shaping the national imagination by reflecting and reinforcing cultural values and beliefs. They can be a powerful means of creating and reinforcing shared cultural narratives and promoting national identity. I will try to explain the discursive space the show creates by first giving a contextual basis for the representation of Islam in

Turkish television dramas with recent examples, and then analyze the breaking points in the TV show *Kızılıcak Şerbeti* and how audiences reacted to it. The audience can become involved with the show morally by comparing "them" and "us", and ideologically by searching for manipulative messages. I will employ a method of content analysis in investigating social media platforms, comments in video sharing platforms, and news commentaries that are published on online news platforms, especially media information on series or socio-political news. I am interested in particularly controversial and critical comments and reflections, that I believe can shed a light on the conceptualization of Islamic values, cultural identities, and political anxieties (Gibson et al.).

I believe Cranberry Sherbet is a beautiful metaphor for what is happening with the Turkish Muslim community. "*Kan kusup kızılıcak şerbeti içtim demek*" directly translates into "spitting blood and telling everyone you are drinking cranberry sherbet", in short, it means suffering in pride. Because of my proximity to the topic, I had the fear that it may be too niché to analyze a tv-series that only 20 episodes that had been released and it carried the risk of coming across as a personal essay. But after the 25th anniversary of 28 February, and just before the upcoming presidential elections I realized that what the show presented and how different groups of audiences reacted to that hides important, contemporary tension points beyond of long debated secular vs. Islamist discussion in Turkey, and it is worthwhile to investigate that. The show's portrayal of the tension between traditional and modern values, as well as the struggle to maintain cultural identity in a rapidly changing society, reflects the larger issues facing Turkish society today. By examining these themes through the lens of a popular TV series, we can gain insight into the complex social and political landscape of Turkey.

Television as a Media Text

The importance of TV dramas lies in their ability to not only dramatize social issues, but also facilitate public discourse, making them more understandable to the masses, while also influencing personal and social identities and contributing to the national imagination as a byproduct of popular culture, further serving as a platform for identifying and discussing the societal challenges, aspirations, and cultural values (Glover et al.). Television plays a crucial role in shaping our understanding of gender roles as social constructs, as it presents us with a range of norms, emotions, and desires that audience can choose from. Television dramas as a media text present and becomes an extension, a debate area where matters of culture, family, relationships, man, and women are discussed, and between the dominant ideologies and discourses it creates a liminal area. In short, television dramas have the power to both reflect and reinforce societal values and beliefs, making them a crucial site for analyzing the intersection of politics and entertainment. By examining the messages conveyed through popular media, we can gain insight into how cultural norms are constructed and perpetuated.

Turkish *Dizis* and Representation of Islam: Huzur Sokağı and Bir Başkadır

Between the 1970s and 1990s, when the official Turkish Radio and Television Corporation controlled the dynamics of *dizi* (Turkish television drama) production, and the 2000s and beyond, when private channels developed their distinctive styles and diversity. According to Öztürkmen and Bauman, the *dizi* has also been a historically constructed cultural form that is closely related to the Turkish film industry, the advertising sector, and theater circles. This

affected what was seen on television and what forms of social identities and representations occurred on the screen.

Since the re-emergence of Islam in public space and society, a wide spectrum of cultural activities and products for Muslim-oriented audiences has appeared in the cultural arena. Religious movies, music, and television channels became a big industry itself. “Pious” private television channels such as Kanal 7 and now banned Gulenist Samanyolu TV has produced and shown dramas that include pious characters, and veiled woman also. However, even though there were representations of a Muslim men in tv dramas produced by mainstream channels, a veiled character (except as a domestic worker), never was part of them. The portrayal of Muslim women, even though shows might feature daily Islamic practices and promotion of religion as a moral source, characters on television dramas were bound by the secular conventions of Turkish television in which veiling had been taboo (Berfin and Çetin). The Islamic headscarf is distinct from traditional veiling, which is commonly associated with uneducated, mostly rural women. It serves as a strong symbolic representation of Islamic identity and sets it apart from secular or Westernized identities (Çayır). Some argued this symbolic representation value was the reason behind the lack of veiled characters, meanwhile, others stated the headscarf characters presented no entertainment value in television dramas and relied heavily on passion and liaison.

