

WOMAN PHASE OF NARRATIVE / HİKAYENİN KADIN HALİ

by

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Approval of the Institute of Social Sciences

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## ABSTRACT

### WOMAN PHASE OF NARRATIVE

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M.F.A., Visual Arts & Visual Communication Design

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Women's sexuality, still a taboo subject in Turkey, is often associated with immorality, shame and embarrassment. Such taboo manifests itself in every aspect of social life from advertising and soccer culture to honor killings and virginity tests. Everyday language remains phallogocentric defining sexuality as an act of violence and domination where women are represented as the passive victims. Such predominant representations, including the "virgin" versus "whore" dichotomy, alienates women from their own bodies ("disembodies" them) and disempowers them not only in sexual relations, but in all aspects of life. A web site design where women can be informed and can share their own narratives with the others and thus, constitute a common conscious and a book design in which some of the narratives from the web site are planned to be published are the core of this project which started in purpose of designing a visual language for a research project aiming to draw an atlas of women's sexuality in Turkey. A critical point of view against the cognition of women' sexuality in society and representations of women in women in society is aimed with the images and the visual language used in designs.

Key words: embodiment, sexuality, woman, narrative, representation

## ÖZ

### HİKAYENİN KADIN HALİ

Ceren Erdem

Görsel Sanatlar ve Görsel İletişim Tasarımı Yüksek Lisans Programı

Tez Yöneticisi: Murat Germen

Temmuz 2004, viii+ 29 sayfa

Türkiye’de hala bir tabu olan kadın cinselliği; genellikle ahlaksızlık, utanç ve mahcubiyetle ilişkilendirilmektedir. Bu tabu, reklamlardan futbol maçlarına, töre cinayetlerinden bekaret testlerine sosyal yaşamın her alanında kendini açıkça ortaya koymaktadır. Erkek merkezli günlük dil, cinselliği de kadınların pasif kurbanlar olduğu bir şiddet ve egemenlik eylemi olarak tanımlamaktadır. “Bakire” karşıtı olarak “fahişe” kavramını içeren bu egemen temsiller, kadınları kendi bedenlerine yabancılaştırıp (bedensiz kılıp), onları sadece cinsel ilişkilerinde değil aynı zamanda hayatın her alanında da güçsüz kılmaktadır. Türkiye’deki kadınlarla yapılan görüşmeler sonucu bir kadın cinsellik atlası oluşturmayı amaçlayan projeye görsel kimlik oluşturmak üzere başlatılan bu projenin ana kısmını kadınları bir araya getirip onları bilgilendirirken aynı zamanda kendi hikayelerini paylaşıp ortak bir bilinç oluşturabilecekleri bir web sitesi ve içinde bu hikayelerin bir kısmının yer almasının planlandığı bir kitap tasarımı oluşturmaktadır. Tasarımlarda kullanılan görüntüler ve tasarım dili ile kadın cinselliğinin toplumda algılanışına ve toplumdaki kadın temsillerine eleştirel bir bakış getirilmesi amaçlanmıştır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: cisimlendirme, cinsellik, kadın, hikaye, temsil

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## **INTRODUCTION**

In this report on my project, I would try to give explanations to the main items I designed to constitute the concept, their functions and the metaphors I used to visualize the concept of the project.

Hikayenin Kadın Hali<sup>1</sup> started as the visual identity for a cultural research done by Cultural Studies Program at Sabancı University. The aim of the research was to draw an atlas of women's sexuality in different parts of Turkey. A qualitative research on women's experiences and narratives of sexuality in different parts of Turkey was conducted with the aim of making such narratives public in written, oral and performative form. After cooperating for a semester, I did my research individually and designed a conceptual visual identity parallel to both my research and the ideas I inspired from the research of the Cultural Studies Program.

## **DESIGN APPROACH**

### **Conceptualization of the project**

Why women's sexuality? Women's sexuality, still a taboo subject in Turkey, is often associated with immorality, shame and embarrassment. Such taboo manifests itself in every aspect of social life from advertising and soccer culture to honor killings and virginity tests. Everyday language remains phallogocentric defining sexuality as an act of violence and domination where women are represented as the passive victims. Such predominant representations, including the "virgin" versus "whore" dichotomy, alienates women from their own bodies ("disembodies" them) and disempowers them not only in sexual relations, but in all

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<sup>1</sup> The project takes its name from a radio program on Açık Radyo, which was on air on 2003-2004, edited and presented by Ayşe Gül Altınay.

aspects of life. Hence, two key words that best define the purpose of this project are: embodiment and empowerment.

A web site design where women can be informed and can share their own narratives with the others and thus, constitute a common conscious and a book design in which some of the narratives from the web site are planned to be published are the core of this project. A critical point of view against the cognition of women' sexuality in society and representations of women in women in society is aimed with the images and the visual language used in designs. Details of some households or different closed parts from house are photographed and used in image processing. They have metaphoric meanings reflecting the inner world of women, mostly trapped in their houses (Figure1-2-3). In general, my intention is to reveal the general definitions and decisions of others (men) serving their interests rather than women's, with the belief that these perspectives effect not only the social roles of women but also their sexuality.

