

“Brad Pitt Halal” and the Hybrid Woman: Gender Representations and Religion through Turkish Soap Operas

PhD Candidate Dimitra Laurence LAROCHELLE
Université Sorbonne Nouvelle – Paris 3
FRANCE
larochelle.laurence@gmail.com

Abstract: Through this article we aim to present the results of our empirical research concerning the impact of religion on gender representations projected through Turkish soap operas. Since 2000, Turkey aims to become a model of a Muslim but democratic and modern country in the region especially for other Muslim countries. Even if AKP is not an explicitly religious party, the statements effectuated from times to times by its representants indicate an important convergence between the religious values and the party’s political and social priorities. Within this context, Turkish soap operas, function not only as tools of the country’s soft power outside Turkey’s borders and of promotion of its neo-Ottoman political orientation but also as tools for the promotion and the perpetuation of the government’s world view inside the country. The taboo of the sexuality and the importance of motherhood, the underrepresentation of LGBTQ community members, of ethnic or of religious minorities, the “sin” and the attribution of justice are some of the elements we discuss in the present article.

Keywords: soap operas, neo-Ottomanism, Soft power, religion, gender representation

« Brad Pitt halal » et la femme hybride : représentation des genres et religion à travers les feuilletons télévisés turcs

Résumé : À travers cet article nous présentons les résultats de notre recherche empirique concernant l’impact de la religion sur la représentation des genres projetées à travers les feuilletons télévisés turcs. Depuis 2000, la Turquie vise de devenir un modèle d’un pays Musulman mais aussi démocratique dans la région du moyen Orient. Même si l’AKP n’est pas de manière explicite un parti religieux, les déclarations effectuées de temps en temps par ses représentants indiquent une convergence importante entre les valeurs religieuses et les priorités politiques et sociales du parti. Dans ce contexte, les feuilletons télévisés turcs fonctionnent non seulement comme des outils du soft power de la Turquie à l’étranger et de sa politique néo-ottomane mais aussi comme des outils pour la promotion et la perpétuation de la vision du monde du gouvernement au sein du pays. Le tabou de la

sexualité et l'importance de la maternité, la sous-représentation des membres de la communauté LGBTQ et des minorités ethniques ou religieuses, le « pêché » et l'attribution de la justice sont certains des éléments que nous discutons à travers cet article.

Mots-clés : feuilletons télévisés, néo-Ottomanisme, soft power, religion, représentation des genres

Introduction

The narrative (the way in which a society describes itself in a symbolical way) is an extremely important element not only for a society's self-consciousness (Constantopoulou, 2017) but also, and from a dramatological perspective (Goffman, 1959), for the projection and/or the explanation of a culture and of its attractive characteristics to outsiders (Lundberg et al. 2017). Consequently, it can be understood, that mass media texts play a significant role in narrating a society's shared values and norms.

Television, is the “principal storyteller” in contemporary society (Kozloff, 1992: 67). Despite the discourse of concurrence between Internet and television that accompanied the emergence of the first¹, television is still a dominant mass media. This, not only because television is still much more accessible than the Internet², but also because televisual consumption is inherent to expectations of sociability that are not satisfied by the Internet (Maigret, 2007). Thus, television is still the main canal through which narratives are diffused to the audience.

Television texts such as soap-operas, convey representations that narrate the culture of a particular society. These televisual narrations enable the culture to be transmitted, reaffirmed, reproduced and therefore perpetuated. Nonetheless, it would be incorrect to consider that these representations are neutral or that they represent faithfully the social reality. What is presented through these narrations is also a reality reshaped according to the interests of those who control the production process of television products.

As Edgar Morin (1975) pointed out, mass culture obviously does not reflect “reality” but it projects the historically situated and provisory compromises of self-representations of each national society. Consequently, the study of media representations should always be accompanied by the study of the economic or of the political context which may have an impact on the media production process.

¹ This discourse of media concurrence between the new and the old media is present every time that a new media emerges (i.e. concurrence between television and radio etc.).

² As Maigret (2007) points out, among all mass media, television is still the most democratic. This, because its use does not require specific skills or knowledge and is not limited by subscription fees.

The aim of this article is to present the instrumentalization of religion by Erdogan's government for political purposes inside and outside Turkey's borders as well as the impact of this phenomenon on gender representation through Turkish soap-operas.

1. From the Kemalist ideology towards "neo-Ottomanism"

The Republic of Turkey was based on Kemalist ideology which was named after Mustafa Kemal who is also known as Atatürk (the father of Turks). Kemalism, introduced a new conception of Turkish identity that was defined by various political, social, cultural and religious reforms that intended to separate the Turkish state from the Ottoman Empire. Kemalist ideology was inspired by a "modern" / westernized model of regulation of the political and social affairs that included among other social reforms the establishment of democracy and secularism.

