

Same-Sex Sexualities in Turkey

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Abstract

This article examines the background and the current situation of same-sex sexualities in Turkey. First, a short recent history of homosexuality in the nation and the ways it has been represented are explained. Then, the most significant factors that reshape contemporary Turkish same-sex sexualities, namely, Islam, social class, and the role of the state are expounded. Finally, some of the emergent problems and issues that gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and queer people in Turkey have to deal with are contrasted to their persistence at seeking respect.

A Short History of Same-Sex Sexualities in Turkey

Following a social constructionist perspective on same-sex sexualities and homosexual identities throughout modern history (D'Emilio, 1998; Nardi and Schneider, 1998; Plummer, 1992; Seidman, 2009; Weeks, 1990), one can discern an ambiguous time in Turkish history when there were no sexual self-identities or medical diagnosis of sexual 'abnormalities,' but same-sex sexual acts took place and virtually everybody had knowledge about them. This undocumented and thus ambiguous period starts from the late Ottoman Empire and continues for 100 years or more into the temporal realm of modern Turkish Republic, which was founded in 1923. The new republic radically transfigured almost all spheres of social, cultural, and political public life via various developmentalist projects including Europeanization, secularization, westernization, and modernization. Not only the empire was abolished and a new nation with the nation-state was created but also a new, modern subject-citizen was formed under the influence of Enlightenment ideals by state discourses, policies, and practices. In spite of this grand transformation, same-sex sexual acts, or the type of 'the homosexual,' were not explicitly monitored, regulated, named, or criminalized by the new regime. Although it worked meticulously on the structure of the nuclear family, the role of women in public and private spheres, and the gendered politics of representation (Arat, 1997; Sirman, 2005), the modern revolution in Turkey was seemingly too busy to deal with, cure, ban, or intervene into homosexuality. Same-sex sexual activities became a significant part of the abject, invisible yet connived urban underground culture. Contemporary scholars can trace this hazy time period through local and foreign historians' work as well as novels and other literary forms. Among others, the great Turkish author Kemal Tahir's numerous novels and stories and the social historian Resat Ekrem Kocu's unfinished yet marvelous *Encyclopaedia of Istanbul* (1946) and his other books can reveal this unnamed yet fully experienced sexual riptide.

After a relatively insipid period in terms of homosexuality in the 1950s, the famous singer Zeki Muren became the first queer public figure in the history of the country in 1960s. In the beginning of his career, he was enacting a kind of alternative masculinity that contradicted with the hegemonic displays of manhood of its time. Later he started to destabilize gender and

sexual norms more manifestly, and continued that until his death in 1991. People loved him as if he was a national hero and called him 'pasha,' a title used for the very masculine military leaders, despite the fact that he was not related emotionally or sexually to women and performed at stage in women's clothes with heavy makeup on his face. For most of his lifetime, he was an open transvestite and clandestine homosexual, a well-respected queer king (Özbay, 2009).

Despite his exceptional queer public display, Muren was not alone in enjoying a homosexual lifestyle in Turkey. The Beyoglu district of Istanbul has long been the focal point of queer lives in Turkey (Oz, 2009; Yuzgun, 1986, 1993). The country's first popular 'gay bar' Vat-69 (opening year 1975) and almost all its successors have been located in Beyoglu and vicinity. By attending to these bars as well as specific public beaches, parks, and Turkish baths at certain times, a new, distinct, modern homosexual person, who is located within a web of same-sex sexual relations instead of conventional family ties and collegial sociabilities, started to emerge in Istanbul after 1960s.

Another crucial figure in this particular history is also a singer, Bulent Ersoy. After becoming immensely popular in the late 1970s as an apparently homosexual man, in 1981 she became transsexual through a sex reassignment surgery. Although Muren's subverting queer performance was never oppressed by the state, Ersoy was legally banned to perform at stage by the postcoup military government. She was exiled to Germany until 1988 when the new, liberal government put an end to the prohibition. In contrast to Muren's highly adaptable, almost officially sanctioned transvestism, her radical transgenderism with the narratives about the surgeries and the bodily transformation, and the political conflict with the military power, made Ersoy a trenchant symbol of gender and sexual struggle that is still effective in the 'structure of feeling' about homosexuality or same-sex intimacies in Turkey (Yuzgun, 1986; Hocaoglu, 2002). For homosexuals, the 1980s was also the decade full of brutal police patrols, torture in police stations, harassment in public spaces and bars, and the new stigma that came with the first human immunodeficiency virus infection/acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (HIV/AIDS) cases.

