Empowered by Faith: Gender and Kuranist Muslims in Turkey

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Abstract

Kuranism is a growing Islamic understanding and movement in Turkey, which has gained visibility through the mainstream and new media, i.e., social media digital spaces. The progressive interpretations away from traditional jurisprudence and hadith argue for a direct engagement with the Kuran as complete. The Kuranist approach leaves behind the cultural and historical baggage for Muslim women by being skeptical towards hadiths and traditional jurisprudence in Sunni Islam. Developing from this discourse, this thesis explores how Kuranist discourse on social media influences followers' perceptions and practices on gender roles and the status of women in Islam. Empirical qualitative research method is used in this research, and semi-structured interviews are conducted with twelve participants, five male and seven female, who shifted their religious understanding to Kuranism. The study analysed personal narratives and religious practices to explore whether there are changes in interviewees' gender understanding due to the Kuranism transition. In this research, it is observed that one's religious and social background influences their religious viewpoint. Moreover, personal world-view influences people's negotiation and reconciliation of religion with contemporary understandings, which are highly informed by the religious fluidity shaped by globalization forces. It is also observed that the progressive theological interpretation of gender allows its followers to reinterpret modesty, femininity, and womanhood. Then, the study discusses why Kuranist women still struggle to position themselves to become religious female authorities, contrary to progressive interpretations of female leadership. Consequently, the study has a crucial implication on how religious interpretations shape people's lives, especially concepts such as gender roles, femininity, and modesty. The paper discusses how Turkish people position themselves between modernity and traditions through Kuranist interpretations, representing an example to other Muslim societies, including the Muslim diaspora in Europe, who face dual sentiment daily.

Keywords: Kuranism, gender, Islam, Turkey, women's agency, religious authority

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Introduction

Turkey's religious landscape has experienced notable transformation, especially in the last decade. The declining engagement of Turkish people with Islam (Kirdiş, 2022) has resulted in the growth of alternative religious understandings, mainly deism, Kuranism, and historicism (Bilici, 2018, pp. 44–45) or irreligiousness such as atheism and agnosticism. There are two main reasons for altering the religious landscape in Turkey. The first reason is that the conservative Justice and Development Party (JDP) has been in power for more than twenty years and instrumentalized religion for winning political votes, at the expense of censored liberal secular and political perspectives. This results in a positive association between the declining support for the current party and declining interest in religion. Historically, as a way to keep religious affairs out of politics, Diyanet, the Presidency of Religious Affairs (PRA) of Turkey, was established in 1924 by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk (Toprak, 2017).

According to the Turkish Constitution, Diyanet's duty was to manage religious duties and the worship buildings while securing the country's secular nature by being neutral in political affairs and cultivating solidarity in the state (Turkish Constitution Article 136). However, with the incumbent JDP rule, Diyanet, the presidency of Religious Affairs, became a political instrument of the party. For instance, Diyanet's mandate is to craft the weekly content of the Friday sermons (khutba). However, instead, the sermons have frequently been used for political mobilisation and convey political messages to the audience (Carol & Hofheinz, 2022; Gürpinar & Kenar, 2016; Ongur, 2020). For example, the head of the PRA delivered sermons against the Kuranist ideology and mentioned that the correct path is Islamic Orthodoxy. In particular, in the Friday sermons dated 12.02.201625, 03.11.201726, 02.02.201827, and 22.03.201928, the PRA directly targeted groups who say, "The Qur'an is enough for us." (Özşahin & Akın, p. 38).

As a result of the political connotations in Friday sermons (khutba), many practicing Muslims, as a way of defying the politicization of religion, stopped attending the mosque's sermons. Similarly, the close relationship of the Presidency of Religious

Affairs (PRA) with the Turkish party government and the increasing budget of PRA, which resulted in excessive luxury spending, made many Turkish citizens alienated, disengaged, and question the Orthodox Islam PRA representatives.

Alternatively, on the 15th of July 2016, Turkey faced a coup attempt orchestrated by the Gülen Movement, later called "FETÖ", which was one of the most prominent and most powerful religious organisations against the incumbent (Tunç, 2023). Surprisingly, the spiritual movement had strong ties with the governing party, AKP, until 2013, which had gained the trust of the regular people (Ölçekçi, 2017). However, after the failed coup attempt, more than fifteen thousand people were jailed with convict and detainee statuses (Tunç, 2023). This situation further shook the public trust in religious organisations and cults; it resulted in being more cautious about attending religious activities and distancing themselves from religious groups, thus affecting religion in general (Gür, 2024).

The second reason for the shift in the religious landscape in Turkey is the surge of internet and social media usage, which has facilitated the further advancement of atheist, agnostic, and Kuranist discourses among Turkish society. The diverging views on the interpretation of religion among atheists, agnostics, Orthodox Sunnis, and Kuranists have created a fertile ground for challenging traditional interpretations of Islam, creating space for dissent and re-positioning Turkey's social and religious landscape. As a result of debates within these groups, alongside the surge of internet use, atheist and agnostic conversations that were traditionally taboo became more prevalent among the youth on internet social platforms like Twitter. Several critical atheists and agnostic content creators on social media spaces like YouTube and Twitter created content criticizing Islamic tradition, Islamic history, and problematising various controversies on topics such as the Prophet Muhammad and Aisha's marriage, polygamy, and slavery (Özşahin & Akın, 2022, p.34). Atheist and agnostic people supported and developed their criticism mostly from famous hadith books (narratives recorded after the Prophet Muhammad's death, believed to be his sayings) and the traditional Kuran interpretations. In response, the responses of the Orthodox Sunni exegesis were generally insufficient to answer the atheist arguments. Orthodox Sunni

believers also advanced the hadith books as reliable sources and could not find an alternative to critical voices from the elitists. Even when they did, their defense didn't hold.

Instead, Kuranists were able to oppose views from an atheist and agnostic lens because what gave Kuranists an upper hand is that they don't consider the hadith books as reliable references of Islam. They argue that the only holy reference of Islam is the Kuran. This partially made Kuranists a middle ground between atheists and orthodox Sunnis. Beyond critiquing the validity of Hadith books, Kuranists also interpret certain verses of the Kuran with a new approach, which makes Kuranist arguments compatible with the modern values of Turkish society. Similarly, their religious interpretations and perspectives on gender-related issues are far closer to the secular understanding of gender equality (Büyükkara, 2016, pp. 231-238). Hence, right to assert that while atheist arguments dissolved the dogma of Sunni Islam in Turkey, Kuranists and historicists found a digital space to convey their critical interpretations of Islam, which explains increasingly their strong online following community (Özşahin & Akın, 2022, p.36).

Emerging from these religious interpretation camps in modern Turkey, and with the aid of feminist theory, this thesis aims to understand and document the experiences of the individuals who follow Kuranist scholars on social media. In scholarship, there is an intense theological discussion on interpretations of the Kuran, the credibility of the hadiths, the gender norms, and the rights and responsibilities of Muslim women. However, there is a research gap in how a particular Islamic interpretation affects its followers, especially on gender-related topics, as reflected in their lived experiences, such as shifts in attitudes, practices, and perceptions about the role and status of women. Moreover, there is only a little attention paid to the digital presence of Islamic minority understanding, Kuranism, with its revolutionary advocacy on the status of women in Islam. The reflection of the Islamic reinterpretations on the daily lives of its followers, particularly regarding gender roles, remains underexplored. Thus, this study will address this gap. The study also expands the discourse on progressive Islam and how reinterpretations of the Kuran challenge traditional gender norms. Simultaneously,

this master's thesis provides an insight into how online platforms mediate religious and cultural transformations and virtual belonging. In doing so, the research will provide a unique glimpse of the shifting spiritual landscape of Turkey, which might serve as a case study of a broader Middle Eastern context. Thus, the thesis addresses the intersection of Kuranism, a religious reinterpretation, the rise of social media, and the gender dynamics that contribute to various gaps in scholarship. In the end, examine how diversified Islamic interpretations reshape the lived religious experiences of the believers on their perception and attitudes on the role of women in Islam.

Problem Statement

Despite the increasing influence of Kuranist scholars on social media platforms, such as YouTube and Instagram, there is a lack of understanding about how these digital spaces and Kuranist social media content engagement impact followers' perceptions of women in Islam, particularly regarding gender equality and the role of women. Additionally, the experiences of these followers and whether their views on gender roles evolve across time and space remain underexplored, highlighting a gap at the intersection of religious reinterpretation, digital platforms, and gender dynamics.

Research Question:

How does engagement with Kuranist discourse on social media influence followers' perceptions and practices regarding gender roles and the status of women in Islam in Turkey?