Kemalist ideology was a reaction to different nationalist movements which fragmented the Ottoman Empire between the end of the 19th century and the post World War I period (Makdisi, 2002). For Fisher Onar (2009), Turkish Republic was based on the Kemalist interpretation of the Ottoman collapse which defined the nation-building project during the 1920s. According to this interpretation, the cultural, religious and linguistic heterogeneity that characterized the Ottoman Empire had turned it vulnerable to ethnic and religious minority secessionism. Thus, the Kemalist vision of the Turkish identity was based on principles that aimed to prevent such development in the future. One of these principles, was the adoption of a unitary, secular character of the nation-state influenced by western countries and the rejection of the theocratic basis of the Ottoman authority. Religion was then considered as a threat to Turkey's modernization and nationalization process and the new Republic opposed to the pluralism of identity that characterized the Ottoman Empire (Robins, 1996). Therefore, during the nation-building process, Turkey - influenced by the French anticlerical tradition of *laïcité*, a form of state-enforced secularism - left behind the traditional and religious principles as elements that belonged to the *ancien regime* in order to embrace a "westernized" modernity (Ahmad, 2003).

However, during the last decades, we observe in Turkey a more intense convergence between religion and the Turkish Republic, making Sunnism the only legitimate basis for defining the republican moral norms (Paris, 2017).

More precisely, since 2002, the year that Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi/AKP) took the power in Turkey, a new vision concerning the exercise of Turkey's foreign policy has been adopted. This policy is based on the notion of "strategic depth" developed by Ahmet Davutoglu³. According to

³ Former academic and diplomat. Minister of Turkey's Foreign Affairs (2009 – 2014) and Turkey's Prime-Minister (2014 – 2016).

Davutoglu, the emphasis accorded to the relation of Turkey with Western countries since the creation of the Turkish Republic has conducted to the neglect of Turkey’s interests to other countries that belonged to the ancient Ottoman Empire and particularly with the countries of the North Africa and the Middle East (Taspinar, 2008).

The rediscovery of Turkey’s imperial heritage presupposes “a more moderate version of secularism at home, and a more activist policy in foreign affairs” (Taspinar, 2008: 15). This conception of Turkish foreign policy aims to the augmentation of Turkey’s “soft power”⁴ in countries that belonged to the former Ottoman Empire as well as in regions where Turkey has strategic interests. As Taspinar pointed out, “this broad vision for Turkish foreign policy requires an embrace of Ottoman “great power” legacy and a redefinition of Turkey’s strategic and national identity” (ibid: 15). Within this context, Islam plays a significant role “in terms of building a sense of shared identity” (ibid: 15) between Turkey and the Ottoman Empire’s former provinces (particularly in North Africa and the Middle East).

While AKP’s ideology is not explicitly Islamist but it is rather defined as “conservative” (Taspinar, 2008), the fact that there are many references to religion by AKP’s representatives as well as a number of reforms adopted during the last two decades strengthening the influence of religion on state institutions and social life in Turkey⁵ (Shukri & Hossain, 2017), are elements pointing out the importance accorded by Erdogan’s government to religion which is implicitly the base upon which morality is evaluated in modern Turkey. Consequently, social conservatism in Turkey became synonymous to Islamic values.

As mentioned in our introduction, the importance accorded to religion by Erdogan’s government is the result of both external and internal policy. To be more accurate, the Arab Uprising has been considered as a chance for Turkey in order to accomplish a role of model country in the region as a Muslim but democratic Republic. Additionally, we have to take under consideration that even if the Turkey is constitutionally a secular country, AKP’s representatives are aware of the sentiments of their supporters, which are that a significant number of Turks want a “more conservative and Islamic government” (ibid: 171). As a consequence, Islamist principles and values are not only necessary for Turkey’s foreign policy but they are also of crucial importance as far as the establishment of AKP’s power within Turkish borders is concerned.

⁴ Soft power is a concept in international affairs, developed by Joseph Nye, and refers to the ability to influence through cultural attraction.

⁵ Such examples are the introduction in 2013 of laws restricting the sale and consumption of alcohol, the lift of the headscarf ban or even the proposal of criminalization of adultery and the promise of revising the current law on abortion after equating abortion with murder (Shukri & Hossain, 2017).

Over the years, many scholars have noticed that the AKP has used its power in order to direct and reshape state institutions in order to reflect and promote its own political interests and ideology (Öztürk, 2016). Consequently, educational, media or religious institutions, even if they are not under formal state control, they still serve as instruments that impose a certain vision of morality which is in accordance to the governments' interests. At the following sections of this article we will examine the relation between soap-operas and religion in Turkey as well as the impact of this relation on gender representation.

