

Gender in Turkey's Islamic-Oriented Self-Help Literature: Constructing Self-Regulating Female Subjectivity

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Contemporary Turkey witnesses various ways in which the neoliberal understandings of subjectivity interpenetrate surging neoconservative discourses on gender. This study looks into the constructions of gender difference and female subjectivity in Turkey's Islamic-oriented self-help literature, which has gained remarkable popularity in the past 2 decades. Relying on a discourse analysis of 5 books published in Turkish between 2010 and 2018, the study suggests that this literature combines references to Islamic sources, globally circulating concepts of Western secular self-help culture, and New Age spirituality. In doing that, Islamic-oriented self-help literature articulates neoconservative discourses on gender difference and female subjectivity with neoliberal conceptions of self-monitoring individuals. Gender difference is posited as a natural, God-given disposition (*fitrat*) that individuals need to find within their "core, authentic selves" to attain individual happiness. Accordingly, "healthy" female subjectivity is only possible within the contours of family and motherhood, and women are advised to monitor themselves to make sure they act according to their *fitrat*.

Keywords: self-help culture, neoconservatism, politics of gender, gender difference, Turkey

In one of his many TV appearances, Uğur Koşar, the bestselling author of Islamic-oriented self-help literature in Turkey as well as a self-declared "spiritual therapist," was the guest of a popular daytime show on Turkish Show TV in 2013 (Ergen, 2013). The format of the show included phone calls coming from women who were targeted as the primary audience. Among many calls by people seeking Koşar's advice on issues such as how to reach God's mercy or how to pursue inner peace, one call from a woman on the verge of a crucial life decision stole the show. After 21 years of marriage, the woman had found out about her husband's betrayal. Apparently, the husband not only showed no sign of regret, but he also downplayed his wife's frustration and sorrow, defending his affair as common and acceptable male behavior. The woman, who explained how her life as a stay-at-home mother of two was shattered into pieces, was apparently seeking advice before deciding whether to go back to her marriage or to the court for a divorce. Koşar's response was twofold: Claiming that "divorce" is the favorite word of Satan, he advised the woman to go back to her husband and leave all the rest up to God. If she showed total submission to God's will with a positive and solution-oriented intention to save her marriage, God would take care of the problem, and she would not need to think any further. However, he also suggested that she should question her own

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responsibility in the husband's behavior: Where did she go wrong? Did she suffocate him with too much affection? Or maybe she neglected his needs? One woman from the audience in the studio reacted: Why is it always women's responsibility to forgive and forget? Because, Koşar responded, women, as mothers, are naturally predisposed to solve problems and find the right path for the sake of their children. This is why, he said, Islam declares heaven to be "at the feet of mothers."

Uğur Koşar has written more than 20 self-help books, many of which have topped best-seller lists, were reprinted hundreds of times, and sold well beyond a million copies, making the author the recipient of record amounts of royalty income ("Allah De Ötesini Bırak," 2015). Yet he is only one author among many in Turkey's surging market of Islamic-oriented self-help literature that has flourished particularly in the past two decades. Today, Islamic-oriented self-help books occupy their own sections in bookstores. It is reported that even though Turkey's publishing industry shrank in 2018, the publication of religion-based books, including Islamic-oriented self-help books, increased by 5.21% in comparison to the previous year and constituted more than 10% of published books (Turkish Publishers' Association, 2018).

The introductory vignette contains many clues on the construction of ideal femininity and gender difference in Turkey's Islamic-oriented self-help literature. The tension inherent in Uğur Koşar's response on the TV show is remarkable: On the one hand, he burdens women with the responsibility to constantly reflect on their own behavior, investigate ways to make themselves more pleasant, forgive and keep their husbands content in an attempt to preserve marriages, and find "the right path for the sake of their children" in their role as perfect mothers. On the other hand, he advises women to trust in and submit to the transcendent power of God and not to think any further. This "responsibility-submission" tension is not unique to Islamic-oriented self-help; it is also central to New Age spirituality, which explains personal success with reference to higher powers, but blames failures on unfulfilled personal responsibility for self-management and self-development (Redden, 2011, p. 656). However, this instance highlights the gendered dimension of this tension, as women are designated as the agents responsible for keeping the institution of the heterosexual family intact.

Islamic-oriented self-help literature is a fertile field to scrutinize circulating cultural discourses on gendered Muslim subjectivities articulated with a neoliberal language of self-management, individual choices, and responsibilities in Turkey. I use the concept of "Islamic-oriented self-help" to underline the genre's difference from both secular self-help and Islamic advice literature. Even though it shares commonalities with both of these, what characterizes Islamic-oriented self-help literature is its simultaneous articulation of religious and psychological discourses along with its validation of individualism and individual choices by giving them a religious rationale. In doing that, this literature bases its advice on mixed references, including not only Islamic sources and Sufi philosophy but also secular psychological expertise and New Age spirituality. The market for this genre of self-help literature has burgeoned in Turkey in the midst of the increasing visibility and circulation of religious cultural formations in mainstream popular culture (Bölükbaşı, 2016).

Turkey has witnessed a surge in the dominance of entangled neoliberal and neoconservative rationalities, particularly in the past two decades. I understand neoliberalism as more than a set of economic policies; it is a rationality that operates in political, cultural, and social spheres (Brown, 2006) and manifests in the idealization of self-managing, self-developing, entrepreneurial subjects in global self-help culture.