By the late 1980s, the incipient neoliberalization of the economy, further integration to the Western world, and the strong tides of globalization paralleled public Turkish culture becoming gradually demilitarized. Along with these changes,

modern gay men emerged in major Turkish cities. They tended to imitate a Euro-American style of gayness, embodied body-oriented gay masculinity, and declared a symbolic war against the feminine public image of homosexuality, which more or less stemmed from the popular transgender singers (Hocaoglu, 2002; Tapinç, 1992). A more surreptitious but better organized urban gay culture flourished in this period. Men who have sex with men started to identify themselves as 'gay' as in English, having sex with other gay men, having emotional and long-term relationships, desiring and emulating a straight-looking bodily demeanor, and coming together not only for purposes of sex and joy but also for political commitment and sexual activism against homophobia. The first commercial movies regarding the issues of same-sex sexuality were produced in the Turkish film industry in the 1980s (Oztek, 2007) and homosexual stories started to reappear in Turkish novels, after a long period of silence. Representations of homosexuality in film and novel increased steadily in the 1990s and notable examples of queer art became well known such as gay authors Murathan Mungan's and Selim Ileri's books and Ferzan Özpetek's critically acclaimed first film *Steam-The Turkish Bath* (1997).

Gay life in the recent history of modern Turkey reached its peak in the early 2000s, followed by its eventual decline in terms of its visibility and diversity in social and physical spaces in the metropolitan areas. Numerous gay (and to a certain extent lesbian) cafes, bars, and clubs opened during those years in Istanbul, the businesses were full with hundreds of avid homosexual people, the popular press and the news media had quite positive coverage about the glittering gay bars and their clientele, academic publications and research accounts were beginning to be published, sexual activists became more discernable and respected, and the confusion that masses had about the meaning of the concepts gayness and transgenderism vanished a little bit (Hocaoglu, 2002; Bereket and Adam, 2006). In addition to the self-assured gay men, lesbians became for the first time visible and came together as a separate social group to discuss their own problems that might be different than gay men's (Basdas, 2007; Özbay and Soydan, 2003; Savci, 2011).

In this very formation of modern gay and lesbian social identity in Turkey, three different developments played important roles. The first one was the gradual decrease and the eventual end of police raids and violence toward homosexuals and transgenders (Oz, 2009; Yuzgun, 1993). In this sense, it was deemed a little bit more acceptable and feasible to open and manage gay commercial venues, especially in metropolitan areas. Visitors in these queer businesses did not have fear of being exposed to the police when they were socializing. The second point was about the change in the attitude of the newspapers and the news media. Broadly speaking, the marginalizing, otherizing, and even dehumanizing language was dropped off and gays and lesbians started to appear in the pages through their own agendas and words within a framework of tolerance and esteem (Savci, 2011). A third cornerstone in this process was the diffusion of the Internet. It enabled gay men and lesbians to become connected to each other, social organizations and groups, and the world, without being revealed in front of the heterosexual society or having to come out of the closet unwillingly and uncontrollably

(Hocaoglu, 2002; Özbay and Soydan, 2003). In the beginning, European dating Web sites brought large numbers of people together online and then Turkish Web sites were founded and replaced the European ones, became even more popular in urban zones and in the provincial towns. Maybe for the first time in the modern history, being gay and engaging into same-sex sexual activities had no social costs and consequences in Turkey.

Current Situation

Today, Turkey is one of the few countries in which homosexuality or counternormative sexualities are legal yet they are subjugated by state institutions, including the restrictive actions of police forces and public prosecutors (Oz, 2009; Savci, 2011). A simultaneous double life is experienced in terms of same-sex sexualities. On the one hand, the Turkish state and society are becoming more conservative, religious, and oppressive, in the sense that they forbid not only certain types of sexualities but sexuality itself and all its public manifestations are being constructed as taboo. On the other hand, same-sex sexualities are performed as they are tolerated within the zones of exception, especially in certain neighborhoods of the major metropolitan areas. These urban areas, under strict surveillance, provide social and physical spaces in which queer citizens engage same-sex sexualities and experience gay sociabilities while the state authorities are able to watch and govern the flow of homosexuals outside those areas. In this double configuration of same-sex sexual cultures, tolerance and intolerance, respect and intervention, freedom and restriction, grassroots diversity and superimposed uniformity, amalgamate by the participation of the state, the heterosexual public and gay men and lesbians as condoned exceptions (Basdas, 2007; Bereket and Adam, 2006, 2008; Özbay, 2010; Özyegin, 2012).