Sub-questions:

- What are the motivations of Kuranist followers adopting a new Islamic interpretation in Turkey?
- In what ways, if any, do Kuranist followers shift in their perception of gender equality?
- Do Kuranist perception changes reflect their personal and interpersonal relationships, and if so, how?

- To what extent and how have female followers re-interpreted their religious observances (hijab, prayers, fasting, etc.)?

To answer these, the research questions, this paper is structured into an introduction, methodology, four main chapters, and a conclusion. The first chapter provides a short literature review. It presents the historical and contextual background of Kuranism, secularity in Turkey, the social structure of Islam in contemporary Turkey, with the divisions of official religion, cults, and Kuranism. The second, third, and fourth chapters present the empirical findings embedded with scholarly discussions. The second chapter discusses interviewees' motivations for conversion to Kuranism with Bourdieu's "habitus" concept and Kimberle Crenshaw's intersectional identity. The chapter also discusses how interpretive pluralism and individualism support the conversion motivations of the Kuranist people. The third chapter discusses unlearning past experiences and re-learning and transforming concepts such as modesty, femininity, and womanhood.

While sharing the life experiences of the interviewees, the chapter also compares Sunni and Kuranist understanding of the terms used above. The chapter also touches upon women's agency while rebuilding their identities. After discussing the successful changes in interviewees' lives on gender topics, the fourth chapter reveals the habits of gendered religious performativity. It discusses the obstacles Muslim women face in claiming religious authority in Islam.

Finally, the thesis summarizes the key aspects of the research and sheds light on gaps in understanding the dynamics of women's participation in religious leadership within Kuranist communities, the long-term evolution of followers' gender perceptions, and the broader socio-political influences shaping religious gender discourse in Turkey for future research.

Research Methodology

In this research, an empirical qualitative research method is used, which allows the study to "examine people's experiences in detail, by using a specific set of methods" (Hennink, Hutter, Bailey, 2013, pp. 8-9). In doing so, this research aims to identify whether Kuranism, a minority Islamic understanding in Turkey which is mostly present in virtual spaces like social media platforms, creates any ideological or practical changes in the lives of its followers, especially regarding gender related topics. Thus, to document the study participants' meanings and voices, the qualitative methodological approach is the most convenient research method for this study because it allows the study to capture meanings as understood by the Kuranist followers.

The primary raw data provides narratives not captured elsewhere in existing secondary literature sources, hence contributing to the Kuranist literature. While other qualitative methods, such as participant observation in the Kuranist religious gatherings or ethnographic fieldwork, could also have provided valuable insight, semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with thirteen participants, due to their flexibility and ability to collect personal narratives.

Moreover, the semi-structured interviews and mostly virtual interviews allowed interviewees to be freer than in-person interviews. My habituation in Europe while conducting the interviews also allowed participants to trust me more and have fewer doubts about the possibility of my being an agent of the state. During the interviews, I paid attention to the common narratives. I lived experiences of the interviewees, in other words, aimed to grasp the way the interviewees interpret the religion, practices, and their life experiences.

Data Collection

The number of people who identify as Kuranist/Kuran-centered Muslims in Turkey is unknown. For contextual background, Turkey is a secular country in West Asia, with a population of 85.6 million in 2024 (TÜİK, 2025); and 89.5 % of the population in Turkey identifies as Muslim (Hürriyet, 2019). However, Kuranism is a

minority understanding, and the target population of the research is relatively small, so I chose a small sample size. Multiple sampling strategies were used to access the interviewees, i.e., purposive sampling and self-selection sampling.

The purposive sampling was intended to facilitate the selection of interviewees who could provide 'information-rich' data, whereas self-selection sampling was when Kuranists voluntarily approached and responded to the research call (Brett & Wheeler, p.56). To identify voluntary participants, I shared the interview invitation in two Islamic Feminist WhatsApp groups via my existing network, targeting women who are already interested in Islamic discussions that could provide rich and relevant insights to the research topic. The women who identified as Kuranists and showed research interest reached back and sent their contact information. The voluntary candidates filled out a short questionnaire to ensure they fulfilled the minimum requirements. Those requirements were identifying themselves as Kuranists or Kuran-centered Muslims for at least 6 months.

The questionnaire also included question on which Kuranist scholars or accounts they follow on social media. This question supported the basis of the research question, which targets the influence of Kuranist scholars through social media. I also attended one of the Kuranist meetings in Antalya and exchanged contact information with two participants who agreed to join the research. One of the members served as a gatekeeper and helped me to find more participants by introducing my research topic at Kuranist gatherings. Through the announcement, some people showed interest in participation. So, generally, the snowballing technique used increased the number of participants, and participants suggested that other Kuranists from their network be interviewed.

Research Participants

In this study, twelve participants were interviewed, and there was an intentional effort to mirror gender balances and the age of the participants evenly. Thus, seven of the interviewees are female and five of them are male. The age ranges from 24 to 54, and the participants are from several different metropolitan cities of Türkiye, such as

İstanbul, Ankara, Antalya, and Yalova. The participants have diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds. One of the interviewees is an international PhD student (will not disclose the nationality for privacy reasons). There are also ethnically Kurdish participants. Similarly, participants had different religious backgrounds such as Sunnism (the largest branch of Islam), Shiism (the second largest branch of Islam), Alevism (a minority sect within Islam), and secular Muslims (non-practicing Muslims in Türkiye often identify as secular). Six of the interviewees came across Kuranism through Kuranist social media presence, four of them are male, and two of them are female participants. The other six interviewees got to know Kuranism through their social network (family members, friends, etc.), five of them are female and one of them is a male participant.

Table 1

Eylem	Female	46	Social media	Practicing Sunni
Esma	Female	51	Social network (friend)	Practicing Sunni
Fatih	Male	37	Social media	Practicing Sunni
Sezen	Female	28	Social network (cousin)	Secular Sunni
Özge	Female	28	Social network (mother)	Practicing Sunni
Erdem	Male	26	Social media	Secular Sunni
Selim	Male	24	Social network (brother)	Practicing Sunni
Saliha	Female	30	Social network (parents)	Practicing Sunni
Turan	Male	25	Social media	Shii
Ülfet	Female	54	Social network (neigbour)	Practicing Sunni

Veysel	Male	40	Social media	Secular Alevi
Yıldız	Female	24	Social media	Practicing Sunni

Ethical Considerations & Data Management

This research is registered by the University of Groningen's ethical committee, as instructed on the ReD Global thesis manual. One of the main goals of ethical responsibility is to protect the interviewees from any potential harm. For this reason, sensitive information about my study participants is anonymised, i.e., where they work, stay, or study, to minimize the risk of indirect identification. The study identifies participants with pseudonyms (false names) to keep their identity a secret. Before each interview, I introduced myself, my research topic, and the purpose of the study to my participants, and the expected duration of the interview. I informed the participants of their rights to withdraw from the interview, to skip any question if they do not wish to answer, and to withdraw from the research at any time before it is published. Before the interview, participants also read and digitally signed the informed consent forms. The consent form included the above information and assured confidentiality and anonymity of the research. The interviewees signed the consent form, which states they allow the interviews to be recorded by video and voice, via Zoom.

The interviews were recorded in Zoom and transcribed by a licensed Microsoft Word transcription feature, directly to a Word document. The zoom records and the transcriptions have not been uploaded to any cloud storage, such as Google Drive, iCloud, etc., to ensure these companies do not use the data without my consent. The zoom records and transcription Word documents are in my private laptop and secured with a password. The data will be stored on my personal laptop for 2 years due to retention policies. After this period, the data will be permanently deleted.

Positionality

I am a young Turkish feminist woman who agrees with most Kuranist thoughts. According to Kezar, "People make meaning from various aspects of their identity . . ." (Kezar, 2002, p. 96). Thus, my positionality stands as both insider and outsider as some of my identities fall in the category of insider, and some of them fall in the category of outsider. As an insider role, being Turkish allowed me to understand the historical and social context of the interviewee's narrations. Interviewing in Turkish, which is both my and their native language, helped me to grasp the nuances of their word choices, which some of their word choices carried indirect criticism and allusion. I adjusted my probe questions, or my elaborations in the main questions, based on each participant's background. Due to cultural literacy, I avoided being too silent and I made facial expressions like nodding my head or sounds to show that I am actively listening to them, which is part of Turkish culture.