Yet, as several scholars have noted (Freeman, 2007; Kipnis, 2007; Ong, 2007), it is important to investigate how neoliberal rationality interacts with contextual cultural forms and processes, rather than taking it as a teleological process that marks predetermined outcomes regardless of contextual specifics. Kipnis (2007) underlines the significance of tracing the contradictions of neoliberalism in particular contexts instead of using it as a global systemic discourse. Along similar lines, Ong (2007) argues that neoliberal logic should be conceptualized as "a migratory technology of governing that interacts with situated sets of elements and circumstances" (p. 5). Such interactions do not work flawlessly, as the strategies to cultivate responsible, self-improving individuals "rub up against the claims of race, religion and caste" (Ong, 2007, p. 6), marking many tensions and contradictions alongside intersections and overlaps.

Turkey is a case in point, for the entanglement of neoliberal and neoconservative rationalities marks a process imbued with tensions and contradictions. Neoconservative rationality refers to the cultivation of disciplinary power that aims to reinvent and design the social and cultural fabric (Altunok 2016), particularly manifesting itself in the regulation of women's bodies, sexuality, and in the "denunciation of claims for different lifestyles" (Kandiyoti, 2016, p. 107). Gender politics is a key component within the interaction of Turkey's neoliberal and neoconservative rationalities. Whereas the neoliberal rationality is based on the state's withdrawal from social services and the designation of individuals as entrepreneurs responsible for their own self-care, "the 'neo-conservative rationality' reaffirms the state's existence in the political order by assigning it a moral mission, circumscribed by discourses of nationalism, patriotism, religiosity, culture and tradition" (Acar & Altunok, 2013, p. 15). As the state withdraws from social welfare provision, the heterosexual family is designated both as the "locus of government intervention" (Kandiyoti, 2016, p. 107) and a self-managing institution responsible for filling the void left by the state (Acar & Altunok, 2013, p. 5). Women find themselves in the eye of the storm as they are designated as natural caregivers and protectors of family based on religious claims of "essential" gender difference formulated in the concept of *fitrat* (i.e., natural, God-given disposition).

In line with Ong's suggestion to look into neoliberal encounters between the global and the local in non-Western contexts (Ong, 2007), this study aims to understand the entanglements, intersections, and contradictions of neoliberal and neoconservative rationalities in Turkey's Islamic-oriented self-help literature. How does this literature articulate the idealized self-managing, self-developing individual, which is central to global self-help culture, with a discourse that normalizes gendered power inequalities and an Islamic understanding of naturalized, essentialized gender difference? What are the ways in which ideal femininity is imagined and constructed in this literature? How does this literature distribute neoliberal responsibility along lines of essentialized gender difference?

The study approaches Turkey's Islamic-oriented self-help literature from two vantage points: first, as a part of global self-help culture and an example of its domestication in a particular national context, and second, as a fertile field to discuss contemporary Turkey's neoconservative gender politics. I employ a discourse analysis of five Islamic-oriented self-help books published in Turkish between 2010 and 2018, in an effort to show the ways in which different systems of meaning are brought together and the various tensions that emerge from these articulations. Three main themes arise in the analysis: first, Islamic-oriented self-help literature interlaces religion, psychology, and spirituality. Islam is formulated as one, albeit the most potent, way among others to reach one's core self and attain individual happiness. Second,

gender difference is essentialized and sacralized. The third theme relates to the uneven allocation of responsibility along the lines of this essentialized gender difference. The analysis reveals that the construction of gender difference is based on contravening positions. Whereas the concept of *fitrat* is used to normalize gender difference and gendered power relations, it is also posited as something that individuals, particularly women, should seek and find within their "core selves." Accordingly, rather than being an already given and naturally experienced phenomenon, *fitrat* should be performed and managed as a social responsibility to protect the institution of family and as an individual responsibility essential to women's personal journeys to happiness.

By looking into the notably understudied area of Islamic-oriented self-help literature in Turkey, the study has two main contributions. First, it demonstrates the ways in which contemporary Turkey's neoconservative gender discourses circulate in a popular culture medium. Second, it delineates some of the ways in which concepts and notions of global self-help culture translate into a non-Western context.

Self-Help: From Secular to Spiritual

Self-help culture and literature have flourished within the context of late modernity, which endows individuals with the responsibility to bring meaning, order, and coherence to their lives in the face of a diminishing hold of traditional institutions (Roof, 2003) and neoliberal insecurities (Jamil, 2019). Self-help literature locates "the individual self" at the center, promoting the idea that the individual needs to develop a "healthier" relationship with one's self by discovering an "authentic, core self" posited as a separate, autonomous entity (Hazleden, 2003; Rimke 2000). Prescriptions are given to develop mastery over emotions and thoughts that allow one to design "positive thinking" skills (Hazleden, 2003; McGee, 2005; Woodstock, 2006). Self-help literature draws boundaries between healthy and unhealthy relations with the self, relying on the advice of "psy experts" (Riley, Evans, Anderson, & Robson, 2019, p. 7) who usually establish their authority based on narratives of their own personal transformation (Woodstock, 2006).