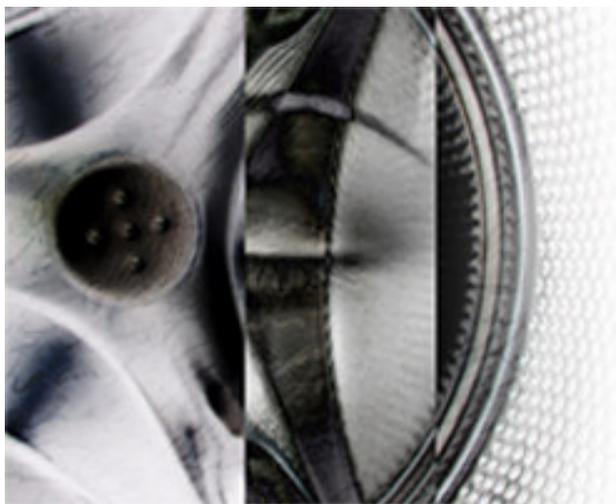


Figure1

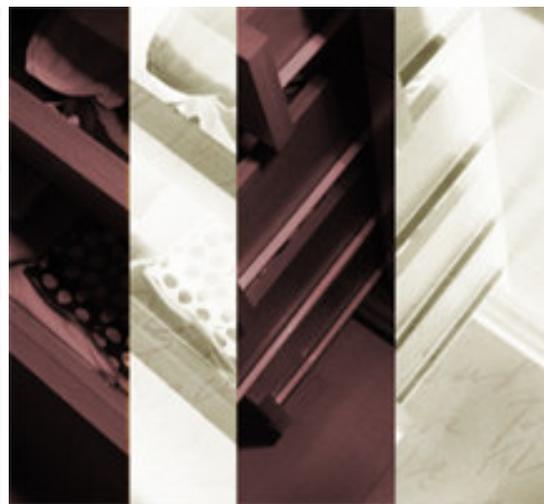


Figure2



Figure3

#### **a. Representations of women in society**

It may just seem to be ‘common sense’ that women should have babies and cook, that women cannot be company directors or bricklayers, that they should wish to totter around on high heels to make themselves attractive to men. This appears to be the natural order of things. So it just happens, ‘naturally’, that men are spared the drudgery of domestic chores, can have most of the best jobs and can expect women to want to please and service them.

The apparent naturalness of this social arrangement is evidence of the success of patriarchal ideology. ‘Overdetermined’ nature of women’s oppression in society is obvious: the way in which their subordinate position in a multiplicity of structures, institutions and value systems interacted with each other to lock women into an overall subordination. Among these structures are those concerned with producing representations of women: from school reading schemes to films, from advertising to TV shows, women are depicted in ways that define what it means to be a women in this society: what women are like (naturally), what they ought to be

like, what they are capable of, and incapable of, what roles they play in society, and how they differ from men.

If these definitions do not fairly and accurately represent the real lives of women, and the reality of their potential as human beings; if women are being defined, for example, as wives and mothers to the exclusion of their work outside home; if they are being judged by their sexual attractiveness to the exclusion of their moral and intellectual qualities; if they are being defined as inferior to men; then they are not receiving fair representation in society. It may be argued, for instance, that it is in men's interests, as a group, for women to be confined to the domestic sphere; not only does it reduce competition in the work place and ensure a servicing for men at home that facilitates their work and leisure activities, it renders women dependent on men, identifies women with the 'natural' world of the family and excludes them from those fields such as science, politics, wealth- creation and the arts which are seen as characterizing the achievements of humanity. Images of women cooing over babies and floor cleaners are not therefore necessarily just limiting stereotypes; they may be interpreted as encouraging a division of labor that favors men and disadvantages women, while defining humanity as essentially male.<sup>2</sup>

Women may themselves be seduced into accepting such images, both because patriarchal ideology has achieved a general hegemony, and because, however much they work against women's interests in the long term, in the short term they may offer what benefits are available to women in a patriarchal society. If, for example, single motherhood can mean poverty and exhaustion, women may reasonably decide that marriage is the preferable option; so much so that they will desire marriage before contemplating the alternatives. And if definitions of femininity and heterosexuality demand that women wear make-up and high heels in order to be

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<sup>2</sup> Duncan, 127-131.

attractive to men, then not only might women wear them for this purpose, but they may well come to feel more confident, more beautiful, wearing them. If, in this way, women come to be subordinated – even in their definitions of themselves and their desires – to the needs of patriarchy, it may be argued that this is because definitions of femininity appear to offer solutions to their material problems. ‘Be pretty – get a man – escape poverty’ is a crude reduction of what is a very complex process; but what is certain is that representation has an important part to play in it, and needs to be taken very seriously by anyone wishing to analyze, and change, women’s subordination to men.<sup>3</sup>

The internalization of patriarchal values by women is also a reason why it is not necessarily a satisfactory answer for women simply to take control of the means of cultural production. It is obvious that if women are underrepresented in professions which produce and reproduce definitions of gender and gender relations, then they are not in position to speak for themselves and in their own interests.