2. Methodology

Our research concerns the representations projected by Turkish television soap operas and their reception by fans in Greece. According to Éric Macé (2001), the production, the representation and the reception are three moments of the same continuum. Consequently, a reception study cannot neglect the study of the representations projected through the media text nor the study of the context of production of these texts.

In order to study the consumption of these soap operas, we have conducted an empirical research based both on qualitative and quantitative methods. First, we have realized, a qualitative study based on 50 in-depth interviews with Greek fans of these products. Through our interviews, we also detected the soap operas that were the most viewed (and appreciated) by the public in Greece in order to analyze the representations projected by them.

Additionally, according to Paddy Scannell and Marie-Christine Gamberini (1994), it can be assumed that the television programs, in order to be intelligible to a large majority of the audience, are organized in all their aspects so as to produce this effect - that of appearing ordinary - in ways that absolutely everyone can, in principle and in practice, seize. Thus, communication is not a simple process of exchanging messages from an emitter to a recipient but it is a social interaction. Within this context, it becomes one more time clear that the study of the reception of media products must be accompanied by the study of the conditions in which these creations have been produced in order to seize the logic of the communicational intentionality behind them. Taking this under consideration, we have realized a field study in Istanbul during May 2017 in order to better understand the production process of Turkish soap operas. Within this context, we have realized interviews with producers, actors and personnel implicated in the production process of these soap operas.

Through the present article we aim to present a part of the results of our empirical research concerning the analysis of gender representations projected through Turkish soap-operas as well as of their context of production.

3. Turkish soap-operas: an international brand

Since 2000, the production of Turkish soap operas is in constant development. These soap operas have indisputably a great success at a local level and are also exported abroad. More precisely, they were first diffused in countries that were in the sphere of cultural influence of the ancient Ottoman Empire (which means the Balkans and the Middle East). Later they were also exported even far, in Latin America, in China, in Pakistan, in India, in Bangladesh etc.

According to Hülya Ugur Tanriöver (2011), since the beginning of the first television channel in Turkey, soap operas had a privileged position among other media products. This happens, because as she explains, Turkish audience had already a cinematographic tradition which was established in the “golden age” of Turkish cinema (1960 – 1970). Thus, Turkish audience always had a particular interest for fiction. The crisis in the cinema industry (that occurred during the 1980s) as well as Turkey’s financial situation during the same period are some of the reasons that stimulated Turks to massively adopt the entertainment offered by television at home. In the early years of television, when the number of local productions were still very limited, TRT bought series from abroad that were highly appreciated by the public. Their success was so considerable that in social history, certain periods were named in reference to the series in question, such as the "Love Boat Years" or the "Dallas Years". This is one of the reasons why TRT insisted on producing local soap operas. During the nineties, private channels appeared in Turkish television and this caused augmented competitiveness in the sector. Hence, audience abandoned foreign series in the favor of local products. Today, local soap operas are the most popular television genre in Turkey.

The themes of these soap operas are not original. They remind the practically standardized themes of the classic products of the genre or of the “telenovelas” of the Spanish speaking world of the period 1990 – 2000. The most frequent subjects concern the sentimental relations and the stories of forbidden love between two persons with different social status or between lovers that are in an ambiguous situation because of a third person that is implicated in the relation.

These soap operas present several stories characterized by the rich lifestyle of the protagonists. Protagonists have a lifestyle including expensive clothes, jewelry, furniture or even cultural goods such as frequent trips etc. So, this lifestyle invites the public to a journey towards fantasy, dream and evasion.

The narrative schemes that are diffused by these soap operas are identical to those that we find in most of the television products anywhere in the world (life lasting love, optimism, fight between good and bad etc.). It is about presenting problems that preoccupy every person in everyday life (love problems, survival problems etc.) but always by accompanying these problems by intrigues, passions and rivalries in order to attract the public.

As mentioned above, Turkish soap operas are also (particularly since 2000) exported abroad. For many specialists on the subject, Turkish soap operas seem to be considered by the Turkish government as a tool in order to enhance a positive image for Turkey and thus, augment its “soft power”.

In their article on the instrumentalization of culture and the Turkish vision of “soft power”, Nilgün Tütal-Cheviron and Aydın Çam (2017), explain that many strategies of the Turkish government have been established in order to assist the production of Turkish soap operas. The public press agency (Anadolu Ajansı) and the financial aid that is provided to private television channels and to production companies for the creation of soap operas are two of the instruments of this policy. Consequently, the diffusion of Turkish soap operas outside Turkey’s borders seems to contribute to the effort of turning Turkey into a “model country”. Thereby, the representatives of Turkish government have several times stated in public the importance of Turkish soap operas for the government. For instance, Egemen Bağış, while he was the minister of the European Union Affairs (2009 – 2013) had declared: “Turkish series are a perfect tool for us to reflect Turkey’s image and Turkish lifestyle. This, not only for our economic but also for our diplomatic and sociological interests. Turkish series have become one of the most effective means of our soft power” (Tütal-Cheviron and Çam, 2017: 133).