Much of the scholarly debate on the surge of self-help culture in Western societies focuses on how the preoccupation with the self relates to the social, cultural, and economic mentalities of the neoliberal era. Illouz (2008) outlines the dominant critique of self-help culture in two threads. The "communitarian critique" (Illouz, 2008, p. 2) draws attention to the atomic individualism that self-help culture encourages, which harms social relations by endorsing a narcissistic conception of the self (Lasch, 1979) that ignores social inequalities and retreats from politics. The Foucauldian critique, on the other hand, argues that the "technologies of the self" endorsed by self-help culture show a redefinition of governance rather than a negation of the political sphere (Rose, 1996). Accordingly, the most popular concepts of self-help culture, such as individual autonomy, choice, and freedom, are actually about the production of a disciplined, self-governing individual (Hazleden, 2003, p. 425) who "must be skilled in his or her own subjection" (Rimke, 2000, p. 63). The gendered analysis of Western self-help culture further delineates how women are particularly "disciplined" by the responsibility to adhere to the constructions of an ideal femininity. They are advised to be more individualist, self-centered, and detached in their relationships (Hazleden, 2003) and more competitive and aggressive in the workplace (Riley et al., 2019). Moreover, the female body in particular becomes a site of improvement and regulation. These constraints highlight the disciplining nature

of neoliberalism, which "excludes others as certain bodies become more privileged and others excluded and pathologized" (Ghabra, 2015, p. 8).¹

Yet the technologies of the self in self-help culture bears a fundamental contradiction: While aiming for positive thinking and finding the authentic, autonomous self, there is the inherent requirement of constant work on the self, fostering a "belabored self" (McGee 2005, 16). In that sense, self-help texts paradoxically advise on how to control anxiety while cultivating anxiety at the same time, as the individual is posited as the autonomous agent solely responsible for his or her well-being by making the right choices in life (Türken, Nafstad, Blakar, & Roen, 2016).

These contradictions suffered by the "belabored self" are partially alleviated by the incorporation of fluid, deinstitutionalized forms of religiosity with psychology, merging into "a hybrid concept of spirituality" (Woodstock, 2005, p. 173). Spiritual self-help, which flourished in the 1980s and became a surging trend within Western self-help literature (Woodstock, 2005), is distinguished from secular self-help in that it foregrounds belief in a higher power and partially relieves the individuals from the responsibility of the choices they make by "providing a sacred rationale for elective practical action" (Redden, 2011, p. 656). This does not mean that religion comes back in its traditionally institutionalized forms, but rather it is reinvented as a part of the individual quest for meaning, happiness, and the authentic self (Roof, 2003). Therefore, spiritual self-help blurs boundaries between the sacred and the profane by privatizing religion (Carrette & King, 2005), resulting in "sacralization of the self and the psychologization of religion" (Kenney, 2015, p. 675).

To understand the incorporation of religion into self-help culture in Muslim majority contexts, it is necessary to look into the new Islamic subjectivities promoted by media, pop psychology, and self-help culture, which flourish within "spaces of compatibility" (Atia, 2012, p. 811) between neoliberal and Islamic values. Kenney (2015) contends that self-help literature in Egypt reconfigures and functionalizes Islam in service of finding the authentic self to the effect of sacralizing subjective lifestyle choices and expressing a neoliberal understanding of a disembedded subject vis-à-vis the traditional emphasis on family and community. Rudnyckyj (2009) defends a more nuanced way to understand the relation between Islamic and neoliberal forms of culture. He suggests that the Islam-neoliberalism conjunction should be conceptualized as an "assemblage"² of simultaneous processes instead of a "homogenizing thrust" of neoliberalism over Islam or vice versa (Rudnyckyj, 2009, p. 107). His research demonstrates the ways in which the spiritual reform movement implemented in Indonesia's companies reformulates work as a religious duty, while at the same time spirituality is objectified "as a site of management and intervention" (Rudnyckyj, 2009, p. 105). Along similar lines, Hoesterey's (2012) research on Islamic pop psychology in Indonesia uncovers Muslim self-help gurus' evocation of the Prophet Muhammad's life and teachings to address the civic concerns and consumerist desires of Muslim middle classes in ways that are "both informed by, and offered

¹ Elsewhere, Ghabra (2018) also suggests a definition of White femininity as "the ability to extend and circulate the reach of Whiteness and White patriarchy" (p. 9) and argues that "Muslim femininity" is captivated in archetypes that define it by its relation to White femininity. Hence, she defines positions of "privileged" and "excluded" with reference to White and Muslim femininities.

² Rudnyckyj echoes Collier and Ong's (2005) definition of assemblage as "the product of multiple determinations that are not reducible to a single logic" (p. 12).

as alternative to, global discourses about psychology and self" (p. 38). These studies suggest that the Islamic vision elicited at the conjunctions of Islam and neoliberalism may sometimes work in commensurable ways with "secular-liberal logics of neoliberalism" (Hoesterey, 2017, p. 1) but should not be conceptualized merely as the function of an overarching neoliberalism.