Subjects who have same-sex inclinations promulgate their own characteristics of flexibility, versatility, multifariousness, adaptability, discretion, self-centeredness, and even a precarious insincerity, in order to navigate within this compelling binary social structure that oscillates between a globalizing tendency for multiculturalism and an imagined insular isle of normality and undemocratic homogeneity (Özbay, 2010). The first step in this process is the formation of modern, Western, Euro-American gay and lesbian identities. These people construct a self-image that does not strive to hide their sexual identities and actions; on the contrary, as the Western role models suggest, coming out strategies and narratives play a crucial role in constituting who they really are and to what extent they internalize gay identities (Bereket and Adam, 2006; Hocaoglu, 2002; Özbay and Soydan, 2003; Özyegin, 2012). In this Westernized view of sexuality, there is a neat border between heterosexual and homosexual affect, culture, eroticism, and identity. A person is either gay or straight and the definitions are exact and stabilized.

There are factors complicating this supposedly neat, yet never neutral, division between what is homosexuality and what is heterosexuality. One of the most significant of them is the capacities of Islam. Islamic doctrines clearly prohibit same-sex sexual acts. Some of the most popular religious discourses and interpretations, as well as the religious public, openly deny

and ostracize gay men and lesbians as sinful people. This otherizing, robust antigay position is visible at least for the Sunni majority, while for the Alevi minority of Islam the attitude toward homosexuality is rather vague but supposedly more democratic and flexible. As Islam is not singular and unified at almost any subject, it has also multiple perspectives and principles about homosexuality. Despite the lack of elaborate discussions about religion and homosexuality as in the case of Christianity, homosexual citizens in Turkey have to deal with religion in their everyday lives and, to a certain extent, they have to find a satisfying answer to the inescapable question of whether they had faith (Bereket and Adam, 2008). Mostly, gay men and lesbians reconstruct themselves as entirely outside of the religious domain, believing in God but disconnecting from religious practices and developing a tacit silence, while some of them unmistakably reject religious and belief systems (Hocaoglu, 2002; Özbay and Soydan, 2003).

Another critical factor that shapes the current homosexual *mise-en-scène* in Turkey is class, which is not entirely independent from the social organization of religion in Turkish society. As it signifies a modern, global, refined, European, elite person whose cultural capital is sufficiently high, the term gay has a certain middle and upper class connotation in the Turkish vernacular. In other words, being gay in the Turkish context is not only about erotic subjectivity and sexual acts, but always a matter of social class (Armbrecht, 2001; Hocaoglu, 2002; Özbay, 2010). According to this classed understanding of sexuality, a person's erotic and intimate escapades cannot mark or stabilize the person's sexual identity; defining oneself as gay (or lesbian), sharing intimacy with self-identified homosexuals, or being a part of queer social environments are not enough alone to become gay. One needs to have a certain set of class criteria to achieve the proper, inherently modern gay identity. The most recurrent of these class signifiers are having or sharing an apartment in one of the decent middle-class areas of the city, being a college graduate or student, speaking foreign languages, adopting a secular lifestyle, following global cultural flows and fashions, traveling abroad, embodying and performing a specific style that is imbued with consumerism, self-care, and masculinity (at least for men). Being gay in this very setting is translated into becoming gay through utilizing cultural capital and mastering symbolic codes and then buoyantly sustaining it.

What happens when one has same-sex sexual affinities but for class reasons cannot follow the right codes of the middle upper-class gay notion? If he is more masculine and has a straight-acting aura then he is tagged as 'varos.' Varos in popular Turkish means both the destitute neighborhoods of informal housing and the poor, working class people who live in these areas. The word varos has obviously negative overtones and it is generally used in a derogatory sense. However, in the Turkish gay slang, varos is transformed into a word that signifies poverty and the lack of middle-class values, while it also highlights robust virility and an authentic, uncontaminated masculinity (Özbay, 2010). In this sense, the Turkish case bears a resemblance to the contexts in other countries in which the power of working-class masculinity defines or rejects sexual identities, labels, and communities (Aggleton, 1999; Barrett and Pollack, 2005; Parker, 1999). If the person who lacks the higher class qualities is more

feminine, embodying an effeminate style, then this person is more easily deemed as a 'lubunya.' Lubunya is a term that was borrowed from transgender culture and it simply means sissy or unmanly (Berghan, 2007). Lubunya people are easier to match with the famous transgender singers' behavior by the public, and in some contexts they can be seen as candidates for future transvestism and transsexuality. Class for homosexuals in Turkey is deeply intertwined with desires that govern one's bodily presentations, gendered acts, and the ways of interpretation, which effect how they are related to other people.