Huzur Sokağı (Peace Street) became the first tv series to have a veiled lead on a high-rating, non-conservative mainstream channel in 2012, adapted from the inspirational novel of leading conservative female icon from the 1960 Şule Yüksel Şenler. The book was first adapted to cinema as “*Birleşen Yollar*” (Crossed Roads) by “National Film” movement director Yücel Çakmaklı in 1971. The book and movie became a blueprint for Islamic films that followed a

similar formula of a love story between a traditional, innocent person and a modern, degenerate one. Typically, these stories ended with the modern person finding the true path, though sometimes it was too late for a happy ending. The conflict between the old and good with the new and bad was used to highlight the suffering of Muslims under an unjust, non-Islamic system (Dönmez-Colin).

Since then, Turkey and the Turkish television sector transformed tremendously, AKP government pushed pro-government companies to invest and buy into the media sector, and in the late 2010's mass media industry in Turkey came under direct political control and the influence of Erdogan (Özçetin). Meanwhile, the Turkish television drama industry became a world powerhouse, 2nd biggest exporter in the world after the USA and not only economically but also as a form of soft power, especially targeted to the global south. Under this context, how Islam is represented also has seen a change depending on the political and cultural transformations, *as well as* Turkey's internal conflict between opposing categories like the East and the West, and modernity and tradition. The headscarf has become the most visible, elusive, and distracting symbol of this power struggle. Under the AKP, the struggle that has been taking place over the meanings of women's headscarves in Turkey has taken a new turn, and the pro-AKP media have succeeded in recasting the garment as a new source of power and prestige (Özcan).

Many cultural critics and media scholars agreed that television dramas, including historical, so-called anti-terrorism dramas as well as the village, family, and anti-terrorist youth dramas, have started to change what it depicts as a normative lifestyle as a response to Erdogan's cultural hegemony claim (Çelenk). Historical television dramas such as *Muhteşem Yüzyıl*

(2011), or *Diriliş: Ertuğrul* (2014) have gained tremendous international popularity. The Turkish government took advantage of the fame of Turkish TV series actors to promote its soft power goals in foreign policy, especially in light of the limited media landscape that is heavily influenced by corporations with ties to Erdogan (Algan and Kaptan).

Some people, who are afraid of government interference or being directly targeted, opt to collaborate by modifying storylines, supporting the government's official soft power narrative, or creating material for new digital platforms that cater to specific audiences (Algan). Digital platforms became a powerful force in the creation of freer and more creative content in the sense of cinematography, narrative, and screenplay and have enabled the middle-upper class audience in Turkey to use digital platforms (Gül 2020). *Bir Başkadır* (2020) is one of the TV series that was produced for digital platforms and created a discursive area using unconventional methods that cannot be seen in mainstream Turkish television.

Ethos, an 8 episode Netflix production created in 2020, takes its name from a famous nostalgic song “*Bir Başkadır Benim Memleketim*” by Ayten Alpman, focuses on Turkey’s recent history through the encounters of different characters with different social and cultural backgrounds and been heavily criticized and also applauded because of the way it deals with controversial subjects such as conservatism, secularism, sexual and ethnic identities. The series used the methods of nostalgia as a common ground and served as an invitation to face the challenge of creating a new cognitive map, in an era where aggressive government strategies and policies have caused polarization among people and damaged their desire to live together peacefully (Erkılıç and Uluerer Erkılıç). Even though *Ethos* had a veiled lead, Meryem, people criticized the show for confirming the already existing stereotypes and structural inequality about

presenting veiled women as not highly educated as Meryem is also a domestic worker and has no educational background.