Islamic-Oriented Self-Help Literature and Gender in Turkey

Whereas Western self-help literature has been scrutinized and criticized for its conception of ideal femininity as detached, autonomous, and more competitive, adequate scholarly attention has not been given to how notions of ideal femininity and gender figure in subject formation in Islamic self-help culture.³ Turkey is a fertile context for the discussion of the assemblages of neoliberal mentality with the neoconservative promotion of an idealized heterosexual family embedded in gendered hierarchies (Akyüz, Sayan-Cengiz, Çırakman, & Cindoğlu, 2019; Cindoğlu & Ünal, 2016) and the conception of ideal femininity that these hierarchies are built on. Yet, when it comes to how neoconservative discourses are integrated with concepts of self-help and popular psychology, there is a void in scholarship, despite the remarkable surge of self-help culture manifest in the popularity of Islamic-oriented self-help books in the past two decades. This study aims to fill this void by analyzing the configuration of gender relations, gender difference and idealized notions of femininity in Turkey's Islamic-oriented self-help literature.

The development of self-help literature in Turkey has its roots in the period following the 1980 coup d'état, a period defined by a turn to neoliberal economic policies, rising consumerism, and the depoliticization of society. The social transformations of the post-1980 era included the rising influence of Islam at not only political and social but also cultural levels in the 1990s, which manifested itself particularly in the emerging public visibility and influence of Islamic lifestyles, consumption patterns, and Islamic media.

The 1980s and 1990s witnessed the publication of self-help books predominantly by experts of psychology and psychiatry⁴ giving secular advice on themes such as how to cope with stress in the midst of socioeconomic transformations, how to excel at communication, especially in work life, and how to become successful, entrepreneurial subjects in a changing labor market (Özdemir, 2010). Yet the real surge in self-help literature's popularity came in the aftermath of the economic crisis of 2001 (Özdemir, 2010), which left masses of people unemployed. In the meantime, the Justice and Development Party's (JDP) rise to power in 2002 accelerated the process of bringing Islamic cultural formations into the mainstream of popular culture, which provided the ground within which Islamic-oriented self-help literature flourished.

One of the defining aspects of JDP's incumbency is the neoliberal restructuring of the state, during which "conservative norms and values, religious sensitivities and the neoliberal market rationality have been blended in the same pot" (Cindoğlu & Ünal, 2016, p. 5). JDP's gender politics has been one of the key

³ In an exceptional study, Jamil (2019) focuses on popular Islamic self-help classes in Singapore and provides insight into how young Muslim minority women seek refuge in Islamic piety amid neoliberal insecurities. Accordingly, Islamic piety is formulated as a source of strength, self-love, divine love, and heteronormative romance for women, who are advised to marry to cultivate submission to God's will.

⁴ The pioneering authors of this period are Doğan Cüceloğlu and Özcan Köknel.

components of this blend, and it has been marked by a neoconservative agenda with a particular focus on the protection of the heterosexual family, and the reinforcement of traditional gender roles. This agenda emphasizes the "strengthening" and the responsibility of the family in the face of the neoliberal withdrawal of the state from social responsibility (Acar & Altunok, 2013; Güneş-Ayata & Doğangün, 2017; Kandiyoti, 2016; Yazıcı, 2012; Yılmaz, 2015). Therefore, JDP's gender politics includes the encouragement of marriage, discouragement of divorce, a stricter regulation of women's bodies and sexualities (Cindoğlu & Ünal, 2016), and a defining of female subjectivity as inseparable from the family and notion of motherhood (Altunok, 2016). The reinforcement of traditional gender roles is grounded on claims of "natural differences" between men and women, which is conceptualized as "gender justice" as opposed to "gender equality" (Koyuncu & Özman, 2019; Özcan, 2018). "Gender justice" refers to an Islamic-based understanding of natural differences and mutual complementary relations between men and women (Koyuncu & Özman, 2019, p. 735). The concept was put into circulation by progovernment women's rights organizations, such as KADEM, which is supported by the JDP government (Akyüz & Sayan-Cengiz, 2016).

Even though Turkey's contemporary gender politics is extensively discussed in terms of policies and circulating political discourses, there has been much less scholarly discussion on the reflection and reproduction of the main pillars of this gender politics in popular culture. Looking into Turkey's Islamic-oriented self-help literature through a gender lens provides us with insight into the articulation of a discourse relying on "natural gender difference" with a neoliberal understanding of responsibility and self-management.

Methodology

This study relies on a discourse analysis of five Islamic-oriented self-help books by three authors: *Kendini Bilen Rabb'ini Bilir (That Who Knows Oneself Knows God)* and *Allah de Ötesini Bırak (Say Allah and Let Go of the Rest)* by Uğur Koşar, *Son Sığınak Aile (Family the Last Shelter)* and *Mesnevi Terapi (Rumi Therapy)* by Nevzat Tarhan, and *Mutluluk Atölyesi (The Happiness Workshop)* by Nevin Nesrin Soysal, all published between 2010 and 2018. I approach these books from a feminist critical perspective and focus in particular on the gender ideology endorsed by Islamic-oriented self-help literature. Feminist critique aims to uncover the relations of dominance and inequality underlying hegemonic gender ideologies in particular discursive settings, which are normalized and do not "appear as dominance at all, but as consensual and acceptable to most in a community" (Lazar, 2014, p. 186). Discourse analysis is a useful method in the effort to demystify the obstructed relations of power and inequality, as such obstructions are circulated through discursive means. In its construction of gender difference and ideal femininity, Islamic-oriented self-help literature mystifies the power relations underlying the gender ideology it reproduces and circulates. Discourse analysis helps uncover the gendered inequalities portrayed as normal and consensual in this literature. Moreover, considering that the self is constituted in relation to discourse (Willig, 2008), discourse analysis helps us understand how the ideal Muslim female subject is constituted within the broader discourses on the Islamic subject and the "ideal self" in self-help culture. It provides insight into how contending discourses are brought together and reconciled in the analyzed texts, remaining sensitive to the

domestication⁵ trajectories of neoliberal discourses on the self. The study employs discourse analysis to draw attention to not only utterances but also to silences (Huckin, 2002) to deconstruct the tensions that underlie the construction of the gendered Muslim subject.