As we explained, Turkey aims to become a model of a Muslim and democratic state especially for Arab countries. Consequently, a certain vision of morality based not only upon nationalist principles but also upon Muslim values, is a crucial element during the production process of these soap operas. This because on the one hand they are addressed to the Turkish society - and hence they have to be in accordance with the vision of Turkishness promoted by Erdogan’s government - and on the other hand because they are meant to be diffused transnationally and thus consumed by a large public that is in an important level composed by Muslims. Consequently, morality is also a practical element as it prevents these cultural products from choking transnational audiences and thus it turns them to easily commercialized merchandizes outside Turkey’s borders.

More precisely, according to Julien Paris (2017), government’s conception of morality is a central element of the regulation of the production and of the diffusion of Turkish soap-operas. Paris’ study showed that even if Turkish series are superficially depoliticized, they remain however vectors of certain values. The representations of the institution of the family, of the nation, of authority or even of History through television contents are still the responsibility of producers but also of institutions who are responsible to ensure the respect of a legislative corpus whose interpretation may differ depending on the political and social context.

Consequently, there are many forms of control of the content of Turkish series which may be in accordance to the interests of those who are in power. The legislation in Turkey for television fictions is the same as for the audiovisual sector in general but includes a certain number of additional restrictions concerning the

respect of the nation and of the authority. Furthermore, there are laws that control the liberty of expression such as the article 8 of the audiovisual law (law 6112) which forbids contents that “undermine the national or the moral values of society, the public morality, and the protection of the family” (Paris, 2017: 150) – at this point we have to take under consideration that the article 41 of the Turkish Constitution, indicates that the foundation of the Republic is the family and the moral and traditional Turkish values.

The specificity of the audiovisual sector in Turkey is that the organization of the institutions allows to each government to use the sector if necessary, as a tool for its own interests. Consequently, in an institutional level but also within the production companies there are several levels of content control. Furthermore, the professionals of the audiovisual sector operate an auto censorship in order to adjust their productions to a certain vision of morality - which is government instructed - and thus avoid the heavy financial sanctions imposed by the television watchdog.

As far as the exportation of these series is concerned, given the fact that producers aim to sell their products to various publics they are the first to operate a certain auto-censorship as a method preventing the reject of their products by international buyers (Paris, 2017). Thus, producers also adopt their contents to the tastes and values of their eventual buyers.

Thus, this vision of morality mentioned above, is based on religious rules and principles. Consequently, the representations projected through Turkish soap-operas are always in accordance with religious values, the respect of the institution of the family and of its patriarchic organization, of the nation and of the authority.

Turkish soap operas are now exported in more than 140 countries. One of the most popular soap operas is *Muhtesem Yuzyil* (Magnificent century) that has been watched by almost 400 millions of viewers worldwide. The soap operas in question seem to have even overcome in popularity telenovelas in Latin America that since recently were “dominant” in this particular geographical area.

4. Turkish soap operas, religion and gender representations

Mass media are one of the institutions that influence social subjects’ procedure of socialization through the projection of specific models of behavior, of attitude and of opinion. This way, media representations conduct women (but also men) to adopt stereotypical and conventional roles that are adequate to society’s expectations for their gender. We live in a society that is characterized - in multiple levels - by specific roles that are attributed to sexes. This is something that can be observed to all aspects of daily life from ordinary activities (i.e. watching television) to activities that are considered more important (i.e. working conditions).

The term gender is not something we have but it is rather something we do. It is our way of acting as gendered social beings and that we acquire through our

everyday interactions with others. We are not simply the heirs of a masculine or a feminine identity but we constantly determine and we re-determine through our daily encounters what it means being a woman or a man (Beauvoir, 1949). This is how we obtain our sexual identity. All individuals are born with a determined sex but nobody is born with a gender. The last is taught to individuals through institutions such as family, school or media etc. that reproduce and thus perpetuate models of behavior based on stereotypes that are acceptable for men and for women. Consequently, media narratives also play an important role in individuals' gendered identity learning process.