Furthermore, being a Turkish woman who grew up in Turkey provided me with an advantage of trust, and I faced less suspicion during recruiting participants. Also, most of the interviewees perceived me as an insider, a Kuranist, which influenced their responses. My insider role helped them to open up about their thoughts that normally would be criticised or judged by a Sunni researcher. In fact, during one of the interviews, a participant hesitated to comment on modernity. I kept neutral and silent, waiting for her to speak, and she said she does not know about my lifestyle. She was afraid to criticise something that I do in my personal life. I told her that it is not about me, she is free to say anything, and I am here for a research purpose, which later made her more comfortable speaking out her mind.

Although I intended to keep neutral throughout the interviews, I could not "truly divorce from subjectivity" (Bourke, 2014, p.3). At one point during one of the interviews, my positionality as a young academic woman, and perhaps my questions, led her to perceive me as a secular or Western-oriented person. This incident revealed that, although at first glance I was an insider, my positionality in an elite institution in the Western hemisphere affected what participants naturally spoke up or censored

during interviews. To counter this, I often, during the interviews, echoed that I was doing this for research purposes, and I was very receptive to diverging religious perspectives.

However, although I succeeded in neutralizing my views and not biasing the study participants, I learnt that I was not fully an insider but rather fitted into insider-outsider positionality due to my affiliation with the academy. As Bourke explains:

"The nature of qualitative research sets the researcher as the data collection instrument. It is reasonable to expect that the researcher's beliefs, political stance, cultural background (gender, race, class, socioeconomic status, educational background) are important variables that may affect the research process." (Bourke, 2014, p.2)

Aware of this, throughout the interviews, I reflected on my own biases, which are the results of my past experiences and current identities. For instance, I have realised that as a researcher with a political science background, I have a tendency to see things at the macro level, yet for qualitative research, it is more of depth than breadth—the core is deeply understanding individuals' life experiences rather than generalizability. More importantly, the deeper you are connected to the study subject, the easier it is to understand the meanings they make of their experiences (Lareau, A. 2011). Otherwise, not keeping this in mind would lead me to maintain perceiving religion and politics as intertwined, seeing religion through a sociological lens on how it shifts the lifestyle of the people, therefore the society, culture, and political stance of a country.

When I research on religion, instead of solely focusing on the personal experiences of individuals, what is expected from an anthropologist, l would deduce conclusions on power relations, on who benefits in terms of power and how power relations change. At the same time, deriving from my identification with feminism, I had to decipher my bias, which I was expecting all Kuranist women to be more assertive on the status of women and seeking uncompromising equal rights. Yet it was surprising to meet with their ideas where they do not always look for equality in secular

terms, as well as to realise my own expectations. Overall, I continuously reflected on my positionality to minimize the researcher's (my) positionality's influence on the research findings.

Challenges and limitations

The research has not faced a serious challenge; finding interviewees and arranging Zoom meetings were easy processes. I think one main limitation of the research was coding the detailed, rich data and writing self and methodological notes from the primary data I had collected from the twelve interviews, that was approximately one hour long each. Since there is a vast research gap on Kuranists, especially in anthropological and sociological perspectives with qualitative research, I was very enthusiastic to capture and document as many detailed findings as I could from the primary data. In fact, the initial thesis draft had five findings chapters. However, to protect the research focus and due to the length and time limitations, I decreased the chapters to three findings, and much of the collected data was left unused.

Data Analysis

To analyse the data, I have applied thematic analysis and narrative analysis. For the thematic analysis, I first transcribed the interviews and then created common codes and themes that existed in the interviews. I then reviewed transcripts over and over again to familiarize myself with the insights and to observe the codes better. Narrative analysis allowed me to observe interviewees' personal journeys on religious interpretations and perceptions of gender, and whether their lifestyle has been impacted, for example, if women apply fewer restrictions in their lives, or if men have changed their perception or attitude towards women. I found the common words in their language fascinating. For instance, several interviewees used sentences such as "feeling free", "core Islam", and "pure religion" were some of the common words used by the interviewees. These words for me captured what Kuranism in snapshot meant for its followers. It's the middle ground for the Muslims who no longer subscribed to traditional Islam and sought a safe habitat away from either atheism or Sunni Orthodox practices.

The three main thematic categories present the analysed data. The categories are *conversion motivations, unlearning gendered past beliefs and practices, and the continuity of gendered practices within the new religious understanding.* This thematic structure provides a framework for the motivations of conversion and the transformation of people's lives, discussed with a feminist anthropological perspective. The themes are interpreted with the key concepts outlined in the conceptual framework, i.e., agency, habitus, identity, conversion, and gender. Each category illustrates participants' life experiences and viewpoints by providing quotes from the interviews. These quotes also serve as an analytical tool to connect the personal narratives with the theoretical discussions in the existing literature.

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

The research aims to explore specifically the gender related changes in perception and practices among Kuranist followers, thus feminist anthropology is the theoretical basis of this study. It provides a critical lens on the experiences of the interviewees by considering gender as a cultural context and relating it to the associated power dynamics (Ortner, 1974). Feminist anthropology as a theoretical framework will allow us to analyze the data with a feminist lens while maintaining objectivity. Conceptually, gender is used in accordance with Judith Butler's gender performativity, which is constructed with social norms. According to Butler, gender is not biological or essentialist; it is performed and shaped by a constructed society's expectations (Butler, 2018). Hence, gender is related to the roles assigned to men and women in public and in religious settings. This performative gender vision provides a critical lens in conceptually understanding the changes in Kuranist people's perceptions and practices on gender-related topics. For instance, one of the interviewees, who went to a religious high school, was oppressed for being a woman, and later this shaped her becoming a Kuranist; she changed her perception about what women should be doing. In this regard, gender not only shaped her transition to Kuranism but also her perception of a fluid performative gender instead of biological after she became a Kuranist, her views on what a woman should do and be changed.

The second conceptual framework blends Pierre Bourdieu's "***Habitus***" concept with social and cultural inputs that shape Kuranism (Bourdie, 1990). This conceptual blending is critical because it captures how deeply ingrained dispositions, shaped by one's social and cultural contextual background environment, shape their perceptions in this regard of Kuranism. From the early ages, people's culture, religious teachings, gender, family role, status, and all other experiences and knowledge serve as "input" to their cognitive reasoning, shape and produce people's decisions and conclusions on diverse topics. In the context of Kuranism, habitus and social and cultural inputs such as religious teaching, gender socially assigned roles, and childhood experiences explain people's motivations for conversion to Kuranism. Several interviewees subscribed to Kuranism because it reconciled neither being Orthodox Sunni nor secular. Hence, people's social and cultural background influences their "habitus," and the cognitive "habitus" influences the conversion decisions. ***Intersectional identity*** by Kimberle Crenshaw (1991) is another concept used mainly in the second chapter to portray how individuals negotiate their multidimensional identities and how these intersectional identities influence conversion processes.

In this paper, ***conversion*** as conceptualised by Robbins (2004) has two elements of the conversion process, which are "rupture" and "ethical transformation". According to Robbins, rupture is when one leaves the previous lifestyle and beliefs, which in this paper I refer to as unlearning the past or leaving the learned behind. This is followed by ethical transformation, which refers to the process where a converted person transforms their lifestyle and ethical framework by the new faith (Robbins, 2004, pp. 253-260). For instance, Kuranist interviewees negotiated their previous ideas. They formed a new ethical stance under their new religious understanding, which makes Joel Robbins' conversion concepts suitable for understanding the conversation about Kuranism in Turkey.

However, it is important to mention that according to Islam, transitions between Islamic sects are not considered conversion in Islamic theology. It is interpreted in a way that Islam is an umbrella, and all the sects and different interpretations are considered minor differences, as long as one admits there is only one God, the last

prophet is Muhammad, and the Kuran is a sacred book revealed by God (Geaves, 2021, pp. 25-32).

Therefore, although shifts from traditional Islamic sects to Kuranism are not considered a conversion in Islam, in this paper, I use the word conversion occasionally to emphasize the similar process interviewees experienced in their unlearning and adopting process during their shifts to Kuranism. In other words, the life experiences, habits, and worldviews of Kuranists change rapidly due to the shift from traditional Islam to Kuranism, which aligns well with Robbins' rupture and ethical transformation concepts. The final element of this paper's conceptual framework is Saba Mahmood's conceptualisation of "***agency***" that challenges the mainstream feminist perspective that agency is equivalent to resisting social norms and power structures. But rather calls for seeing agency as a manifestation embodied in the willingness to inhabit ethical self-cultivation and traditional religious patriarchal norms, in this case of Kuranism (Mahmood, 2001). In other words, according to Mahmood, agency can take different forms beyond the classical feminist definition of agency as resistance to domination. A woman can choose to perform traditional roles such as subordination to patriarchal order, and these are also forms of women's agency (Mahmood, 2001).