Another significant aspect of contemporary homosexuality is the state institutions' intervention into the domain of morality, righteousness, and value through policy implementation at different levels. The most important aspect of this state intervention takes place in the compulsory military service (Biricik, 2009; Tarhan, 2008). According to law, all male Turkish citizens have to spend a certain amount of time in the army, serving for military purposes in the barracks. Only citizens with a pre-defined, extraordinary medical condition can avoid the service. Among the medical conditions that disqualify one from the service, in a very outdated psychological terminology, homosexuality is framed as an 'advanced psychosexual disorder' and thus people who are able to prove that they have this particular condition can waive the military service. After experiencing the awkward and torturous examinations held by the military officials, self-claimed homosexuals are entitled to receive a medical document called 'the rotten report,' which marks them as officially recognized homosexuals and tacitly excludes them from public life (Biricik, 2009). People, both gays and heterosexuals, believe that a person with the rotten report cannot work in state institutions, including public schools, and when they apply to jobs elsewhere their homosexuality will be known by the employers because of the circulation of the document between state and nonstate organizations. In other words, gay men in Turkey must find their way between two difficult strategies: perform the long compulsory military service as a closeted gay who travails to pass as straight, or get the rotten report, which has the potential to destroy their coming out strategies and their control over their personal and professional lives.

Despite the fact that the state, especially through the army, acknowledges the existence of homosexual citizens and labels them whenever it can, law does not recognize them otherwise and does not guarantee any sort of social rights that heterosexual citizens virtually have including but not limited to marriage, civil union contracts, and partnership benefits such as retirement, heritage, insurance, social security, and access to the corpse in case of death. No Turkish law specifically forbids discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation or sexuality in social institutions, government offices, or corporations. In fact, Turkey encourages discrimination through the distinct Ministry for Family and Social Policies (previously The State Ministry for Women), which reiterates the priority to protect families instead of individuals who opt for staying out of families; precludes alternative definitions of the family with a focus on definitions based on the conventional, traditional heterosexual family; and proselytizes reproductive policies. The previous head of the Ministry, Mrs Kavaf, even stated in 2010 that homosexuality was a disease that needed to be cured. Although she lost her chair

right afterward, this iteration is believed by many to reflect the official state attitude toward citizens with same-sex sexual inclinations. Supporting this assumption of state negativity, HIV/AIDS is still largely seen as a homosexual illness and the nongovernmental organizations that aim to prevent infection and to help HIV-positive people maintaining their lives are not supported by the state most probably because the sufferers as well as the charities about this illness are labeled as gay.

Issues, Visibilities, and Absences

Today, sexual minorities in urban Turkey are in great diversity consisting of gay men, lesbians, bisexuals, varos and lubunya individuals, transgenders, bears, and queers, who are mostly from the younger generations and defend the fluidity not fixity of sexual identities in the original sense of the term in English (Cakirlar and Delice, 2012; Özbay, 2010; Özyegin, 2012; Savci, 2011). In addition to the matters that emerge at the intersection of sexuality, Islam, social class, military policy, and the state, homosexuals have other issues to deal with in the course of everyday life. Among these issues are the fierce or symbolic violence they face; the continuing (although decreasing) confusion between gay and transgender identities; murders of both gays and transgenders; the homophobic approach that popular press and even politicians do not hesitate to use out of blue; the limited availability and despicably low physical standards of queer spaces; the huge secrecy, concealment, and insecurity in their lives; the rigid top-bottom sexual duality in terms of physical penetration; the scarce academic and scholarly research about queer lives and sexualities; and the intense marginalization and exclusion experienced by those intellectuals who think or write about sexualities. Some of these issues are evidently common in multiple international cultures, while some are strictly local and unique to the Turkish context and history.