Kızılıcak Şerbeti

Kıvılcım Arslan is a headmistress of a prestigious college in Istanbul and a single mum of two daughters Doğa (Nature) and Çimen (Grass). Doğa, who attends dental school, becomes pregnant by her boyfriend Fatih, who comes from a conservative and rich Ünal family. This unexpected pregnancy shocks both families, Doğa refuses despite her mother's insistence that she have an abortion, and the couple decides to get married, with Doğa going to the Ünal family as a bride. Fatih, on the other hand, despite coming from a Muslim family and having an extramarital affair, does not receive a big reaction from his family and they accept Doğa as their bride. The meeting of the Ünal and Arslan families, the wedding, and the events that follow lead to conflict and transformation between these two families with different cultures and traditions throughout the episodes. Kıvılcım, who initially paints a harsh secularist and Kemalist portrait and finds the Ünal family bigoted, gradually softens and we see her falling in love with Fatih's uncle.

The incident I've mentioned in the opening paragraph evolves into court, but at the end resolves with gradual empathy of characters toward each other, veiled woman's son with autism end up as a student in Kıvılcım's college with her tremendous effort while no other school accepts him.

Of course, this change does not happen easily and unrealistically. Throughout the episodes, the conflicts between religion and tradition, which the series explored throughout the series, drew strong reactions on social media and among commentators. Some of the conflicts that show

depicted and created a backlash on social media and made the headlines are included but are not limited to; conservative family insisting on a veiled woman gynecologist instead of a male one, mother-in-law buying promiscuous undergarments for her bride, a rich veiled character taken as a domestic worker by mistake, tearing the painting on the wall because it includes a depiction of pig, rejecting the offering of cologne because it contains alcohol.

It is worth noting that the *Kızılıcak Şerbeti* debuted and continued to air around the time of a critical period for Turkish politics and society, and under a strong censorship mechanism of the regulatory body of the television RTÜK. TV series writers often express dissatisfaction with the practice of self-censorship, primarily due to the influence of the Radio and Television Supreme Council (RTÜK), the regulatory body that can punish TV networks for broadcasting nonconformist content concerning government policies (Öztürkmen). In the upcoming presidential election that will take place on the 14th of May, the current government Justice and Development Party (AKP), and Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) decided to make a coalition with the successor of the Welfare Party which Erdoğan left 21 ago to found AKP, Islamist New Welfare Party (YRP), and Sunni Kurdish-Islamist Free Cause Party (HÜDA-PAR) that has close ties with Islamist militant organization Kurdish Hizbullah. Their coalition agreement included the closing down of LGBTQ+ NGOs and the removal of 6284 code, which is known as the Law on Protection of the Family and Prevention of Violence Against Women. Emergence of this coalition and the possibility of being ruled by an Islamist Nationalist right-wing state had created fear and anxiety among opposition and secular members of the Turkish society, which furthered the tension and polarization that already existed. In Turkey, especially during the last two decades, these two lifestyles have been polarized and confronted. (Erdoğan and Semerci).

Reactions to Kızılıcak Şerbeti

These conflicting themes of the series have led to different and most of the time contradictory reactions. Some argued that people wearing headscarves were humiliated, while others argued that people who do not wear headscarves were demonized, and the series shows religiosity better than Kemalism. Many Muslim-identified people said they never had these kinds of practices in their lives and this tv-show represents Islam as wrong and backward and should be banned. As opposed to that other Muslims added that they had the same practice in their household. The comments revolve around the topic of anxieties about representing Islam wrong and furthering the already existing polarization in Turkish society between Seculars and Muslims.

Many audience members criticized the perceived hypocrisy of the Ünal family, “Adultery you allow, but alcohol in cologne you put salt inside? May Allah mend the hypocrites like this!”, one commentator on Youtube underlined the similar perceived hypocrisy: “This show is not against the religion but only showing the difference between fake Islamists and real pious people”.