In the end, these conceptual frameworks are complementary to each other and essential in understanding Kuranism transitions in Turkey's evolving religious landscapes. For instance, gender social expectations shape Kuranist conversion, as Kuranism serves as a habitus to defy the gendered interpretation of religion common within the orthodox Sunni Islam. Similarly, Pierre Bourdieu's "***Habitus***" conceptualization is crucial as it captures the narratives from several interviewees who indicated that their conversation resulted from seeking a reconciliation between being neither non-Orthodox Sunni nor Secular but rather a middle ground. While conversation as a concept, coined by Joel Robbins, was more important in explaining the process and journey of Kuranists in transitioning from former religious practices to the new form of Islam. Moreover, although under Islam, moving between sects is not considered conversion, this study conceptualized Kuranism as conversion to capture the actual voice of interviewees and how interviewees experienced their unlearning and

adopting process during their shifts to Kuranism. Hence, bringing us to the intersection of gender and agency. Agency can take different forms beyond the classical feminist definition. In other words, a woman can choose to perform traditional roles such as subordination to patriarchal order, a process that also explains forms of women's agency.

Chapter 1 Literature Review & Historical Background

1.1 History of Kuranism

This chapter discusses Kuranism's historical background and how it emerged within Turkish Muslim society. It also briefly explains the main differences between Sunni Islam and Kuranism. Initially, different political views and understandings emerged immediately after the death of the Prophet Muhammad. The Muslim community had one main disagreement on their new leader. One group advocated that Ali, the son of the Prophet Muhammad's uncle, who was trained under the Prophet's authority, should be the next leader, and others advocated for Abu Bakar, who later became the new Caliph with the support of the majority.

The second Caliph became Umar with no significant opposition. However, the main disagreement grew after the 3rd Caliph Uthman, as he favored his tribe. The rebellious groups assassinated him, and the unrest continued during Ali's Caliphate. These early disputes resulted in two main sects in Islam: Sunnism, the supporters of the mainstream, and Shiism, the protestors who advocated for Ali's Caliphate from the beginning. Although the starting point was political, religious interpretations and practices later varied between these two groups. Sufism, the third main branch of Islam, emerged in the 8th-9th century by Sufi renunciants who devoted their life to worship and forbade themselves from worldly wealth and joy (Melchert, 2015, p.3).

Whereas Kuranism/al-Qurʾāniyya became a structured school of thought starting from the second half of the 19th Century, its adherents arguing that the only holy source of Islam was and is the Kuran, and one can practice Islam by only referencing the Kuran (Birışık, 2002, pp. 428-429). Kuranists see some of the early Islamic thoughts and practices as part of their arguments. For instance, Kuranists argue that hadith (the narrations attributed to the Prophet Muhammad) should not be seen as a holy source of Islam, as they are not the revelation of Allah. Interestingly, even in Sunni hadith records, there is a narration that the Prophet Muhammad says,

> "Do not write down anything from me, and he who wrote down anything from me except the Qur'an, he should erase it. But, narrate from me, for there is nothing wrong in doing so. Whoever attributes any falsehood to me, let him occupy his seat in Hellfire." (Muslim, Authentic hadith).

According to Kuranists, this hadith points out that Prophet Muhammad was also concerned that his words or thoughts would be considered as holy as God's words, and it would be a reference point like the Kuran if it were written down. In addition, in Sunni historical records, it is known that Abu Bakar, the 1st Caliph, and Umar, the 2nd Caliph, after the Prophet Muhammad's death, were concerned with written forms of hadiths as well. There are narratives that Abu Bakar collected five hundred hadiths from companions who heard things from Prophet Muhammad, but later Abu Bakar burnt them all (Zehebî, *Teẕkiretü'l-ḥuffâẓ*, p. 5). Also, Umar consulted his committee for a month on whether to write down the hadiths, and later he did not. (Hatîb, *Taḳyîdü'l-ʿilm*, pp. 50-51). Kuranists refer to these narratives that both Prophet Muhammad and early Caliphs were concerned about mixing and/or confusing the Kuran with the written words from Prophet Muhammad's statements, yet the only sacred source that Muslims are responsible for is the Kuran. For instance, Imam Shafii, who lived during the late 8th and early 9th century, explained his arguments against ideas on only following the Kuran and rejecting hadith in his book Al-Um, VII, 250-254 (Birışık, 2002, pp. 428-429). Imam Shafii's arguments indicate that early Kuranists could have lived for centuries as a minority group.

The modern term Kuranist ideology was first seen in British India by Sayyid Ahmad Khan, an Indian Muslim in the 19th Century. Ahmad Khan was born into an elite family, and his father was a noble court officer in the Mughal Empire. When Great Britain took over the Mughal Empire, Ahmad Khan maintained good relations with Britain. His ideas are influenced by western rationalism and natural philosophy. He interpreted Islam with rationality, he argued that the Kuran is the only authority in Islam, and religion, science, and rationality do not contradict each other. More so, he was sceptical towards miracles and did not interpret them in the literal sense. Ahmad

Khan also argued that Islam should adopt the modern terms, and a country should be ruled in a secular manner (Öz, 2002, pp. 73-75).

Ahmad Khan's arguments are echoed by Chakrawali, Amritsarî, Muhammad Aslam Jiraghpuri and Gulam Ahmed Parvez in British India and the early years of Independent Pakistan. Similarly, in the 19th Century, the Ottoman Empire applied a set of reforms and started the modernisation process of the Empire, including establishing a parliament and a constitution. In British Egypt, modernisation thoughts were also popular among the scholars. However, they were different than Kuranist arguments (Birışık, 2002, pp. 428-429). Kuranist thoughts started to become popular again in the 1970s by the Egyptian American scholar Rashed Khalifa, who was later assassinated at a mosque in Arizona, USA, in 1990. Rashed Khalifa wrote an English translation of the Kuran and claimed some of the verses in the Kuran on female slavery or underage marriage have been intentionally distorted over history (Bowen, 2010; Khalifa, 1989, 4:3-6).

Professor Yaşar Nuri Öztürk, a Turkish scholar, was the first to disseminate Kuranist ideas in Turkey since the 1980s. He emphasized the importance of praying in Turkish and explained the historical and sociological background of the Islamic traditions, comparing them with the Kuran verses (Aydar, 2007, p.97). After Yaşar, Edip Yüksel, a Kurdish-Turkish scholar, was one of the other pioneers in studying and advancing Kuranist ideas in Turkey. Before Kuranism, he was an Islamist who was actively engaged in activities to make an Islamic Revolution in Turkey, similar to Iran. He was imprisoned in 1980 due to his fundamentalist activism. During his time in jail, he became a pen pal with Rashad Khalifa, running Islamic debates on radical Islam and Kuranism. Finally, Edip Yüksel agreed with Kuranist arguments and advocated for Kuranism in Turkey since 1986 (Yüksel, 2015).

Meanwhile, it was in 2000 that the number of Kuranist scholars significantly increased in Turkey, and Kuranist thoughts intermingled with Turkish Islamic understanding and the socio-cultural needs of the Turkish society. More to say, although there are still Kuranist minority groups in the world, Turkey stands out from

the rest of the world due to the comparatively higher number of Kuranist scholars in academia, the number of publications, and its high social media presence. The popularity of Kuranism in Turkey is associated with Turkey's unique socio-political situation and Turkish history of religiosity and French Laïcité. However, despite reasonable scholarship from Turkey on Kuranism, there is a dearth of scholarship on the influence of Kuranism on a reinterpretation of socio components such as gender. Hence, for these reasons, it is crucial to examine the impact of Kuranist thoughts in Turkey and their sociological implications on gender as understood through agency, feminism, and Islam.

1.2 Literature on Kuranism and Islamic Feminism

Literature on Kuranism in the existing scholarship is very limited, both universally and in the Turkish context. The main existing literature on Kuranism can broadly be divided into two categories. The first consists of works authored by Kuranist scholars themselves, in which they articulate their interpretations of Islam (e.g., Öztürk, 2018; Dorman, 2018; Taslaman, 2017). The second main scholarship is the critique from the Sunni theologians defining Kuranism, providing their main arguments and producing counterarguments with Sunni interpretations of Islam, i.e., Ocakoğlu, 2010; Ertaş, n.d.; Şenocak, 2017; Dönmez, 2019. The second main body of scholarship consists of critiques by Sunni theologians, who define Kuranism, outline its perceived flaws, and offer counterarguments grounded in traditional Sunni interpretations of Islam (e.g., Ocakoğlu, 2010; Ertaş, n.d.; Şenocak, 2017; Dönmez, 2019). Thus, most of the existing scholarship is about the historical rise of Kuranism and theological discussions on Kuranist interpretations and critiques. There is only one notable academic contribution that offers an analytical perspective, which is the PhD dissertation of Filiz Orhan titled *"Türkiye'de Kur'an İslamı Arayışları"* (Orhan, 2022). The dissertation employed qualitative research and provided a socio-religious grounded insights by interviewing the Kuranist people.