Gender representation through soap operas has been analyzed by numerous social researchers. Melodramas are traditionally based on the distinction between the private and the public sphere (Geraghty, 1991). The public sphere is traditionally associated with men as, according to patriarchic principles, they are considered to be the breadwinners for their families while the private sphere is associated with women to whom stereotypically are attributed the "traditional" roles of mother and housewife. Consequently, taking under consideration that soap opera is considered to be a feminine genre the emphasis is putted on interpersonal relations and problems that occur within the domestic life. Modleski (1994) attributed to soap-operas the function of reinforcement of the roles that are attributed to women by the patriarchic society which means the responsibility to ensure the personal relations and the maintenance of the united family. Far from representing an ideal family life, soap operas project the numerous dilemmas that may occur within the private sphere and to which women are invited to find solutions in order to reach harmony.

However, Edgar Morin (1975) has pointed out the structural contradiction of the cultural industry between standardization and innovation / production and creation. From one hand, cultural industries have to attract the majority of media consumers which inevitably leads to a moral and cultural conformism and to a repeated standardization. From the other hand, cultural industries have to renew their offer not only to differentiate themselves from the concurrence but also in order to represent the social changes.

Many features of the soap-opera may tempt us to believe that this particular television genre is rather reassuring. More precisely, the rhythm as well as the organization of time in general give the impression that time does not have an impact on the soap-opera world and thus life in soap-operas is on a slow-motion (Ang, 1985). Moreover, the rather stereotypical characters that we often see in soap-operas (i.e. "the faithful husband", "the bad guy" etc.) do not surprise the audience. Consequently, we could believe that soap-opera as a genre is rather reassuring and functions as a shelter to the audience in a changing world. Nonetheless, as Christine Geraghty suggests (1991), this type of television program is also under the pressure for changing, which implicates the representation of social change.

As a consequence, soap operas in general are based on stereotypical characters and situations in order to attract the majority of the audience but they also very often

highlight social issues such as safe sex practices and heterosexual sex (*General Hospital*), acceptance and understanding of transgendered individuals (*The Bold And The Beautiful*), abortion (*All My Children*), interracial couples (*Days of Our Lives*), same-sex couples (*DOOL*), bullying (*One Life to Live*) etc. Hence, soap operas often discuss social taboos related to women and their position within society which is something that is not common in other television genres (i.e. crime series, sitcoms etc.). Therefore, soap operas are much more dynamic texts than what we tend to consider in which often women are portrayed as emancipated, sexually liberated, with important careers etc. Besides, As Segal (1990) demonstrated, very often when we look at gender representations, we tend to envisage them as immobile. However, according to her, this seems to be false as gender representations do change but they change so slowly as if they are in a “slow motion”.

The reason that the soap opera genre is often object of criticism regarding the representations that are projected by its texts, is based not only to the distinction between high-taste and low-taste culture but also to the fact that it is considered to be a “feminine” product as they project and discuss women’s preoccupations. Thus, according to Blumenthal (1997), the devaluation of soaps “takes place in a larger, intranational, and cross-national milieu in which women’s general and representational cultures are actively subordinated” (ibid: 87).

However, when the production process of soap operas is regulated by religious moral norms, their ability to discuss social issues is significantly limited while their characters’ representation is becoming more and more conservative and stereotyped.

Through this part of our article we will discuss the impact of the regulation of religion by Erdogan’s government on women’s representations. On this point, we have to take under consideration the fact that social identity is also defined by alterity (Constantopoulou, 1999). One identifies itself with a particular social group with which he/she considers that he/she shares similar characteristics which are by definition different from the characteristics of the opposite social group. Consequently, femininity is also defined by masculinity as it is by definition opposed to it. The positions as well as the roles that are considered to be acceptable by women within society are correspondingly defined from those that are appropriate for men. Thus, we will not only analyze women’s representations through these soap operas but also those of men. Moreover, what seems to be equally important for our research is in addition to consider the representation of non-Muslim characters through the plots that we will examine in order to identify the eventual differences between the portrayal of Muslim women and men and non-Muslim populations.

Finally, the examination of the adaptation of the popular American prime-time soap opera *Desperate Housewives* seem to be equally important in order to seize the differences as far as gender representation is concerned between the original product and its Turkish reproduction.

a. *The taboo of sexuality and the valorization of motherhood*

Sexuality (and more precisely women's sexuality) is rather a taboo. Sexual relations between women and men are not portrayed or even implied through these soap operas. This is valid not only for pre-marital sex but also for married couples. Such an example, is the Turkish adaptation of the American soap opera *Desperate Housewives* (*Umutsuz Ev Kadınları*⁶). The Turkish version of *Desperate Housewives* is the exact reproduction of the scenario of the original series but in a Muslim version. No nudity⁷ or sexual relations between the protagonists are projected through this version of the famous format. In fact, the Turkish television watchdog (Radio and Television Supreme Council / RTÜK) fined the soap opera in question with an amount of 115,000 Turkish Liras, (approximately 60,000 American dollars) when a couple who was supposed to try to have children implied of having sex after dinner⁸.