In the show's 20th episode that has been released during the first week of Ramadan, Kızılcım and her soon-to-be husband from the conservative Ünal family go to a restaurant to break their fast with their friend. During the meal, a group of tourists shares a glass of wine at the next table. Angered by this scene, a friend calls over the waiter and angrily asks them how they serve alcohol during Ramadan while they are fasting; then warning them to never come to the restaurant again. This comment irritates Kızılcım, and she intervenes by asking why he cares

about what people are drinking, that anybody can drink whatever they want. The discussion quickly escalates and Kızılcık Şerbeti says in a frequently shared quote on social media: “This is a secular country, and to achieve this people have fought very hard. Also, Istanbul is a cosmopolitan city, flooded with tourists. If you have a problem with that you should get out.” (“İftar yemeğinde içki krizi!”).

Pro-government conservative newspaper Yeni Akit shared this news, as they did with every week’s episode with the following titles: “Disgusting! Attack on Islam during Ramadan in Show’s notorious series Kızılcık Şerbeti” (“Mide Bulandırdı!”). Yusuf Kaplan, a conservative columnist, and media critic for prominent pro-government newspaper Yeni Şafak devoted his whole column page to Kızılcık Şerbeti. Looking at the opinions of columnists who support the government in traditional media can be a useful way to gain insight into prevailing attitudes, popular viewpoints, and emerging power structures. This approach may be more effective in understanding mainstream perspectives rather than dissenting voices, as many people still rely on major newspapers and prominent writers as primary sources of information (Mautner).

He claims that during Ramadan, the month of peace and tranquility, the month of mercy and brotherhood when the unity and brotherhood of society are at its peak, it is very suspicious and disrespectful that the show is provoking people by covering fasting, drinking, and secularism in such a “primitive” way. He calls the actors of the show “secular militants” who target people’s ontological security, “The biggest cultural and ontological murder in this country is carried out first through education and then through the media. Such a humiliating attitude could not have been exhibited by the colonialist Westerners!” He also adds “The series Kızılcık Şerbeti builds its story and its characters on the primitive oppositions that classical anthropology has defined as

"west and the rest", "civilized and barbarian", and that the great anthropologist-thinker Claude Levi-Strauss called "binary oppositions. Against the elite, urban, enviable secular characters; the ignorant, peasant, slum, loser, obscure, mentally ill Muslim type!" (Kaplan).

This idea of the show giving a secret message and deliberately provoking the public just before the elections is not the topic of the paper but rather how it is pronounced and in which framework it is used is relevant to our topic. It is seen as a morally degenerate cultural product of alienated Westernist/Kemalist cultural elites, continuing a line of thought of Islamic populist discourse.

6284 Code and Sisterhood of Nursema

Nursema is the oldest sibling of the Ünal family, she studied in the United States (just like the daughters of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan) and is a devoted Muslim who is interested in the art of calligraphy. Her mother, Pembe, doesn't support her ambitions, and even sabotages her chances at a possible calligraphy exhibition due to the proposed reason of being not halal, unlike her brothers that are supported through their actions. Like the other characters in the show, she encounters the "secular" lifestyle of the Arslan family through the sudden marriage of her little brother Fatih. With this change, she meets with Alev's co-worker Umut. Umut, which means Hope in Turkish, opens a new set of possibilities and emotions in her life, and her harsh perspective on life gradually transforms when they secretly meet in parks as she tells her mother Pink that she is meeting with her close girlfriend. When this discreet relationship is discovered by her mother Pembe due to ongoing gossip, she lets the patriarch of the family know about this relationship. The father Abdullah Ünal calls his old friend to arrange a marriage between their

kids, and Nursema marries with a person whom she never exchanged a word. Her husband, who turns out to have anger issues and extra-marital affairs, accuses her reluctant behavior to lack of purity on the wedding night and when Nursema refuses to participate in sexual activities, climbing to the ceiling of the window, he pushes her causing her to fall from the third floor to the ground.