The thesis focuses on Kuranism and the role of women in Islam, which leads us to the scholarship on Muslim women. In Turkey, there are both orthodox

interpretations, i.e., "*Kadın ilmihali*" (Mutlu, 2016), and critical interpretations within the Sunni scholarship "*Kadın Olmak*" (Albayrak, 2024). However, there is relatively less scholarship on the status of Muslim women in Islam with Kuranist perspectives, in comparison to Sunni scholarship. There is Caner Taslaman and Feryal Taslaman's book called "*Islam and Women*," published in 2018. In their book, Taslaman discusses common misinterpretations in Islam regarding women, such as the first sin, women and leadership, and women's right to travel (Taslaman & Taslaman, 2018). There is also another book, "*Dini Cevaplar 3*," which answers the most common questions regarding the status of women in Islam with a Kuranist perspective (Kara, 2024). The role of women in Islam is a widely debated and studied topic by Islamic Feminism around the globe.

The common feature of the Islamic Feminist scholarship and the Turkish theological critiques on women in Islam is that the critical readings and interpretations are done within the Sunni framework, including the hadith and historical records, which also include the patriarchal norms and narratives. This theological division is the fundamental difference between the position of Islamic Feminist discourse and Kuranist discourse on Muslim women. While Kuranist scholarship directly focuses on Kuran and interpreting Kuran with minimal patriarchal norms, most of the Islamic Feminist scholars, such as Amina Wadud, Asma Barlas, Ziba Mir-Hosseini, Leila Ahmed, and Asma Lamrabet, do not reject hadiths like Kuranists. They critically analyse the Islamic jurisprudence (fiqh) and Islamic scholarly consensus (ijma) on various topics on women within the Sunni framework. Thus, many of the Islamic Feminist scholars critically analyse the hadiths to filter the patriarchy embedded in narration. However, they still use hadiths as a source of understanding Islam. In terms of critically reading the Kuran, Asma Barlas has a book "*Believing Women in Islam*" (2002) where she dissolves the patriarchal readings of the Kuran. Similarly, Amina Wadud also has a book "*Kuran and Women: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective*" (1999) where she reviews the ultimate nature of the status of women in the Kuran.

Lastly, some Kuranist scholars have Kuran translations with Kuranist exegesis, where they interpret many of the gendered verses with a more equal approach. For instance, Edip Yüksel published a Turkish Kuran translation in 2000, named "Mesaj: Kuran Çevirisi"; Erhan Aktaş in 2017 "Kerim Kuran Türkçe çeviri; and Mehmet Okuyan published the exegesis (Tafseer) of a 30-volume set in 2021. This literature review has shown that most existing works focus on theological debates or feminist critiques within Sunni traditions, while gendered experiences and interpretations within the Kuranist discourse remain underexplored. This anthropological study addresses that gap by exploring how Kuranist individuals navigate, negotiate, and reinterpret religious meanings concerning women within the Kuranist framework in contemporary Turkey.

1.3 Secularization in Turkish History and the Role of Diyanet

During the Tulip Era (1718-1730), early forms of modernisation started in the Ottoman Empire, by sending diplomats to Europe, the influence of western architecture & art, establishing the first printing press with Ottoman alphabets, and reform in education. In the late 18th century, the reforms became more prevalent in almost every field, i.e., military, administration, legal/law, education, and social. The Imperial Edict of Gülhane (Tanzimat Fermanı) in 1839 and the Reform Edict (Islahat Fermanı) in 1856 were edicts to improve the status of citizens, emphasizing equality, which is a modern state understanding where people are not treated differently based on their religious background. Between 1876 and 1878, the first constitutional era was applied with a parliament where Muslim and Non-Muslim citizens were represented. All of these efforts successfully transformed the society towards modernity in bigger cities. In the late 19th Century, a political group of people called Jön Türks (Young Turks) wanted a modern form of government where religion was not a reference for state affairs. With their efforts, the second Constitutional Era started in 1908 (İmamoğlu, 2024, pp. 58-69).

As a result, in the 19th and 20th centuries, Western and Eurocentric schools were open for women and higher education to raise teachers, nurses, and midwives. Women

became more active in the social sphere, working in factories and lower administrative jobs such as assistant clerk or post officer (İmamoğlu, 2024, pp. 58-69). In 1846, women received equal inheritance rights whereby the son and the daughter share the inheritance equally, unlike Sharia Law in Islam (Çalışkan, 2022, pp. 321-327). Women were hand in hand with the political elites, taking actions to modernise the Empire, pressuring the Sultan for a modern government. For instance, in 1895, Ottoman women printed a women's newsletter called "*Hanımlara Mahsus Gazete*" to discuss the struggles Ottoman women went through in their daily lives. After the second Constitution, women printed other magazines and newspapers and introduced the term Feminism to Ottoman women (Çalışkan, 2022, pp. 321-327). Women also held conferences on their ideas, though the Feminist thoughts were popular in bigger cities like İstanbul, İzmir, and Thessaloniki (Çakır, 1996, p. 43).

During the Ottoman Empire's last era, there were discussions on Islamic modernisation. Said Halim Pasha was one of the prominent figures who argued that Islamic ethics and values are compatible with Western scientific and technological developments, and religion should be interpreted in a progressive way. He argued that the fundamental Islamic values, such as justice, ethics, and social welfare, fit with the modern government's understanding (Kara, 2018, p. 110). As seen by the historical developments, modernisation and secular form of a government understanding is deeply inherited to Ottoman/Turkish history by 18th century. The educated class was looking forward to a society that supports equality, including gender equality. Discussions on French republican state system, were leading to Islamic discussions on Sharia Law, as well as Feminist debates that led Islamic Feminism to begin in the Ottoman Empire. The elite class compromised western values with Islam, which influences the Islamic understanding in Turkey, and an answer to why Kuranism is easily socially accepted today, in comparison to the rest of the World.

After World WW1 and the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, a Turkish Republic was established in 1923, which adopted French laïcité as a founding principle. Atatürk, the Turkish Republic's founder, also carried a set of reforms including adopting Latin alphabet from Arabic alphabet (Aydar, 2007, pp.72-74). After Arabs revolted against

the Ottoman Empire for independence, during WW1, and a nation-state, Turkey, was established, the ideology of the Muslim Brotherhood (Ummah) failed, and Turkish nationalism rose. The traditional Islamic practices were seen as the reason for backwardness that led to the Ottoman failure. Thus, the Turkish elites aimed to make the Turkish Republic a modern, Western country. Atatürk carried out a set of reforms that affected the influence of religion in Turkey. On March 3, 1924, The Islamic Caliphate was abolished, Diyanet the Presidency of Religious Affairs (PRA) was established, and the education institutions were unified (Tevhid-i Tedrisat) under the Ministry of Education (Aydar, 2007; Aysal & Korkmaz, 2021; Toprak, 2017).

In 1925, Dervish lodges (Tekke ve Zaviye) were abolished (Çetin-Can, 2024). These reforms were introduced to regulate dogmatic religious teachings, which were often disseminated by cult leaders such as dervishes, mollas, and sheikhs due to the lack of centralized religious authority, and to shift religious understanding toward a more rational foundation (Çetin-Can, 2024). For instance, the unification of education under the ministry ensured that all schools provide a modern Western education curriculum, and it gradually closed madrasa education. This religion-based school embodies Islamic philosophy, law, history, and Kuran studies. Instead, Imam-Hatip schools were established, which carry both science and religious classes for students who want to pursue a career in religion after their education.

Additionally, theology programs were established as a higher education (Temizel, 2024). Abolishment of the Dervish lodges was also a very critical step, as Islam in Ottoman lands was not institutionalised, the local cult leaders were able to manipulate religion for their interest through dogmatic thoughts. In the Turkish Republic, the political elite wanted to both abolish this system and establish Diyanet to represent rational Islam that ensures religion is not instrumentalised to cultivate ignorance or backwardness.