In Turkish soap operas, pre-marital sex remains almost unconceivable for both sexes according to the traditional habits very much influenced by Islamic values but not for all characters. More precisely, "good" women in particular, are not portrayed as sexually active individuals. It is always the villains that are portrayed as "bad" or "unethical" women who are represented as sexually active. This duality between "good" (sexually inactive) and "bad" (sexually active) characters could be translated in a duality between Muslim lifestyle and non-Muslim lifestyle. On this point, it is worth mentioning that in some cases, women that are portrayed as living far from Muslim ethics and values are not only necessarily bad but in some cases, they are also foreigners. Rarely, women with different religious and ethnic confections are portrayed in secondary roles incarnating women sexually available and "unethical" (i.e. Katya from the series *Ask-i memnu*).

When a "good" female character somehow does the mistake to have a pre-marital relation this is always in order to portray the bad consequences of this mistake (i.e. unexpected pregnancy). In these rare cases, this element serves as a key factor for the scenario as it may be crucial for the development of the plot as an element triggering several unfortunate or tragic events (i.e. *Fazilet hanım ve kızları*).

While women are explicitly sexually inactive, this is not always the case for men. As far as men are concerned as "good" Muslims they in general abstain from sex too. Yet again, in some cases, men's sexual activity is much more ambiguous and raises less problems than in the cases of women. When a "good" male character does have a pre-marital sexual relation, this seems to do not be as problematic as in

⁶ 2011 – 2014

⁷ Even the famous scene of Suzan being locked naked outside her house during the first season was presented with the Turkish version of the same personage being covered from head to toe with towels.

⁸ Source: Hurriyet Daily news (<http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/watchdog-fines-turkeys-desperate-housewives-over-sexual-innuendo--59387>), consulted on June 30th, 2019.

the case of women and men are often presented as “victims” of women’s conspiracies.

As much as sexuality seems undesirable in the representation of good feminine characters, similarly, motherhood is considered to be of crucial importance for women and abortion is portrayed as a sin committed by egoist, selfish and vengeful women (O’Neil, 2013). On this point, we remind that as mentioned above, in 2012 Turkey’s Prime Minister, Recep Tagip Erdogan, stated that abortion is equivalent to murder. In a general way the representation of women who have abortions is rather negative. As O’Neil demonstrated, it is about women that prioritize their careers over marriage and family (*Gumus*), women who are selfish and think of themselves first (*Ask-i-memnu*) or women that seek revenge over men (*Hanımın Ciftlig*). It is also a recurrent pattern to see a man trying to convince these women to change their decision and to do not commit an abortion (i.e. doctor, husband etc.).

In most cases, the woman either embrace motherhood which is an element conducting her automatically to happiness (*Gumus*) or is somehow punished for the crime she has committed and justice is attributed (i.e. Bihter⁹ suicides at the last episode of *Ask-i-memnu*).

As far as motherhood is concerned, it is worth mentioning, that the rhetoric on abortion in Turkey was always in accordance with the needs of the state and not with women’s rights (O’Neil, 2013). Similarly, we could argue that the representation of abortion today through Turkish soap operas, is in accordance with the government’s vision of morality which is religious based.

Motherhood is also very important for the storylines as women impose their opinion either through intrigues either because of their position of mother within the family. Thus, motherhood seems to be a key element as a factor that allows to women to be respected and listened from the other members of the society.

b. The non-representation: an implicit representation?

Media could be considered as mirrors reflecting the values, the preoccupations as well as the debates of a specific society. Consequently, media texts convey storylines and characters in accordance with each society’s world view. Thus, each representation is a political act and similarly is the non-representation. As we tend to consider what we see it is equally important to consider what we don’t as this has also something to say about the way that a society perceives itself and the world. Hence, we will try to also analyze the non-representation of certain social groups as this is equally important for the examination of the impact of religion on media representations.

⁹ Bihter is the main female character of the soap opera *Ask-I memnu*. She gets married with Adnan, Adnan is a wealthy widower, but she falls in love with his nephew, Behlul. Thus, she entertains an extra-marital relationship with him. When he decides to get married to another woman, she suicides.

First, it is worth mentioning, that members of the LGBTQ community are not represented through Turkish soap operas. Among the twenty soap operas that we have examined¹⁰ only in two there are secondary characters that are implied to be homosexual.