Despite these limits, the emergence and the rise of same-sex sexual or queer activism also deserved to be indicated. Lambda and Kaos, in Istanbul and Ankara, respectively, have been active since early 1990s and they have improved a lot in terms of visibility and respectability. Queer college students at different campuses started to come together in the 2000s and they are still the most powerful group regarding the mobilization of young people against homophobia and heteronormativity. Turkey is a conservative and religious country and its politicians, whether from left or right wings, have traditionally stayed away from any sort of sexuality issues, starting with homosexual politics. Nevertheless, in the last couple of years, observers began to see a minor shift, especially in the two leftist political parties, the secular-modernist Republican People's Party (CHP) and the Kurdish Peace and Democracy Party (BDP). One BDP parliament member stated in the commission for rewriting the constitution that the less particular expressions such as everybody is equal in front of law should instead be more explicit and specifically declare that lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, and transgender individuals' situation need to be clearly mentioned in the new constitution. A group of CHP parliamentary members, among them former academicians, held a press conference with families of gay and transgender

people and advocated for equal rights to sexual minorities. Another CHP congress member visited the gay and transgender section in a prison and talked to them about their demands. These are small but symbolically remarkable actions, exceptional and meaningful steps in the long process of having equal sexual citizenship and a democratic sense of identification and representation.

Recently, there has been a boom in queer artistic production and representation. Major novelists, among them Perihan Magden (2006, 2012), Duygu Asena (2006), and Elif Shafak (2007), as well as more independent literary figures, such as Niyazi Zorlu (2003) and Mehmet Murat Somer (2008, 2009), published thriving books while the queer filmmaker Kutlug Ataman's movie *Two Girls* (2007), which was adapted from Magden's novel, was noted as the first modern lesbian film that became mainstreamed in the Turkish popular culture. The respected director and university professor Can Candan produced a documentary about parents of queer children, *My Child* (2013), which became a national sensation and discussed widely in heterosexual public as well as among queer circles.

In terms of queer visibility, the greatest event that happens in Turkey is the Gay Pride celebrations that have taken place each June on the Istiklal Street in the Beyoglu district of Istanbul since 2001. Thousands of people, queer and straight, men and women and transgender, young and old, in all their diversity, gather and parade in attires that are quite counternormative for the standard Turkish taste, and act out, kiss each other, and dance together, which in other settings across the city in a manner that would typically create physically abusive, homophobic reaction. Onlookers can easily detect the carnivalesque collective spirit that inspires many otherwise closeted gays and lesbians, tired from oppression and concealment, protesting the heterosexist social values by their conspicuous presence in the heart of the city. The police, while normally harsh toward the protesters of any sort, do not attack the participants of the Pride, let the queer citizens walk, and maintain security through surveillance from distance.

At the end of the carnival, the burdensome conditions for queer people in Turkey recommence. There are serious taboos about same-sex sexualities in many spheres of social life. Sports, for example, especially football is one of them. The first and only out-of-closet gay football referee is not appointed to games any more by the national federation regardless of the support by many fans' associations. The theological circles, legislation, and the bureaucratic elites are rather passive and silent if not entirely against having queer members. Higher education is also dubious and not necessarily inclusionary – if not explicitly discriminating existing or prospective queer scholars. There is no out queer politician at either local or national level in Turkey. Except for a couple of elder actors and writers, there is no single esteemed, well-achieved, inspiring queer role model in the country.

Conclusion

The governing logic of the conservative, pious, neoliberal, corporate collective consciousness in Turkey avoids, forbids, condemns, marginalizes, and blacklists queer people and same-sex sexual acts. Although disempowered by much of culture and the state, these people strive to survive, make peace with the idea

of whom they are, congregate, socialize, and attempt to change the hostile social order in a bold and electrifying manner. Dynamics of globalization and transnational flows of ideas and expressions brought certain novelties, not only in Turkey but also in the Middle East as a whole, in terms of sexualities and intimacies (Özbay, 2012). It is difficult to say whether 50 years ago same-sex sexualities were freer in Turkey or nowadays they are more oppressed because it is almost impossible to fully grasp the clandestine nature of queer acts in the past. However, it is most certain that today one talks, thinks, and knows more about sexualities and in this discursive frame same-sex sexualities and queer identities occupy a great place. The Turkish case presents a twisted example simply because globalizing, more flexible, liberating currents are juxtaposed here with a more conservative, authoritarian, subjugating undertow. Thus, it is not entirely possible to exactly foresee which direction Turkish same-sex sexualities will take in the future, but it is obvious from the recent developments that the symbolic, social, and political struggle of queers against homophobia in Turkey has been ignited.

See also: Clinical Psychology, Psychiatry and Homosexuality; Gay and Lesbian Movements; Gay and Lesbian Tourism; Heterosexism and Homophobia; Islam: Middle East; Mass Media, Representations In; Sexual Minorities and Sexual Citizenship; Sexual Orientation: Historical and Social Construction; Social Protest.

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