#### **b. On sexuality**

Essentially, sexuality can be conceptualized as ‘just doing what comes naturally’. This basic view limits sexuality as a drive satisfied through sexual intercourse, ‘normally’ and ‘naturally’ with opposite sex. The heterosexual assumption of this essentialist conceptualization comes from the idea of considering sex as a reproductive function. Society, in so far as it is seen as having an effect, modifies the expression of sexuality through repressing or controlling drives or urges that are pre-given and pre-social. Sexuality is a ‘natural phenomenon’; universal and unchanging, something that is part of the biological make up of each individual.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Marshment, 130.

<sup>4</sup> Richardson, 155.

Opposing this is the argument that sexuality is socially constructed. Apart from being just biological urges, our sexual identities are the product of social and historical forces. Different aspects of the social life such as the culture we live in, laws, ethics, religious teachings, social policies, psychiatry, medical definitions and popular culture play a role in shaping our sexuality. More over we learn not just the patterns of behavior, but also the erotic meanings associated with those behaviors in any given social and cultural context.

On the other hand, biological influences on sexuality cannot be omitted. Yet, different from the essentialist approach, the capacities of the body gain their power to shape human sexual behavior through the meanings given them in historical, cultural and interpersonal contexts. Therefore, the body, physiologically, does not determine or differentiate the acts and their meanings, but the meanings they gain socially open the way of determination. The ‘discovery’ of the G-spot in 1950s and its popularization is a proper example of this matter. The fact that it is a highly sensitive part of a woman’s body does not, by itself, lead us to seek for it. The G-spot is physiologically the same as it was before it was ‘discovered’, but it has a different social significance. By giving sexual meaning to a particular bodily region or function we produce sexuality; we construct desire.<sup>5</sup>

Physically identical sexual acts may have varying social significance and subjective meaning depending on how they are defined and understood in different cultures and historical periods.

Anthropological studies have demonstrated that there is enormous cultural variation in what is defined as ‘sex’; why people have sex; how often they have sex; whom they have sex with; and where they have sex. Historical studies of sexuality have also provided support for this perspective.

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 156.

Most feminist analyses of sexuality centralize the view that sexuality is socially constructed. This political conceptualization brings the question that if sexuality is socially constructed, can it be reconstructed in new and different ways.

The most radical form of social construction theory suggests that there is no 'natural' sexual drive as it is said to be. Sexual drive is not a biological urge, so it can be neither expressed nor repressed, but it is something that is historically and culturally constructed. In John Gagnon and William Simon's early work on 'sexual scripts', they argued that "...not only do we learn what 'sex' means, and who or what is sexually arousing to us, but we also learn to want sex. Whilst they acknowledged that biologically the body has a repertoire of gratifications, which includes the capacity to have an orgasm, Gagnon and Simon claimed that this does not mean that we will automatically want to engage in them. Certain gratifications will be selected as 'sexual' through the learning of 'sexual scripts'. A particular experience, say kissing, would not be repeatedly sought after in the absence of any meaningful script. It is the giving of social meaning to bodily functions and activities, pursing our lips and moving them about, which creates the motivation to repeat the experience. From this perspective, socialization is not about learning to control an inborn sexual desire so that it is expressed in socially acceptable ways, but the learning of complex sexual scripts which specify the circumstances which will elicit sexual desire and make us want to do certain things with our bodies. What we call 'sexual drive' is a learnt sexual goal."<sup>6</sup>

"Unlike Sigmund Freud, who claimed the opposite was true; Gagnon and Simon's early work also suggested that sexuality is a vehicle for expressing non-sexual motives and desires, in particular, those linked to gender roles. Thus, they argued that men frequently express and gratify their 'need' to be masculine, a 'real man', through sexuality. Feminist theories of

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 157.

sexuality do not generally disagree with this: they do, however, explain it in the context of a wider understanding of structural inequality. Feminist theories of sexuality are not only concerned with describing the ways in which our sexual desires and relationships are shaped by society; they are also concerned to identify how sexuality, as it is currently constructed, relates to women's oppression. From this perspective, men behave sexually is not seen as simply the result of a certain form of upbringing, a certain kind of 'sexual script' learning to which notions of gender are central; it is also a product of gendered power differences."<sup>7</sup>

The discursive challenge to essentialist theories of sexuality, characterized by the work of Michel Foucault and his followers, does engage with questions of power. Foucault argues against the notion of biological sexual drive. He claims that by taking 'the sexual' as their object of study various discourses, in particular medicine and psychiatry have produced an artificial unity from the body and its pleasures: a compilation of bodily sensations, pleasures, feelings, experiences and actions which we call sexual desire. This fictional unity, which does not exist naturally, is then used to explain sexual behavior and sexual identity.<sup>8</sup>

Foucault also rejects the idea that this so-called essential aspect of personality has been repressed by various kinds of discourses on sexuality; for example, the law or the Church's teaching on sexuality, or medical and psychiatric accounts. It is not that sexuality has been repressed, he argues; rather it is through discourses on sexuality that sexuality is produced. In the case of women's sexuality, for example, Foucault argues that it has been controlled not by denying or ignoring its existence, through a regime of silence, but by constantly referring to it. It is discourses of sexuality which shape our sexual values and beliefs. 'Sex' is not some biological

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 158.