In the serial, *Kiralik Ask*, Koray Sargın, is implied to be homosexual as this character is a grotesque stereotypical representation of a man having “feminized” behavior and habits which is not the case of other men in Turkish soap operas. This secondary personage functioned as a decompressing element between the intrigues and the love problems of the protagonists that aimed to provoke the audience’s laughter. Moreover, in the historical soap opera *Muhtesem Yuzyil*, the eunuch of the palace, Sümbül, through its feminized “way to be” is implied to be homosexual. However, given the fact that *Muhtesem Yuzyil* is a historical soap opera and that eunuchs played a crucial role for the intrigues within the harem the representation of such personage was of crucial importance. Despite the importance if such character for the plot, once again, this personage through its grotesque way of speaking and acting was a tool for provoking audience’s laughter.

With the exception of these two soap operas, LGBTQ community members are absent from Turkish series. It is worth mentioning that in the Turkish version of the soap opera *Desperate Housewives* the homosexual characters of the authentic serial were presented as heterosexual.

Thus, it is clear that not only individuals with non-heterosexual orientation are absent from the storylines of Turkish soap operas but also that where they are present, they serve as decompressing elements for the plot aiming to provoke the laughter of the audience. Apart from the members of the LGBTQ community, other religious or ethnic minorities are in general unrepresented as we will demonstrate shortly.

In the first part of our article we presented the “neo-Ottomanist” model of Turkish policy adopted during the last decades by Erdogan’s government. This nostalgia and the need for revival of the Ottoman period is evident from the proliferation of soap operas incarnating Turkey’s glorious past (*Muhtesem Yuzyil*, *Muhtesem Yuzyil : Kosem*¹¹, *Filinta*¹², *Dirilis Ertugrul*¹³). The first soap opera with historic content was *Muhtesem Yuzyil*, a soap opera narrating the life of Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent. While the accent was putted on the life in the harem, full of intrigues and rivalries rather than on the political life of this period (Larochelle,

¹⁰ *Fatmagul’un Sucu Ne?*, *Ezel*, *Ask-i-Memnu*, *Muhtesem Yuzyil*, *Bin Bir Gece*, *Sila*, *Karadayi*, *Karasevda*, *Asi*, *Kara Para Ask*, *Kiralik Ask*, *Karagul*, *Kismet*, *Yabancı Damat*, *Paramparca*, *Umutsuz Ev Kadınları*, *Anne*, *Carpisma*, *Kadin*, *Fazilet Hanım ve Kızları*.

¹¹ 2015 - 2017

¹² 2014 - 2016

¹³ 2014 - present

2017a), religiosity was represented as a crucial element not only as a personal choice but also as a regulating force of social life and of decision making.

Altunay and Cemiloglu Altunay, in their research on the representation of non-Muslims in the soap opera *Muhtesem Yuzuil*, demonstrated that Muslim confection seems to be considered as an integral part of Turkishness. These characters, that are considered to be the opposite from the Ottomans, are thus portrayed as cowards, unstable and consuming great amounts of alcohol (i.e. King Lajos) and conspiring against the Ottoman Empire (i.e. the Pope, Victoria etc.). The fact that Muslim confection is part of Turkishness is highlighted by the fact that when some of the foreign characters portrayed in the soap opera convert to Islam, then magically their broken Turkish accent is disappeared giving its place to a perfect Turkish accent.

In contemporary series, foreigners or individuals with different religious beliefs are underrepresented. When they are represented, then they constitute the opposite from the “good Muslim” incarnating very often sexually available women without ethical restrictions constituting “villain” personages.

c. Patriarchic hierarchy, “sin” and justice

As in most soap operas, in Turkish soaps too, a balanced situation is reversed by a tragic event such as a rape, a false accusation, a forced marriage etc. or an element that is generally considered to be unethical as for instance an extramarital relation. As a result, the most frequent subject concerns the restoration of the equilibrium by repairing the injustice that harmed the life of the protagonists. Consequently, the type of narration that is privileged is the one of the heroic structure as there is one protagonist who struggles to repair an injustice committed against him.

In the male oriented narratives (i.e. *Ezel*), the protagonist becomes the hero that starts a fight in order to repair the injustice committed while in the female oriented narratives (i.e. *Fatmagul’un sucu ne?*) the woman is never alone but is always assisted by a man (or a group of people) who help her to claim for justice. In both cases, the audience becomes a witness of the adventures experienced by the protagonists during this process. In general, the relation between a man and a woman through Turkish soap operas, could be compared to the relation between a father and its child. Men are always represented as calm when an unpleasant event occur, rational, protective and caring. On the other hand, women are presented as hysterical, with irrational / childish behavior and often unable to take care of themselves of making choices. Generally, action seems to be inherent to male characters while women are guided by other’s actions. So far, it can be argued that Turkish soap operas reproduce and thus perpetuate patriarchic stereotypes.