Cemil Said Dikel translated the Kuran into Turkish with his initiative in 1924. This step has an essential place in the religious reforms of the period, because the aim of the state was to ensure that the people live their religion more consciously and

rationally. With this translation, worship in a local language became a discussed topic among the ruling class. In 1926, at Göztepe Camii, the imam led the prayer in Turkish, which caused a big reaction from the public. Diyanet removed the imam from his position due to public displeasure. Yet, Diyanet also gradually supported the worship in Turkish. In those years, some other theologians stated that according to Abu Hanife, the founder of the Hanefi sect under Sunnism, which Turkish people follow, praying in one's own language does not invalidate the prayer, and is therefore permissible (Aydar, 2007, pp. 71-80).

During the discussions, in mosques, there were initiations that some Kuran chapters were read in Turkish after the Arabic prayer, the Khutbah (Friday sermon) was partially given in Turkish, and some other minor practices, such as "salawat, iqama, sela" were also translated into Turkish and practiced in mosques. In 1932, Khutbahs and Ezan (call to prayer) were performed in Turkish, and in 1935, the Kuran translation, along with its exegesis, was published in Turkish with the government's support through Diyanet for the first time. Diyanet also published a translation of one of the most famous hadith books called "Sahih-i Buhari" (Aydar, 2007, pp. 81-92). All these developments formed the basis of a significant transformation that was embodied in the translation of the Kuran into Turkish and aimed to convey religion into a language that the public could understand; it aimed to remove religious knowledge from the monopoly of a narrow group and make it accessible to a broader audience.

Although the Turkish government made all these initiatives under the Sunni sect, and Kuranism is theologically a different branch, there is still a very significant foundation point in both stances. Both ideologies advocate religion as a rational understanding rather than a dogmatic one, whereby you understand what you believe, and they criticise the cult entities in Turkey that often promote fundamentalism. Diyanet's reforms in understanding and performing in the Turkish language were largely successful, except for performing daily prayers in Turkish. Rather than that, Turkish Kuran translations, Turkish khutbah (Friday sermon), and studying, learning religion in Turkish are very common practices even today. Turkish call to prayer was also practiced until 1950 (Aydar, 2007, p 100). Nevertheless, in 1950's Turkey aligned

with the western block and sent troops to South Korea to fight against the North Korea and the communist bloc, yet the communist ideology was a growing threat in Turkey that the government became more indulgent towards religiosity, in hope of religion to become a social glue in public's ideological disputes. As a result, by the late 1970s, both Islamic movements, organisations, and cults started to grow back, as well as the Islamist political parties. Finally, in 1990, political Islamist parties gained prominence and ruled Turkey, including later in 2002, when AKP became the ruling party that remains in power.

1.4 Understanding Kuranism in Contemporary Turkey

Islam is fragmented and diverse in Turkey, encompassing the institutional Sunni religion regulated by the government branch Diyanet, as well as unofficial cults, Kuranists, and Alevis (a heterodox minority sect not aligned with Sunni orthodoxy.

Diyanet symbolizes, shapes, and regulates the official religious understanding of Turkish people, which is the Hanefi school of thought under the Sunni sect. Diyanet carries out a significant amount of work, such as scientific astronomic research, to analyse the time slots of the five daily prayers, fasting hours in Ramazan, which are different in every city and date based on the sun's motion. Diyanet also publishes religious books for every level, including kids, and runs a TV channel along with a YouTube channel to carry deep theological debates and to educate people on Islam. On the one hand, Diyanet considers Sunni resources such as Hadith books and other classical works as respected and meaningful parts of the Islamic tradition and religion. On the other hand, they align classical Islamic resources with the Turkish culture and understanding. For instance, although polygamy exists in Islam, Diyanet interprets it in a way that polygamy was only applicable during war times to protect widows. Diyanet does not oppose women's right to receive education or work. On Diyanet's TV Channel, it is also observed that women carry programs on topics considered female topics where they discuss prominent female figures in early Islam, family issues, or ethical values. In some of the programs, they also carry mixed gender programs by inviting a specialist from the opposite gender to attend and discuss the topics of the

program. Thus, Diyanet illustrates a religious lifestyle where women wear headscarves, receive education, work, but also follow Islamic practices and embrace the identity of motherhood.

Turkey also hosts several religious organisations (cemaat) or cults (tarikat), primarily associated with Sufi teachings. In these religious communities, there is usually a leader whose words are accepted without question, as they are believed to have mastered the spiritual path and to possess a closer relationship with God. The cult leaders usually maintain the very traditional thoughts from the last century. For instance, some of the radical cults in Turkey encourage their members to dress up in "Islamic clothes," which include a turban and a robe for men and a black chador (çarşaf) for women. Most cults encourage segregation of women from public life, the work sphere, and higher education. The traditional Islamic sources are also accepted without any filters. For instance, there are cult leaders who agree that there is no age limit for marriage in Islam and that polygamy can be applied if wished.

Whereas the main viewpoints of Kuranists in Turkey are coherent with science and give importance to rational thinking. They counter the attitudes of Sunni Islam and sects that ignore reasoning. It involves re-reading the Kuran by keeping reason and conscience at the forefront and considering the viewpoints of modern times. It does not regard classical Islamic sources other than the Kuran as sacred, and the classical sources have no binding power other than understanding the historical context. They argue that God revealed the Kuran, thus the hadith books, which were collected two centuries after the Prophet Muhammad, are neither reliable sources nor necessary to obey Allah. As this suggests, Kuranists in Turkey are not homogeneous. Some of the scholars emphasize the "19 code" of Rashad Khalifa, while others state that believing in evolution does not contradict Islam. Some scholars have a more traditional understanding of the headscarf, while others argue that the Kuran does not mention it.

Kuranists believe that a Muslim should only submit to Allah and that some hadiths deify the Prophet Muhammad. For example, there is the concept of intercession (Shafa'ah) in Sunni Islam, which is a belief that the Prophet Muhammad will have a

saying for those who suffer to win heaven, and he will request God to accept them as well.

> "Abu Huraira reported God's messenger as saying, "Every prophet has a supplication which receives an answer, but whereas every prophet made his supplication in this world, I have kept mine till the day of resurrection to be used in intercession for my people…" Muslim, Book 9, Hadith 1

Or another hadith (narration) is that "The Messenger of Allah (s.a.w) said: 'My intercession is for the people who committed major sins in my Ummah.'" Jami` at-Tirmidhi 2436. Yet, Kuranists argue that apart from God itself, everyone else is a human-being therefore cannot decide or help in the day of judgement. On the contrary, cults have even further arguments. For instance, Ali Haydar Efendi said that "If one person was taken to hell by angels and he says that I am from a Naqshbandi cult's Khalidi branch, angels will let him free" (Ustaosmanoğlu, p.42).

Rejecting hadith as a reliable source of Islam allows Kuranists to have more room to interpret religion. In this way, many cultural elements that were considered normal in the past are not carried over to the present day under the name of religion, making Islam more compatible with modern-day perspectives, which becomes the main differentiation between Kuranism and the official Islam regulated by Diyanet. For instance, Diyanet also puts efforts to frame Islam on a reasonable ground. However, hadith sources lead them to an impasse. For example, while the hadith (narration) states that Aisha got married to the Prophet Muhammad at age 9, which is considered an authentic, reliable source, Diyanet tries to comment on it from a more acceptable ground for Turkish people. In a TV program, the question of the age debate is asked to the former president of Diyanet, Prof. Dr. Mehmet Görmez, and he avoided accepting or rejecting this hadith explicitly, and made an ambiguous speech around the topic (Habertürk, 2024). Again, in 2012, Diyanet stated that it is harmful for minors to get married, and it is not practical in the contemporary world, while admitting that it was culturally accepted in Islamic history, without condemning the past (Diyanet, 2012).

Both Kuranists, Diyanet and cult leaders, respectfully criticize the other, since their positionality naturally locates them on opposite sides. When Kuranists explain why they think the Kuran should be the only reliable source, they automatically criticize Sunni thought and cult structures. Diyanet also opposed Kuranist ideas a couple of times in Friday sermons (khutbah) dated 12.02.2016, 03.11.2017, 26, 02.02.2018, and 22.03.2019 (Özşahin Akın, 2022, p.38). The khutbah included why a Muslim should follow both the Qur'an and Sunnah (the lifestyle of the Prophet) and directly referred to people who say "The Qur'an is enough for us" (Özşahin Akın, 2022, p.38).

Ergo, Turkey has a deep-rooted history of secularization and modernization. At the establishment of the Republic, one key reform was the promotion of a conscious, understandable, and rational approach to religious life, exemplified by initiatives such as translating the Kuran into Turkish and introducing Friday sermons (khutba) in Turkish overseen by Diyanet. Today, Kuranists promote this rational and conscious way of engaging with religion. Kuranism's progressive stance on gender issues contributes to ongoing discussions within Islamic Feminism scholarship, although it sets itself apart due to its perspectives on hadiths. The next chapter explores why individuals who convert to Kuranism identify closely with this movement and the motivations that lead them to convert.