<sup>8</sup> Butler, 119-123.

entity which is governed by natural laws which scientists may discover, and to us as individuals, may vary from one historical period to the next.<sup>9</sup>

Foucault believes that sexuality is regulated not only through prohibition, but produced through definition and categorization, in particular through the creation of sexual categories such as ‘heterosexual’, ‘homosexual’, ‘lesbian’ and so on. He also draws attention to the fact that the history of sexuality is a history of changing forms of regulation and control over sexuality. For example, over the last hundred years there has been a shift away from moral regulation by the Church to increased regulation through medicine, education, psychiatry, psychology, social work, the law and the social policy.<sup>10</sup>

Feminists have made use of Foucauldian perspective, but it is Lacanian psychoanalysis which has had a significant influence on the development of feminist theories of sexuality. According to Lacan, sexual desire is not a natural energy which is repressed; and it is language rather than biology which is central to the construction of desire.

### **c. Women’s sexuality in Turkish culture**

In Turkey, genderized notions of sexuality are instilled in children from a very early age. It is common practice for boy children to be told to show their penises to relatives and neighbors and to be proud of this, girl children are warned that it is shameful to expose, even by mistake, a quick glimpse of their underwear while playing. Women’s negative associations with sexuality are further exacerbated by the importance given to preserving virginity until marriage and customary practices in some regions such as displaying a sheet stained with blood as proof of the bride’s virginity on “the first night” of the marriage. If a woman fails to time of the marriage, she

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<sup>9</sup> Brooks, 53.

<sup>10</sup> Butler, 120.

is likely not only to be disgraced, looked down upon, and seen as less worthy, but in some regions she may even suffer the customary practice of an “honor killing.” Men, on the other hand, are allowed, and even encouraged, to have sexual encounters prior to marriage and sexual experience is often perceived as proof of “manhood.”

“Women and sexuality” remains a strong taboo in Turkey. Most women have access to little or no information as the issue is not addressed in either the formal education system or informal systems such as the family or the community. The closest any adult education program comes to addressing the topic is in a technical manner through reproductive health education, without the social and the cultural perspectives of desire and pleasure. What little most women know about sexuality is mostly based on misinformation and social myths all of which serve to support the strict codes of conduct which severely limit women’s sexual experience.

The social and cultural constructs around sexuality need to be placed within the context of the patriarchal nature of society which is riddled with gender inequalities in both the private and the public sphere. Genderized constructs of sexuality are reflected in social myths and popular sayings such as, “Women are by nature sexually passive while men are by nature sexually active;” “A woman’s sex drive is less than a man’s;” and “A woman’s sexuality ends after menopause.” The resultant impression is that men need sexual release at all costs while for women sex is a burden to be accepted quietly, merely a responsibility of procreation, devoid of notions of pleasure. This is a social construct which is geared towards undermining women’s sexuality, eliminating, controlling, and oppressing it.

The strong codes of conduct, which define women’s sexual behavior, are used as an instrument to keep women under the control their fathers, husbands and brothers who assume responsibility for ensuring ‘their’ women retain their chastity; and if they fail to do so, it is perceived as an acceptable basis for violence against them. In general, sexual codes of conduct

serve as a mechanism for restricting women's mobility in the public sphere; and such restrictions are paralleled by the socially expected role of women which consists of marriage, child bearing, and home-making – all within the confines of the private sphere.

The modernization initiatives initiated in the Turkish Republic made public space increasingly accessible to women – although, primarily to those of the higher socio-economic classes – but codes of conduct for women's sexual behavior have continued to be used as a mechanism for “internalized” restrictions on their mobility. Women, who have moved into the public space, have been allowed to do so in return for strict self-imposed codes of conduct regarding their sexual behavior. Although advocates of modernity and of women's rights have raised the issues of women's unequal status in the family, in education, employment and politics, they have mostly avoided the question of inequalities of sexuality.

The internalization of negative social messages about their sexuality has made it difficult for many to make free and informed choices about their sexual experiences, thereby, limiting their ability to secure themselves a healthy sex life. Many women associate sexuality with a lack of control, violence, and abuse; and certainly not with pleasure.

There is a clear need to empower women to take better control of their sexual lives and to build an affirmative approach towards sexuality. Sexuality is private matter and many people have difficulty talking about it. The negative social messages that have been internalized by many Turkish women make it even harder for them to talk about sex.