In selecting the books, the popularity and social influence of the authors have been taken into account to give a reflection of popular Islamic-oriented self-help discourses. The second motivation for the sample selection relates to the diversity in authors' backgrounds and the ways in which they constitute themselves as authorities. Nevzat Tarhan is a professor of psychiatry and the president of a private university in Istanbul. He mainly constitutes his authority on his medical expertise and takes the liberty to assert unsubstantiated arguments without addressing any contravening ideas or research findings. He is well-known not only through his popular books but also by his frequent presence on popular media shows. In making his medical expertise intelligible to wider audiences, he resorts to the widespread popularity of Sufism and teachings of Mevlana Celaleddin Rumi. The popularization of Sufism and Rumi in Turkey bears parallels to the spiritual turn in Western self-help culture and is very much relevant to the popularization of Islamic-oriented self-help literature in Turkey. It has been argued that Sufism, as an aspect of religious tradition that has broader global appeal, is rediscovered and reshaped to align and articulate with global cultural currents (Bölükbaşı, 2016, p. 160). Tarhan relies on simplified accounts of Sufi teachings in suturing Islamic religiosity with a narrative of "individual journeys" to the "core self."

Uğur Koşar, the best-selling Islamic-oriented self-help author in Turkey, has no formal education in psychology, psychiatry, or theology. Nevertheless, based on the popularity of his books, he offers individual therapy sessions in which he claims to help depressed people who cannot find salvation in psychotherapy. He bases his authority not only on a narrative of self-transformation and spiritual enlightenment but also on a distinction he draws between "experts and masters" (Koşar, 2013, p. 46). Implying that this distinction corresponds to a distinction between Western expertise and Eastern wisdom, as well as between knowledge and intuition, he identifies himself as a "master" endowed with intuition (Koşar, 2013, pp. 46–50). In doing that, Koşar posits his rhetoric on an anti-Western basis and claims to provide the antidote to the normal/abnormal distinctions drawn by psychological experts, whom he bashes for labelling depressed people as abnormal and sick (Koşar, 2013, p. 7). Instead, he claims to guide readers to a state of profound contemplation (*tefekür*) and total submission to God (*tevekkül*).

Nevin Nesrin Soysal, the third author under focus, majored in business management and formerly worked as a professional in finance. Even though she has no academic degrees in theology, education, or psychology, she identifies herself as a teacher of Quran, a reiki grand master teacher, regression therapist, family constellation therapist, self-development therapist, and "master of various energy systems" (Soysal, 2018, pp. 6–7). She offers counseling in all of these areas, with a particular focus on family relations, education of women on child development, and religious education of children. She has contributed to projects supported by Turkey's Ministry of Family and Social Policy and Ministry of Culture under the JDP

⁵ Domestication is understood "as a complex process of articulation in which heterogeneous elements from different systems of meaning with diverse trajectories are sutured together and made intelligible" (Tiaynen-Qadir & Salmeniemmi, 2017, p. 383).

government. She bases her authority on her claim of expertise in the several areas mentioned above and selectively combines various aspects of this wide range of therapeutic methods with religious sources.

Self-Regulating, Pious Subjects

Notwithstanding the differences among the authors, the analysis of the books uncovers two interrelated common aspects that interlace religion, spirituality, and psychology. First, all texts give references to a disparate range of sources, including not only Qur'anic verses, hadith, and stories derived from Sufi tradition but also neuroscientific research, clinical psychology research, Buddhism and Taoism, world-famous authors of spirituality such as Osho, and secular self-help advice literature. For example, in the cover of Soysal's (2018) book *The Happiness Workshop*, the subtitle reads: "Journey to happiness in the light of Quran, *sunna* (Prophet Mohammed's words and deeds), scientific data, spiritual and esoteric knowledge." She gives references to the Qur'an, Rumi, Goethe, Lao Tzu, and Maya Angelou all in the same breath (Soysal, 2018, pp. 100–101). Similarly, Kenney's (2015) study on self-help literature in Egypt finds such a "pastiche of wisdom" (p. 671), arguing that Egypt's self-help literature relativizes and equalizes the authority of religion with other sources of authority. However, rather than equalizing religious authority, Turkey's self-help authors posit Western trends in positive psychology and self-help advice as reinvented forms of Islamic and Sufi wisdom. Tarhan, who incorporates references to neuroscientific research and positive psychology with stories derived from Rumi's *Mesnevi* throughout the book *Rumi Therapy*, states this argument as follows: "When we look into the main tenets of positive psychology, we find that it offers a methodology based on reinvention and systematization of Rumi" (Tarhan, 2012, p. 52).