This episode's finale created such a big controversy that it caused thousands of complaints to the RTÜK, and several famous media commentators and political figures joined the conversation. One of the biggest reasons for this controversy was the timing of it, as just before the episode the 6284 Code brought into question AKP members as AKP's coalition with Islamist parties parliament member and member of government leaning women's rights group KADEM Özlem Zengin received a huge backlash. 6284 is the Turkish code against domestic violence, and after the disbanding of the Istanbul Convention 2 years ago it became the only code women who face domestic abuse can use against violence in law. However, even though it is in law, it is often not applied.

. People accused the Kızılıcak Şerbeti of screening, therefore normalizing the violence against women on TV. When a biased discourse is prevalent in public media, viewers begin to adopt beliefs about violence against women that downplay or rationalize it. This causes it to become normalized in discussions on a national level (Gökulu). The consumption of tv dramas that challenge local religious and gender norms provides a liminal space for discussing taboo topics, enabling audiences to speak about what they expect to be norms and facilitate the discussion of taboo topics (Yalkin and Veer).

While I was writing this, *Kızılıcak Şerbeti* was under examination by the RTÜK after an enormous number of complaints it received due to its final scene showing the daughter of a conservative rich family Nursema being pushed from a window by her husband that she forcibly married on the first night of her marriage. After this episode, political figures quickly joined the discussion. In his tweet, CHP parliament member Gürsel Tekin stated “If Erdoğan wins, Nursema's testimony will not be admissible. The psychopath who threw his wife out of a window the day he got married will be protected. If Kılıçdaroğlu wins, Nursema's statement will be the basis, this psychopath will be held accountable, Nursema will get divorced, receive alimony and start a new life. The choice is ours.” (Tekin).

Quickly emerging as a favorite character among the audience, Nursema managed to stay alive after this episode, and revealed the violence she experienced at a gathering where she invited both families, saying “Let the peace of your house be disturbed a little too, mom!”. After this sensational episode, Muslim feminist bloggers called Nursema as a hope-giving figure. "I believe in watching Nursema struggle against patriarchal cultural codes without giving up her religious identity, perhaps even by taking strength from this identity." It is also very valuable that she did this resistance in women's solidarity with Doğa and Alev, whom she initially kept at a distance.

However, it is still a reductionist to view Nursema in *Kızılıcak Şerbeti* as representing all religious women, as she is a privileged character who liberates herself through a secular man. This ignores the representation of women living in middle-class, educated, and non-oppressive families (Akkaş).

Conclusion and Further Comments

As I was nearing completion of this essay, *Kızılıcak Şerbeti* received a 5-episode ban and a maximum fine for historical violations from the Turkish Radio and Television Supreme Council (RTÜK). This decision was met with protests, and İlhan Taşçı, a board member of RTÜK from the main opposition party, criticized the decision by pointing out a violent scene from a show on the state-controlled TRT channel that did not receive a similar punishment. Despite its powerful position in the media landscape, RTÜK is a culturally conservative political institution that is subject to partiality and nepotism and continually faces threats to its autonomy (Kaptan and Karanfil).

The ban imposed by RTÜK did not impede the show's success; in fact, it contributed significantly to the show's rising popularity among audiences. The show has become the top-rated program, overtaking its closest competitor. Each week, more and more people are tuning in, and a deluge of opinion pieces, texts, and political articles are being released, making it difficult to keep track of them all. Many of these pieces argue that the show's popularity is due, in part, to its ability to provide clues on how Turkey can overcome polarization, by demonstrating that it is possible to empathize with those who are "not one of us," the importance of listening, and the role of empathy in achieving social harmony.

In Turkish television shows, polarization between secular and conservative groups is often portrayed as binary and incompatible. However, as evidenced by the examples I have provided of past and present Turkish TV series, despite its controversies and shortcomings, *Kızılıcak Şerbeti* bridges the cultural divide by addressing contemporary topics, featuring complex and

realistic characters that transform drastically through the episodes by encountering "the other," and creating a space for discourse that can bring together different social and cultural groups. Criticisms of the show from radical political commentators only serve to reveal the decay of assumptions and conspiracies.

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