Chapter 2: Motivations of Conversion

As described in the previous chapter, Turkish religion and culture have strong religious roots embedded with secularization and modernity. The strong Islamic culture in the Ottoman Empire, with the secular state and teachings in modern Turkey, created a duality in the country and the lifestyles of the Turkish citizens. Many Turkish people, while they learn traditional Islamic teachings, also continue living in secular settings and receive a secular education curriculum, which creates a duality in their mind, believing both in traditional teachings and also giving importance to secular concepts such as justice and equality. This chapter discusses how a person's background creates cognitive filtering and negotiating clashing ideas, affecting their conversion process to Kuranism.

Cycling back to the 'habitus' concept, according to Bourdieu (1977, pp. 72-75), humans' perceptions and behaviors are shaped by their culture, social class, gender, and all the other factors that describe them. In other words, the background element of one's past and current surroundings creates "habitus," a system of cognitive and embodied dispositions shaping people's perceptions, decision-making, and actions. As such, the interviewees are also influenced by Turkish society, culture, and historical developments in secularity and religion. Turkey has a culture of secularism, which shapes people's habitus. At the same time, Islam is also an essential factor. Depending on the nature of one's background, secularity or religious references could lead to their rational thinking.

Interviewees described this situation while explaining their transition from Sunni Orthodox Islam to Kuranism by saying it "fits their heart and mind". For instance, Erdem explains how his secular background shaped his perception of Kuranist values.

> I come from a secular family, and my perspective on women is quite up to date. I believe the status of women in society is high and l believe we should have equal rights. When I read hadiths for the first time, I was shocked! Because the

> women were degraded, it makes women, in a way, slaves of men. It does not respect their free will, and hadiths do not respect women's personalities. I was a member of Islam since I was born, but the perception of women that I had was contradicting the image of women in hadiths, and it was upsetting me. I was thinking that God shouldn't say these things. Later, I learned that these are not the words of God, but fabricated rumors written/said back in the time under Patriarchal hegemony. When I met with Kuran, I found a match with the modern woman's perception I had in my mind. In fact, Kuran respects women and sees them as free individuals; it does not portray women as being either higher or lower than men. The ranking is on free will, depending on one's "taqwa," being righteous. (Erdem, Interview, 2025)

As observed in Erdem's story, he comes from a secular background with a modern woman's image. When he wanted to connect with a religion after his friend's death, he recognized that Sunni Islam does not correlate with his worldview. Although he was born to a Sunni Muslim culture, coming from a secular family led him towards Kuranist views. Hadiths (narrations) encompass elements from the societal structure, Arabic culture, and historical limitations of the past, which Erdem describes as "rumors under patriarchal hegemony" and compares it with a verse of the Kuran on the ranking of the people, which fits with a modern concept of egalitarianism. Kuran portrays all humans equally and emphasizes that gender, race, nation, or ethnicity do not lead to being better or worse.

> "O people, We created you from a male and female, and We made you into nations and tribes, that you may know one another. Surely, the most honorable among you in the sight of God is the most righteous. God is Knowledgeable, Cognizant." (Hucurat, 13, The Kuran: A Monotheist Translation)

Although the culture, history, society, and all other factors in one's life create a specific habitus, people not only repeat the previous perceptions, but the environmental factors influence them, and they can also produce new practices within the societal limitations. For instance, Veysel, a born Alevi, a heterodox Islamic sect in

Turkey, with a secular lifestyle, was interested in Islam. He read the Kuran and eventually wanted to perform prayer (salah). The Sunni teachings oblige prayers to be only in Arabic. In Alevi culture, although there are Alevis who perform Arabic prayers, the primary worship practice is in Cemevi (Alevi worship house) with Turkish language and a musical instrument called “saz” in a mixed-gender environment.

Veysel tried to pray but thought it was illogical, and his practical logic, which is the reasoning affected by the habitus (Bourdieu, 1990, pp. 96-100), later inclined him to Kuranism.

> When I first wanted to start performing a prayer, I thought it was so ridiculous to read a prayer in a language I don’t speak. In fact, some time ago l tried to memorize a chapter in Arabic. I was like, what am l doing? There was no meaning, no feeling in that prayer. I am praying that l don’t know what I’m saying, because the Sunni teaching was that prayer should be in Arabic. That’s why I did not continue, because it didn’t fit into my logic. I mean, it can’t work like that. And if it is how, it is, I’m not in it.

Veysel followed what was logically and emotionally meaningful for him and later became a Kuranist, who allowed people to worship in a language that they understood.

Turan, a PhD candidate in geology, values rationality. His secular primary education and specialization in natural sciences influenced his perception of religion. Turan has a secular lifestyle and a Shia background, which is the second biggest sect in Islam after Sunnism. While he is interested in religion, he also looks for something that fits his mind. He explains how his logic led him to Kuranism as a last stop.

> I was trying to do all forms of voluntary (nafila) worship, I was even praying for the salah that I missed in previous years. However, when I started my bachelor’s degree, I got so busy that I couldn’t even pray the regular prayers on time. Then l thought this Shia understanding is not practical in life. It is so hard, l mean you should become something like a nun, devote your life to worship

> only. I thought, let me check what Sunnis say, then I found one of the very popular "hodjas" on the internet, and he was absolutely talking nonsense. He told a story of the Prophet Idris (Enoch). He explained that Cebrail (Gabriel) took İdris to heaven, and then İdris said, I'm not coming back, you can go. I was like nobody had entered heaven, even the apocalypse had not happened yet, this is against the Kuran. Then l thought, if this popular imam talks like this, it is certain that l will not follow Shiism nor Sunnism. After more research l came across with the videos of Prof. Caner Taslaman, and l realised that when this man talks about a topic, he always refers to Kuran verses and makes explanations based on those (Turan, Interview, 2025).

Bourdieu declares that when there is an "orchestration of habitus," all the individual habituses create a collective habitus, a commonsense or "normal" is created in a culture, or the world in general (1990, p.80). These widely accepted "normals" become a reference point in new decisions. For instance, Özge explained her motivation to become a Kuranist by saying that Kuranist interpretations did not felt unfamiliar to her, which indicates the general worldview Özge has.

> I have been aware of the "Kuranism" term for 3-4 years. When I heard it for the first time, I realized that I could immediately call myself a Kuranist. It didn't sound contradictory to me.

Decision makings are not always straightforward; Kuranism aligned with Özge and others' worldviews however, there are also situations where people form their perceptions based on almost equally distributed input of religious rhetoric and secular teachings.

Kimberle Crenshaw's (1991) intersectional identity portrays the multidimensional motivations of conversion. According to Crenshaw, identities are intersectional; a person has multiple identities, such as gender, class, race, or religion, and therefore, identities overlap with each other. Understanding conversion requires a multidimensional analysis of how these intersecting identities shape personal religious choices. For instance, people have several identities, such as being a Muslim, a woman,

and religious; however, none of these identities is enough to identify a person alone. Thus, the conversion process is a result of the intersection of different expectations of the different identities one has. In other words, a woman might be in quest of less patriarchal Islamic interpretations, while her educated middle-class identity can make her search for a rational explanation.

For instance, Yıldız grew up in secular Turkey with a secular primary education. Then she joined a religious high school (imam-hatip). Her worldview was built on these dual, secular and religious, conflicting teachings, which are both of her identities. Sometimes she positions herself on a secular understanding, and sometimes on a more religious one. Yıldız explained how she negotiates between different teachings.

> In my high school, they were saying many things about women. A woman can't do this or that. Later on, I started to ignore what does not fit my logic. For instance, they told us that women shouldn't walk from the middle of the street; they should walk from the sides [not to be visible in the public or to avoid attention]. I mean, I can say that I don't care about things that contradict my daily practices. (Yıldız, Interview, 2025)

As seen above, although Yıldız is a practicing religious person, she still negotiates between her overlapping identities and decides her actions accordingly. These negotiations can also appear in sophisticated forms. For instance, Esra's identities, such as being a mother, a woman, and a follower of the Kuran, intersect in her decisions when inheritance law is asked of her. In Kuran, the inheritance is divided unevenly between the son and the daughter.

In the Kuran, chapter Nisa verse 11 states:

> "GOD decrees a will for the benefit of your children; the male gets twice the share of the female… All this, after fulfilling any will the deceased has left, and after paying off all debts…" (The Final Testament, Nisa, 11).