The second common thread is the personalization of religious discourse, manifested in the formulation of religion as a way to attain individual happiness. To that end, particularly the expression of gratitude to God and the control of *nafs*—that is, control of bodily and material desires—are foregrounded as formulas for finding worldly happiness without being dependent on others. Religious rituals and traditions are reformulated as prescriptive formulas to find the "core self" and individual happiness independent of others, which is also the core focus of secular self-help culture (Hazleden, 2003). For example, Soysal, whose book's subtitle reads "Happiness is worship!" offers a "work program" to systematize the expression of gratitude, which she argues to be the first rule of individual happiness and productivity at work, based on U.S.-based happiness research. The program includes a mixed list of both secular and religious performances, such as affirmations expressing gratitude and submission to God, specific gratitude prayers rooted in *sunna* that should be repeated at certain times of the day, as well as "gratitude journaling," a method recommended by researchers of clinical psychology (Emmons & Stern, 2013). Uğur Koşar advises *tefekür* and praying to God as a way to control excessive thinking and anxiety. Koşar's books include strongly worded advice to constantly remain in control of the "tricks of the mind," demands and desires of the ego. Accordingly, to find the "core self," one has to silence the mind and get rid of the ego,⁶ which also means reaching a state where one fully submits to God's will and finds true peace. Nevzat Tarhan's *Rumi Therapy* promises to give "Rumi prescriptions for the quest of modern-day individuals," claiming that the

⁶ Koşar does not elaborate on the ways to silence the mind, but rather relies on aphorisms and slogan-like sentences to make his point. For a discussion of Koşar's narrative strategies that obstruct and mystify meaning, see Baydar (2016).

stories in Rumi's *Mesnevi* offer "personal coaching" that will help individuals suffering depression (Tarhan, 2012, p. 232).

Gendering the Self-Regulating, Pious Subject

The common threads running through Islamic-oriented self-help texts show us the ways in which the conception of the self-managing subject is reconciled with the pious subject. This literature takes the "individual" as its core point of focus, echoing self-help culture that prioritizes the individual journey to reach one's authentic self. The individual journey is constituted as a journey to both independent, genuine happiness and pure devotion to God. However, while suturing religion, spirituality, and psychology, all three authors under focus are also persistently arguing that Islamic religious practices and tradition have always already shown the way to individual happiness, far before Western trends of pop psychology and self-help culture realized the significance of spirituality to compensate for the discontents of modern life. The "authentic self" in Islamic-oriented self-help literature is constructed as a combination of the ability to control and manage the self in mundane affairs, and full compliance to the divine power. This construction stands on an intentional disregard of the structures of power that encroach on the "individual journeys" and a deliberate ignorance of different subjectivities shaped in relation to inequalities, such as those based on class and ethnicity. However, Islamic-oriented self-help literature addresses gender difference extensively. While doing that, it does not only passively overlook but rather actively obstructs the gendered hierarchies and power relations that result from the allocation of different areas to the male and the female based on the discourse of essential, God-given, immutable differences. Understanding the ways in which gender difference is constituted in Islamic self-help literature, with an emphasis on the construction of ideal femininity, gives insight into the uneven distribution of responsibilities along gender lines in the construction of self-managing pious Muslim subjects.

"If God Wanted Us to Be the Same, There Would Only Be One Sex."
(Soysal, 2018, p. 177)

The construction of gendered Muslim subjectivities in the analyzed texts relies on two main, interrelated pillars: essentialization of gender difference through the concept of *fitrat* (i.e., natural, God-given disposition) and a gendered allocation of duties and responsibilities. The discourse of essential, natural gender difference, which is central to Turkey's gender politics under the JDP rule, is also central to Islamic-oriented self-help literature in its attitude of naturalizing gendered power relations. This literature goes beyond an argumentation emanating from tradition and Islamic sources and articulates these with globally circulating notions rooted in psychological and spiritual self-help discourses.

Uğur Koşar, for example, refers to both hadith and traditional expressions such as "women are flowers," "women are angels on earth," (Koşar, 2016, p. 60) advising men to be gentle to women as God created these delicate-natured humans to be looked after by men.⁷ He then adds a "mindfulness" edge to his approach, defining men as more "mental" and rational, hence prone to falling prey to the "tricks of the

⁷ In those parts of his books where Koşar addresses gender issue, it becomes clear that he imagines his audience as male and mentions women as the objects of a masculine conversation.

mind" and the lures of the ego, whereas he attributes to women the intrinsic ability to fully experience, sense, and appreciate the present moment and flow with it (Koşar, 2013, p. 61). Women are more mindful, thus closer to their core self and to God's mercy, similar to children, who are blessed with deep intuition, he declares. Therefore, ideal femininity is defined by fragility, and effortless submission to the divine power. Through this intertwined use of traditionally normalized conceptions of women as fragile, and "mindfulness" rhetoric widely circulating in global self-help culture,⁸ he both objectifies and infantilizes women while also romanticizing and idealizing the feminine subjectivity. Moreover, the "mindfulness" rhetoric is sacralized by giving it a religious rationale. Another couple of globally circulating self-help concepts employed in tandem with traditional and religious sources to justify the discourse of essential gender difference are "masculine and feminine energies" and "karma," extensively used by Nevin Nesrin Soysal. The author locates gender difference as "equal but different and complementary" and grounds it as God given by referring to the relevant verses of the Qur'an. She goes on to elaborate on "feminine and masculine energies" to further justify an essential, dichotomous gender difference. Accordingly, feminine energy is defined by tolerance, empathy, understanding, forgiveness, submission, trust, affection, and obedience, whereas masculine energy predisposes men to be determined, protective (of women and children), commanding and controlling. Both energies, she asserts, are found in different degrees in every individual. Yet she draws boundaries between "healthy" and "unhealthy," "balanced" and "imbalanced" configurations of these energies: "If a woman's masculine energy is too high, she will be extremely controlling in life and relationships. . . . She cannot express her feelings. She cannot enjoy life" (Soysal, 2018, p. 173). On the other hand,