The notion of “sin” seems also to be very important. Very often, justice is restored in a tragic way. On this matter, we have to point out that “happy end” is rarely fulfilled in Turkish soaps. Consequently, catharsis is accomplished in these soap operas even if the protagonist is killed at the end. What seems to be important in these soap operas is not the conclusion “they lived happily ever after” as in most

occidental narratives but the restauration of the moral order of things. The sin is therefore almost always accompanied by punishment. For example, in the serial entitled *Ask-i-memnu*, when the female protagonist, Bihter, realizes that the extramarital relation that she has with the nephew of her husband is condemned, she commits suicide. Consequently, justice (and the punishment that always accompanies the restauration of justice) seems to be more important than happiness. The victory of morality, seems to be more important than “the happy end”.

As mentioned in the previous section of the present article, very often soap operas point out the need for change and for moving forward. Turkish soap operas have a hybrid character. They often highlight the need for change too but without completely denouncing the injustice committed because of the tradition or dominant hierarchy. As a result, in the serial *Sıla*, even if the protagonists Boran and Sila are forced to get married to each other according to tradition, they later fall in love and they stay together. In the serial *Fatmagul’un sucu ne?*, despite the fact that Fatmagul is raped and later forced to get married with one of her rapists, she falls in love with him and she stays with him because she understands that he is “different” from the rest of her rapists. Consequently, crime is denounced, justice is repaired but without completely denying tradition or the existing dominant hierarchy (Larochelle, 2017b).

Yet again, sin seems to be of greater importance for women than for men whose actions very often are explained and justified by the plot (i.e. the night that Fatmagul was raped the four men were drunk. Thus, apart from one villain character, Erdogan Yasaran, the other three characters are deeply regretted for their action). Within this context, it is worth mentioning that alike sexuality, alcohol consumption is also a taboo in Turkish soap operas. It is always villains who consume alcohol and if “good” characters do so, it serves to the plot in order to portray the bad consequences of such “sin”.

Thus, women are “hybrid” as they are situated between modernity and conservatism. While they wear modern cloths and drive new and fast cars, they are sexually inactive and socially illegitimate to take decisions for themselves and their own bodies (i.e. as in the case of abortion). In some cases, they claim for justice for the crimes committed against them but they never do it alone and even if they do so they implicitly never question tradition or dominant hierarchy. They may commit great “sins” such as for example entertain an extramarital relationship but they are always punished for their actions. Similarly, male protagonists’ behaviors are in accordance with religious principles and if not, they are somehow justified for their actions. However, this justification occurs in a patriarchic context that generally underestimate and suppress women while overvalue men.

It is not hazardous that Kivanc Tatlitug, a famous protagonist of several Turkish soap operas (i.e. *Ask-i-memnu*, *Carpisma* etc.) is named by its Arab fans “halal Brad Pitt” putting the emphasis to his “western” physical characteristics that constitute its

“beauty traits” and to the fact that the characters portrayed by him are “halal” (in accordance to Muslim principles).

In addition, these “halal” storylines seem to have attracted an important number of Arab fans who identify themselves quite easily with Turkish soaps rather than to other similar western products of the same genre. Thus, Turkey has also gain significant economic profits as many Arabs, stimulated by the viewing of Turkish soap operas, choose to visit Istanbul for their holydays (Anaz & Ozcan, 2016).

Conclusion

Since 2000, Turkey aims to become a model of a Muslim but democratic and modern country in the region especially for other Muslim countries. Even if AKP is not an explicitly religious party the statements effectuated from times to times by its representants (and especially from Turkey’s Prime Minister Recep Tagip Erdogan) indicate an important convergence between the religious values and the party’s political and social priorities. Within this context, Turkish soap operas, function not only as tools of the country’s soft power outside Turkey’s borders but also as tools for the promotion and the perpetuation of the government’s world view inside the country.

Through the present article we have tempted to present the impact of religion on gender representations. By examining the representations projected through twenty Turkish soap operas we came to the conclusion that religious values and principles play a significant role as far as gender representations are concerned. Sexuality seems to be a taboo both for single as well as for married women. In addition, motherhood is of a significant importance and abortion is presented as a great “sin”.

Furthermore, Muslim belief is synonymous to Turkishness. Thus, religious and ethnic minorities are rarely represented through Turkish soap operas and when they are, they are presented in a rather negative way as the opposite from Turks or Muslims. Additionally, members of the LGBTQ community are underrepresented or ridiculed through the plots.

It could also be finally concluded that dominant hierarchy and tradition-based ethics are never put completely under question. Even if some of these soap operas highlight the need for change (as all soap operas do) they do not deny (at least not completely) the values and ethics of the patriarchic society that tend to underestimate women and consequently perpetuate gender inequalities.

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