We live in a society where it is commonly believed that sex is a physiological necessity for men, whereas, a woman is entitled to sexual experience only after marriage. Thus, men have the right to get to know their sexuality and make sexual explorations, but women can express their sexuality only after their future husbands appear. This age for women maybe as low as 12 in rural areas, against the young girl's wishes; it may, however, be as late as 35, depending on

when the spouse appears. The main reason for this restricted sexuality is virginity, as still being a big taboo for the society. Curiously, virginity is a matter between men, in which women merely play the role of silent intermediaries. Like honor, virginity is the manifestation of a purely male preoccupation in societies where inequality, scarcity, and the degrading subjection of some people to others deprive the community as a whole of the only true human strength: self-confidence. The concepts of honor and virginity locate the prestige of a man between the legs of a woman. It is not by subjugating nature or by conquering mountains and rivers that a man secures his status, but by controlling the movements of a woman related to him by blood or by marriage, and by forbidding them any contact with male strangers.<sup>11</sup>

“In three articles on the psychology of love<sup>12</sup>, Freud shows us the motivation and the behavior of the patriarchal unconscious. He reminds us firstly that the taboo of the virginity is buried in the most primitive recesses of human memory, and that it is a manifestation of men’s fear of women, a fear arising in the first place from her crushing superiority –only she could create life in and through blood – and in the second place from their suspicion that women, behind their veil of obedience, would be plotting their revenge. Patriarchy also sets up a total split between affection and sexuality: men take the wife they “respect” frigid, and choose for their pleasure women of the “lower order”, slaves yesterday, prostitutes today. The logical conclusion of this split is impotence which Freud identifies as a psychological phenomenon: the man who cannot perform the sexual act with a partner who is “ideal” according to his own standards, and whom he respects, and can only achieve it with a woman he buys or despises. Freud’s articles lead us into the vagaries of the pathological, the twists of the tortured and torturing love of those who are unable to mutilate themselves sufficiently to become virile

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<sup>11</sup> Cindoğlu, 216.

<sup>12</sup> Noted by Mernessi: A special type of object choice made by men. ‘The most prevalent form of degradation in erotic life’ (1912) and ‘The taboo of virginity’ (1918) translated by Joan Riviere in *Sexuality and the Psychology of Love* (Collier Brook, 1963).

according to the demands of a system which fears woman's body and expends all its efforts in damaging it, on making it ugly, on hiding its beauty and its brilliant power."<sup>13</sup>

The woman's feelings are disregarded first by her father and then by her husband; for her, there is no such thing as being sexually attracted. Even if she had had a choice, it would not be possible for her to be aware of this sexual attraction before marriage, i.e., without sexual experience. In the young girl's imagination, sexual intercourse is identified either with extraordinary pleasure or as an activity to be feared and avoided. Sexual relations with inexperienced partners inevitably end in disappointment. In the researches of Department of Psychiatry of Faculty of Medicine of Istanbul University, a common discovery is that the majority of the participants are not aware that they have a clitoris, the only human organ whose sole function is sexual pleasure.<sup>14</sup> Most of them didn't even look at their vaginas (This is not something special to Turkey, in 'The Vagina Monologues', most of the women she interviewed with had not looked at their vaginas or when they looked they thought it was very ugly<sup>15</sup>). Again, in the researches, more typically, most associate women's sexuality with reproduction, motherhood, virginity, fear, being oppressed, or a 'duty'. Men's sexuality, on the other hand, is more often directly associated with sex, pleasure, sexual desire, and the freedom to live it to the full. As a result of this immature sexuality and family idealizations, women suffer from sexual problems, such as vaginismus, lack of sexual desire, anorgasmy and dyspareunia. Most young girls, when they have been constantly warned to protect their hymens, experience difficulties in their first sexual intercourse. Sexual fears of experiencing a lot of physical pain, or that their vagina would be torn or constantly bleeding consolidates women's fears causing vaginismus. To some women, the idea of accomplishing marriage seemed almost a miracle which shows the

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<sup>13</sup> Mernissi, 206.

<sup>14</sup> Kayır, 253.

<sup>15</sup> Ensler, 45.

extent to which they were exaggerating the importance of sexual intercourse. Young people, raised under these circumstances, cannot be expected to behave in a relaxed and experienced way the moment they got married.<sup>16</sup>

The sample pages of the book are designed according to the main topics of narratives supposed to be taking place in the original version of the book. The conditions and problems discussed above constitute these topics. The design elements on the pages are visualizations of different sexual experiences and feelings of women, such as virginity tests, lack of desire, orgasm, vaginismus, unwanted marriages, strict customs of society, pain, housewives trapped in their houses only serving their husbands, medical operations, etc. As in almost the whole of the project images of women are not used in these pages, but metaphoric images revealing the main feelings of narratives are preferred: blood for virginity and honor killings; needle for virginity tests (Figure 4) and hymen operations; thorns, barbed wire and cactus for unwanted marriages (Figure 5), rape, sexual disorders and sex without pleasure.



Figure4



Figure5

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<sup>16</sup> Kayır, 252-267.