A man's masculine energy should be higher than his feminine energy, a man should have the power and determination to say the last word. Every woman wants a loving, sensitive man. But no woman will be happy with a man who cannot take action, make decisions and manage his family because of his sensibilities.⁹ (Soysal, 2018, p. 175)

While distinguishing these energies, Soysal also develops a nuanced approach to their configuration by giving detailed delineations of "family karma." Accordingly, the relationship among one's parents, one's relation with her own parents, and ancestral inheritances all play a role in different configurations of masculine and feminine energies. Hence, a "healthy" configuration of one's masculine and feminine energies requires constant reflection and analysis of family relations.

Interestingly enough, Soysal is torn between arguing, on the one hand, that God created men and women with natural predispositions based on gender, and contending, on the other hand, that it takes individual responsibility and arduous self-development effort to reach a "healthy" balance between masculine and feminine energies. In other words, she formulates gender difference both as essential and natural, but also as constructed and contingent. She resolves this profound contradiction by formulating *fitrat* as a hidden "gem" that needs to be actively sought, rather similar to the "core, authentic self," the

⁸ For a classical example of self-help literature advice on mindfulness and living in the present moment, see *The Power of Now* (Tolle, 1997).

⁹ All of the analyzed books are published in Turkish; hence, all the quotations taken from the books are translated by the author.

discovery of which is the main responsibility attributed to individuals in global self-help culture (Hazleden, 2003). She expresses this resolution clearly:

We may think that we know how to be men and women by birth. Maybe one or two hundred years ago it would be easier and less complex to know who we are, but in today's information pollution, we need to be in constant effort to find out our characteristics that come from creation, and reach our *fitrat*. (Soysal, 2018, p. 176)

Protecting and Managing Fitrat

In her analysis of neoconservative gender discourses and policies in contemporary Turkey, Deniz Kandiyoti (2016) explains that neoconservative familism, a key pillar of Turkey's politics of gender, depends on the reconstruction of an imagined, idealized family and women's domesticity (Kandiyoti, 2016, p. 107). Islamic-oriented self-help literature echoes the ideals of neoconservative familism in imagining the traditional heterosexual marriage as a romantic nest of cooperative, complementary, affectionate relations, and addressing women first and foremost as mothers and domestic caregivers.

Whereas the complementarity of essentialized masculine and the feminine attributes is underlined in the analyzed texts, gendered power relations are nevertheless implicitly reinforced through the uneven allocation of responsibilities and duties along gender lines. The authors attribute the responsibility of protecting the institution of marriage to women, arguing that marriage is to the best advantage of women. Nevzat Tarhan justifies this argument based on the use of sweeping concepts, such as "psychosocial needs," "psychological nature," and "genetic dispositions" without clearly defining them. Accordingly, transformation in gender roles is framed as social decay, loss of *fitrat*, and a source of individual unhappiness, especially for women whose "psychosocial needs" are overlooked. Modernity and feminism, defined as essentially Western phenomena, are frequently blamed:

Feminist approach overlooked women's psychological needs and paved the way to the emotional neglect of women. Women need to be loved and protected, that is their psychological nature. At the same time, women need strong, loving, protective men. Unfortunately, while the West pushed women to be like men, female sexual identity was harmed. Women's liberation was the objective. . . . While this objective was achieved, women's emotional needs were ignored. . . . The psychological nature of humans dictates that women should live like women, and men should live like men. (Tarhan, 2010, p. 19)

Tarhan further contends that the feminist movement turned romantic relations into a war of egos, which distorted the complementary "genetic dispositions" of men and women. He also blames the surge in divorce rates on Western modernity and feminism, which, he contends, "foreground egoism" and encourage the pursuit of "selfish desires" (Tarhan, 2010, p. 127). This crude criticism of feminism and women's rights movements, with an overemphasis of their being solely Western phenomena, functions in two ways. First, divorce, which is defined as a symptom of "social erosion" and degeneration, is situated as "alien" to society in Turkey and its idealized family structure. Moreover, by putting the spotlight on the "harmful effects" of feminism and women's rights discourse on women's "psychological nature," Tarhan endows women with the responsibility

to protect their *fitrat* from being distorted by such "alien" currents. The implication is that once *fitrat* is restored, women will be naturally inclined to devote themselves to the roles of wife, mother and caregiver.

Besides the domestic realm being designated as women's area of responsibility and domestic work as the natural inclination of women's *fitrat*, women are also made responsible for maintaining their marriages by encouraging men to act according to their naturalized masculine roles. Soysal advises women to intentionally limit themselves and refrain from being "perfect" to leave room for men to accomplish some victories:

If a woman does too much in a marriage and makes her husband's life too easy, that will not be good. A woman who manages all, who solves all problems, who takes all the responsibilities, who shows constant effort, distorts her man's *fitrat*. . . . Perfect women, who take on their husbands' responsibilities and accomplish what their husbands cannot, are destined for unhappiness because they steal men's victories. Women betrayed and dumped by their husbands are these perfect women. (Soysal, 2018, p. 179)

Soysal, similar to Tarhan, labels divorce as a moral failure, which is caused by alien forces that distort *fitrat*. To save themselves from being betrayed and abandoned by their husbands, women are advised not just to protect their *fitrat* from "Western-based" distortions by avoiding the urge to be accomplished but also to keep men's *fitrat* intact so that they will not be alienated from their "masculine" responsibilities toward their families.

The authors' effort to locate divorce as a Western-induced moral failure and to suggest the pursuit and protection of *fitrat* as an antidote speaks volumes about the location of moral failure "outside the religious experience proper" (Kloos & Beekers, 2018, p. 2). Schielke (2009) suggests that while studying Islamic ethical subjectivity, "rather than searching for moments of perfection, we have to look at the conflicts, ambiguities, double standards, fractures, and shifts as the constitutive moments of the practice of norms" (pp. 37–38). While trying to cover up the everyday reality of crumbling marriages, the self-help authors under focus give us a snapshot of the contradictions of gendered norms endorsed by Islamic-oriented self-help literature: Women are encouraged to be responsible and self-managing, but their responsibility is to submit themselves to traditional gendered power relations and push themselves (and the men around them) to accept the restrictions placed on them by the traditional gender roles in marriage. Therefore, gender difference is constructed as a combination of responsibility and submission. Finding, managing, protecting, maintaining, and believing in *fitrat* are all posited as responsibilities that especially befall women. Women are encouraged to fulfill these responsibilities both for "society's sake" and for their own individual happiness.

Conclusion

Examining Islamic-oriented self-help culture is important to understanding how Islamic textual discourses and traditions are engaged with the dominant discourses in global self-help culture. These engagements should not be conceptualized in wholesale terms, such as the cooptation of Islamic subject formation processes by neoliberal discourses, or vice versa. They rather surface as a narrative of Muslim

subjectivity that is both focused on the self but also voluntarily embedded in traditional structures, invested in the search for individual happiness, but also seeks that happiness only in traditional institutions. This narrative is imbued with contradictions and covers up power relations and inequalities. The gendered aspects of this narrative, I argue, are at the center of its profound contradictions.

The Islamic-oriented self-help books analyzed in this article foreground women's happiness at the center of their happiness advice. Soysal (2018) even argues that "happiness is the realm of women. . . . When women are happy, men, children and society are also happy" (pp. 158–159) However, the soft self-help language centered around women's happiness suddenly takes an authoritative tone, almost commanding women to "be happy" and reminding the cost of refusing to walk the road to happiness "created by God":

Men are supposed to serve, women are supposed to obey. This is not a matter of superiority, but a matter of division of labor. These are the roles that befall women and men within the structure that God created. Refusing this role . . . is not only futile, but also harmful to the individuals, the family, even all humanity. . . . What happens if we do not abide? We cannot be happy in marriage. Also, we prevent the happiness of our children. (Soysal, 2018, pp. 177–178)

Soysal demonstrates that whereas Islamic-oriented self-help partially constructs a more flexible interpretation of Islamic precepts by putting "individual happiness" at its center, it nevertheless stigmatizes and marginalizes those who choose different paths and lifestyles. It is reminiscent of Schielke's (2009) warning that in discussing the popular reformist Islamic discourses, one should be careful "not to over-state the possibilities" (p. 32).

This article provided a gendered reading of Turkey's Islamic-oriented self-help literature by locating this literature within the context of neoliberal and neoconservative gender politics in Turkey and the conceptual contours of global self-help culture. Neoconservative gender politics emphasize the regulation of female subjectivity to make sure that women remain in their domestic roles as devoted wives and mothers. Naturalizing gender difference and gendered power relations is central to this project.

Islamic-oriented self-help literature argues that gender difference, idealized in the concept of *fitrat*, is essential and natural, but *fitrat* is also posited as something hidden in one's core self, hence not found naturally; it is a responsibility to find it and perform it. Women are advised to manage themselves and find their "natural femininity" in their search for happiness, but their happiness is not to be found as independent individuals. Accordingly, they should manage themselves in such a way as to become ideal wives and mothers; hence, the possibility of the "happy woman" exclusively lies within the framework of family and motherhood. In other words, Islamic-oriented self-help literature advises women to not only accept but also actively protect gendered power relations to live in accordance with their "natural" dispositions and attain individual happiness. In doing that, these popular books encourage women to become the self-regulating subjects of a neoconservative order. The critique of self-help culture suggests that this literature produces self-regulating individuals who "must be skilled in his or her own subjection" (Rimke, 2000, p. 63). The female readers of Islamic self-help literature are provided with the skills to their own subjection through

promises of happiness and protection within the contours of family, which is idealized and romanticized as an institution of love and affection.

Scholarship on Turkey's gender politics has produced extensive and impressive work on the ways in which female subjectivity has been regulated via social and economic policies and political discourses during the JDP rule. The findings of this study suggest that more research is needed to delineate the constructions of gender in popular self-help culture to understand how policies and political discourses are communicated to the public to the effect of encouraging and popularizing self-regulating female subjectivities skilled in their own subjection.

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