## THE WEB SITE

**Aim:** To constitute a virtual platform of women where they can share their narratives with each other, support the others and themselves. Therefore, it helps building up a conscious of embodiment and empowerment. It also serves as a source to different aspects relating women.

**Pages:** kadin hikayeleri.com is made up of six different main pages. The pages where the narratives are published and added work with membership (Figure6). The main reason for this membership system is to provide security in cyber world for women and give the feeling of getting together in their own club. This system also helps to protect the members from risks of assaults, violence or humiliation. “*hikayeler*” is where the narratives take place. Once members log in, they can view all the entries uploaded to the site. “*sizin hikayeniz*” is the part where the members of the web site can send their own narratives.

Figure6

In addition, the web site also works as a source in various topics. “*feminizm*” contains some articles giving information about feminism, what it is, its history and the feminist way of thinking. “*haklarımız*” gives link to some important web site of some nongovernmental organizations working on women’s rights and web sites including the civil law of Turkey and giving information about it. “*linkler*” is the source of many links about women’s organizations, women’s studies, health, violence on women, international foundations, art and business world. “*güncel*” works as a source of latest news.

## **CONCLUSION**

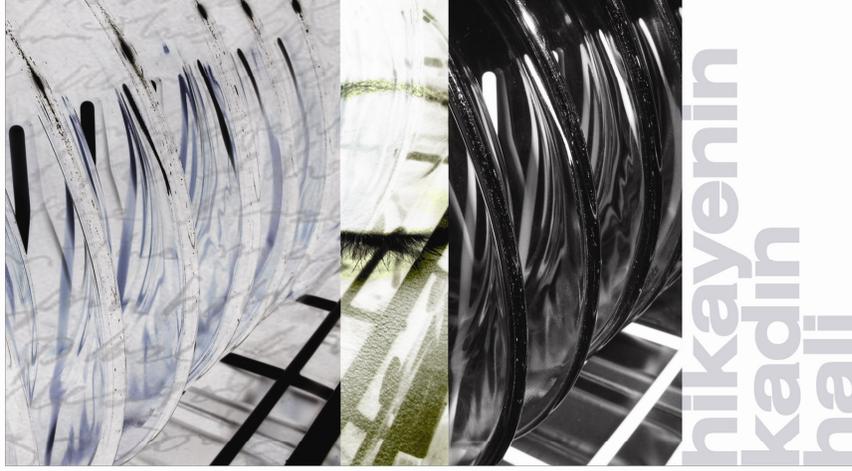
In this project I emphasized on sexuality of women from the perspective of its social construction. Turkish society is still strongly affected from the Islamic rules. This patriarchal culture, with its strict moral rules, is the main factor in shaping sexuality. Especially when women are concerned, sexuality becomes a strong taboo. Women are not taught about sexuality, their pre-marriage experiences are forbidden otherwise they become victims of violence or moral rules, calling them “whore”. This is not the over all but a big part of the construction of sexuality in Turkey. The design of the project aims to reveal these problems, using metaphoric images. The book and the web site works as a counter action towards these patriarchal, persuasive culture, disembodying women.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

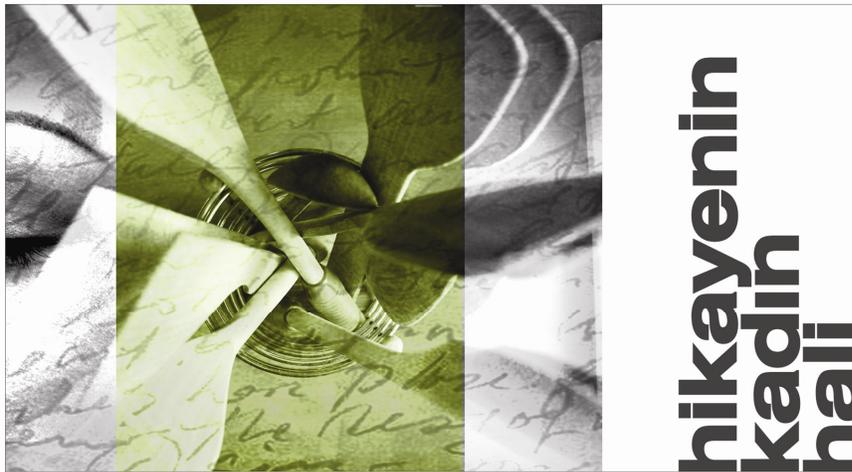
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## **APPENDICIES**

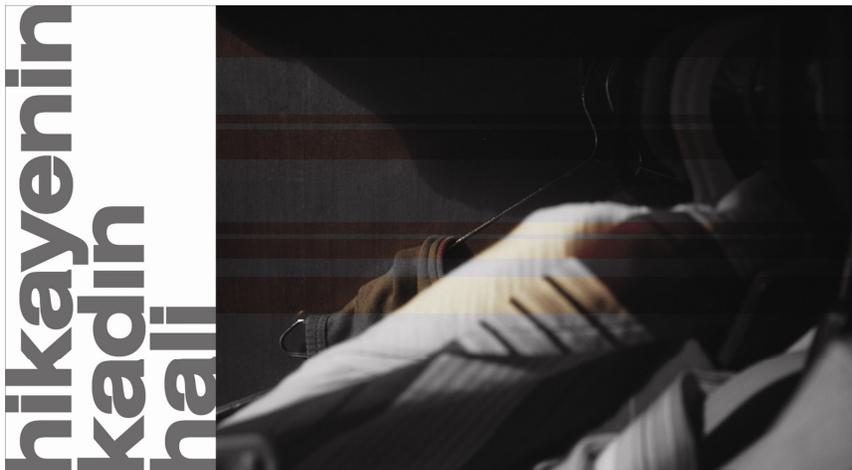
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POSTERS (original size: 50x27 cm)



POSTERS (original size: 50x27 cm)



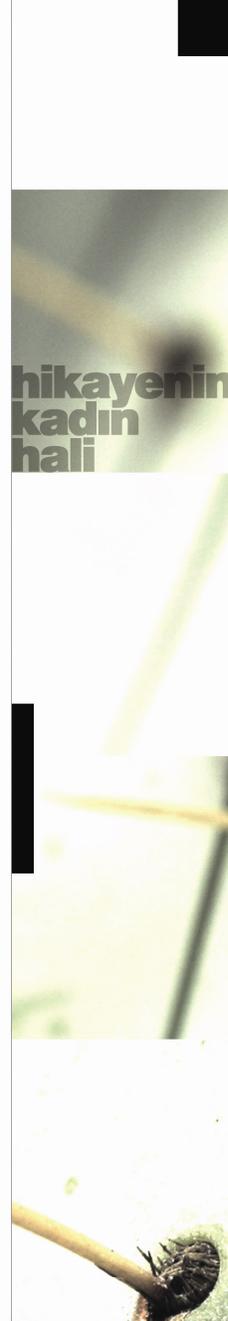
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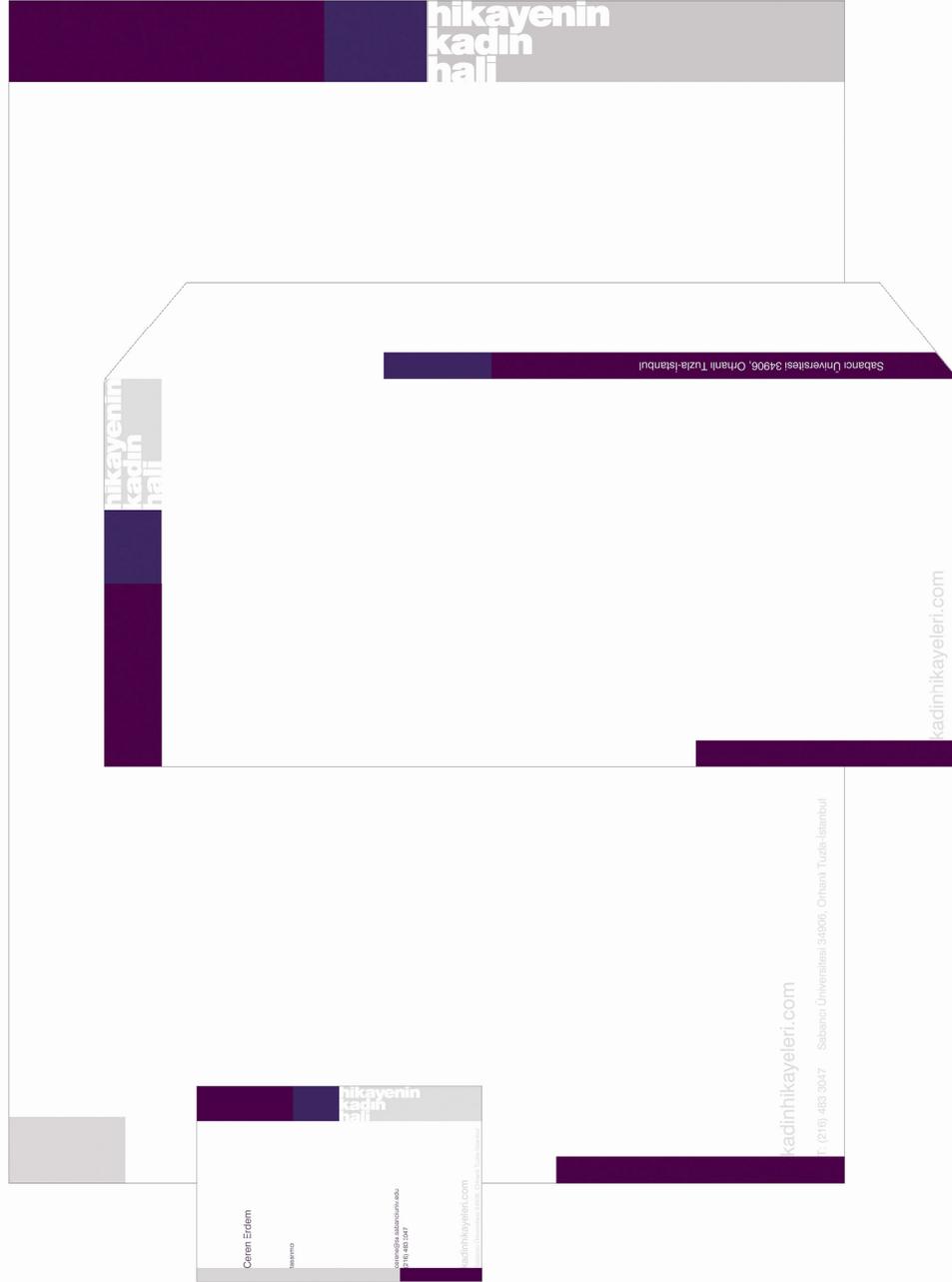




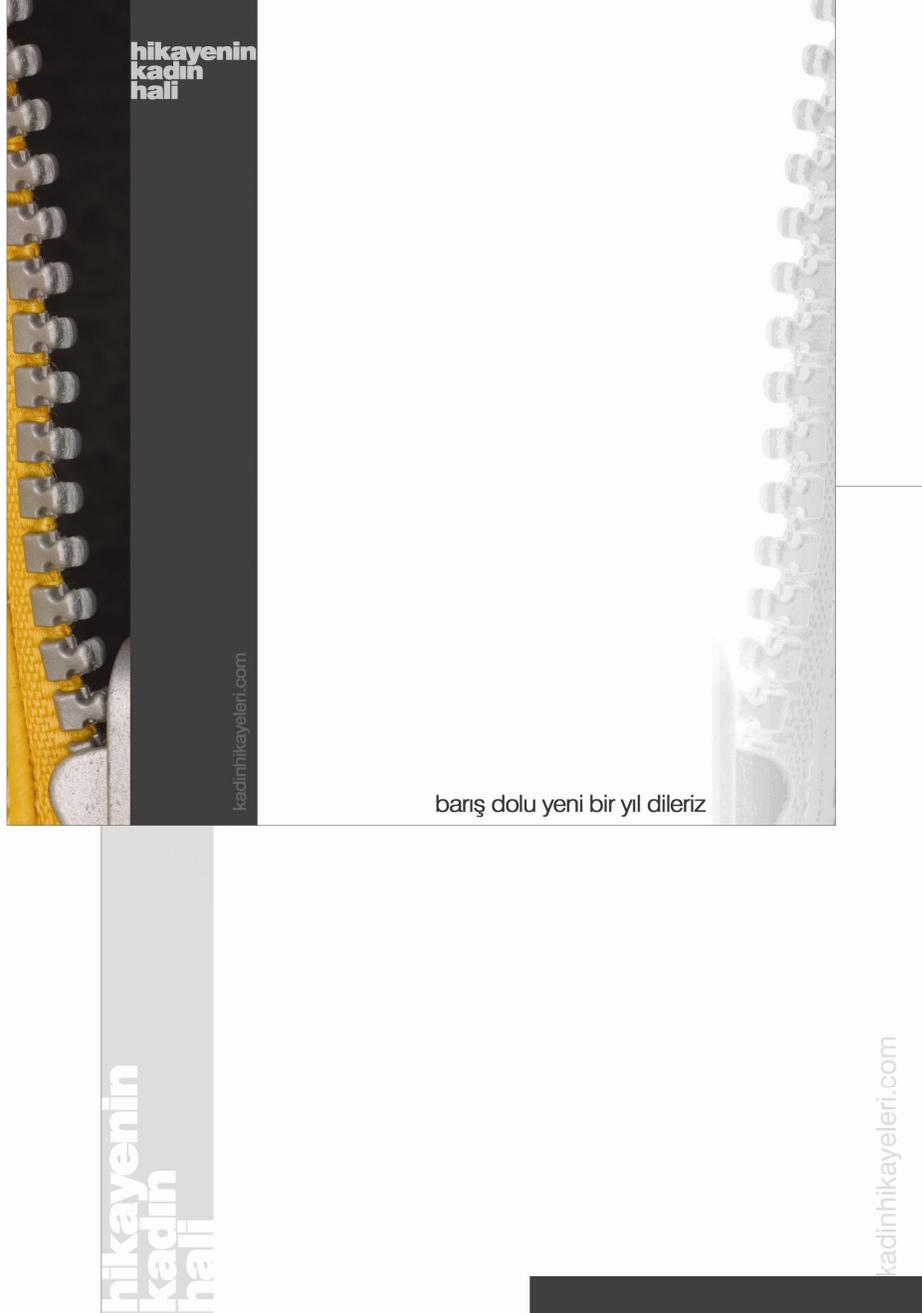
BOOK MARKS (4x24 cm)



## CORPORATE IDENTITY



GREETING CARD & ENVELOPE





## PRESENTATION CD

- To view the presentation and navigate the complete project, start with “**project.html**” file.
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