Esra stated that she does not think that men and women are equal, but that they are two different people who complement each other. When she elaborated on the inheritance law, she was torn between her inner voices and different identities.

> I can't say I think sharply like this or that. But if you ask me how you would share your parents' inheritance with your brother, I would say two to one [brother gets double of what sister gets]. I listened to different interpretations, but I think if this is what the Kuran says, I'm okay with it. Maybe there is a hidden wisdom behind this order that God knows, but I don't know. Let me think of my daughter and son, how would I do it? I would go for half and half. It is very interesting, but yeah, this is how I feel. For instance, soon, my son will have a wedding; I will do the same for my daughter and spend everything I spend on my son's wedding (Esra, Interview, 2025).

As seen in Esra's explanation, her identity as a mother, a religious Muslim, and her principle of fairness and maternal responsibility led her to negotiate between her identities and create her intersectional subjectivity. Esra blends a unique identity by positioning herself in different identities, such as being a Muslim and being a mother. As a Muslim, she chooses to get less than her brother, and as a mother, she chooses to distribute inheritance equally between her male and female children. Esra's intersecting identities and her agency in choosing different ideas based on her positionality are also related to her habitus. For example, Esra was born in a family where her father was a socialist democrat. She lived her childhood and youth in a secular environment; however, when she started her bachelor's degree, she became involved in more religious settings with her friends, which influences her different positionality in her multiple identities.

On the contrary, Eylem for instance, pays more attention on the second part of the verse which states that the deceased can leave a testament.

> What made my heart settle down about this verse is the testimony of the parents. There is a matter of justice there; a parent can evaluate all the

> unique situations of their kids and decide how to distribute the property accordingly. For instance, there can be a situation where their daughter is economically in a worse situation and the son could be rich; in that kind of situation, the parent might say I want to give 2/3 of my wealth to my daughter. Then this become just. If this part is practices the rest of the verse won't be applied (Eylem, Interview, 2025).

Eylem's interpretations of the Kuran on inheritance indicate that her identity as a woman who searches for equality outweighs a traditionally subordinating Muslim identity. Eylem, like many other participants, negotiates her secular background with religious teachings in a way that aligns with her feminist values. Every individual in this study approaches this negotiation differently. Still, this intersectional tension between personal autonomy, gender justice, and religious faith is a key motivator in their shift toward Kuranist interpretations. The individualistic and pluralistic features of Kuranism motivate people to negotiate their overlapping identities and life experiences.

2. 1 Religious Individualism and Interpretive Pluralism

In traditional Sunni understanding, the interpretations are rigid, and the religion has a more hierarchical order where religious scholars make interpretations with their vast knowledge of Islam. Individuals or ordinary people without specialization in religion are expected to learn the teachings from scholarly leaders. There are also practices consulting the "ulama" experts of Islamic doctrine. In Turkey, Diyanet has a call center where people can call and ask about their unique cases to seek advice or "fatwah," legal opinion. This practice aims to guide religious individuals to act within God's order when something is not explicitly defined as "halal" (permissible) or "haram" (forbidden). Yet, Kuranists adopt a more individualistic approach.

Religious texts cannot be interpreted like a physics book, there are always different ways to read, understand and interpret a religious text. Ricoeur (1976) calls this notion a "surplus of meaning". As such, Kuran also can be understood in various ways. Different interpretations existed throughout the history mainly between the sects,

with restricting the authority to "ulama" Muslim scholars. However, Kuranism dissolves the religious authority and spreads authority to a linear position by allowing individual interpretations or understandings. Thus, it can be said that religious individualism and interpretive pluralism are in harmony in Kuranist thought. Therefore, in this section interpretive pluralism and religious individualism concepts will be discussed together with the examples of interviewees.

Kuranism locates rational thinking to the center of their approach and gives importance to read and study Kuran, and when someone combines their rational thinking with their knowledge in Kuran, they can make their own evaluations.
Turan portrays the deconstruction of hierarchy in Kuranism through interpretation and individualism elements.

> I feel super with Kuranism because you are free! You are knowledgeable. When you are ignorant, you are exploited and used by people's interests. Yet, when you have your own knowledge, you are not used to it, and whatever the topic, you give your own decision based on the Kuran. That's why I feel knowledgeable and free. I used to think, who gives the authority to these molla/imams? And I used to think, can I reach that position? If so, I would produce a different version of understanding. In fact, Prof. Taslaman said something similar. He once said everyone can make their own "ijtihad" (Islamic judicial opinion) and in order to do this, you need to know the Kuran, and you need to think about what the Kuran says about this topic. That's why everyone should learn the Kuran. When nobody reads the Kuran, they are easily manipulated, and they believe what is said. (Turan, Interview, 2025).

In many of the Abrahamic religious understandings there is clergy, religious authorities that are seen closer to God than a regular person. Especially in Islam, there are some cult leaders who portray themselves as channels to make regular believers come closer to God through themselves, by a total submission. However, in Kuranism, there is an emphasis on reading and learning the Kuran, being knowledgeable on it, and making your own "ijtihad". In this statement, we can see how Kuranism allows multiple interpretations of Kuran by individuals. This linear approach also eliminates

the religious clergy and decentralizes the authority. For instance, Turan draws attention to authority by saying “who gives the authority to these molla/imams? Can I reach that position?” This critic is not to the official religious authorities, such as Diyanet, or those who are trained in theology departments. However, the cult system in many of the Muslim societies, including Turkey, is not regulated by the government and is open to exploitation.

In cult organisations, there is a religious leader (mürşid) and the followers (mürid). There is a fundamental teaching in cults that is influenced by sufism, which says “Be like a corpse in the hands of the washer of the dead” (Islamveihsan, 2023). The followers are expected to submit to their leader like a dead body, without any question, and trusting their spiritual leader for their inner journeys. However, the submission to a religious leader and not questioning any request sometimes results in exploitation. A few of the common exploitations are financial, sexual, and emotional. For instance, the cult advises a modest life; however, in the “menzil” cult, the government declared that the cult leader has more than 144 different estates (DW, 2024) in the menzil region. Again, many of the religious organisations work as holdings running different companies in different sectors such as Islamic tourism, student dorms, halal markets, TV Channels, etc. (Akaltun, 2025; HalkTV, 2025). Several sexual exploitation incidents have happened in the cults, both to underage kids and to adults, through manipulation (Tele1, 2019; Girit, 2016).

Instead of being at risk of exploitation by religious sects, Kuranism calls people to connect with God, by themselves, without the mediation of a religious leader or an authority. Connecting with God personally requires connecting with his book, Kuran in a language that one understands. The emphasis on worshipping only Allah without human mediators, in other words, religious authorities, more dangerously, cult leaders, is the basis of encouragement of reading and studying the Kuran.

In contrast, in Sunni Islam the emphasis is on reading the original Arabic text even if one does not understand it. It is believed that by every letter a Muslim read in the original Arabic text, they accumulate “good points”. These “good deeds” that

derives from their worship, following the rules and being ethical will be calculated in the hereafter; and people who has more “good deeds” than their faults will enter heaven.

Reading the Kuran in Arabic very well is a sign of religiosity, and it is considered a crucial act of worship that many parents send their kids to mosques in summer to teach them how to read the Kuran in Arabic. It is also important to recite Kuran with tajwid, pronouncing the Arabic letters in an appropriate way and learning the poetic rules of the text such as where to pose and breath. For example, in TRT, the Turkish national TV channel, in every Ramazan period, there is a contest on Kuran recitation. In this program, contesters join read a part of Kuran and juries rate their performances. Along with the Arabic text, the translation of Kuran is also available and permitted for Sunni Muslims. In Turkey, although not as frequent as reading the Arabic text, people also sometimes read Turkish translations however, the scholar leaders emphasize that one cannot understand Kuran on their own, and they should also read the exegesis that the Sunni scholars write; or people should ask their questions to imams. In this way, although people are allowed to read and understand the Kuran, the hierarchy is still protected, and a single Sunni interpretation is preserved (Yavuz, 2003, pp. 234–236).

In contrast, Kuranism celebrates interpretive pluralism whereby one can understand different meanings from Kuran verses. In fact, Kuranist scholars have different opinions or interpretations of many of the Kuran verses, such as pilgrimage, headscarf, and performing sacrifice, which are a few of the concepts to count. The pluralistic nature of Kuranism decentralises the religious hierarchy, where there is no longer a religious authority like Diyanet or cult leaders who suggest only a single type of Kuran exegesis is true. In Kuranism, different opinions or exegesis are considered legitimate, which allows more people to find the answers they are looking for in a religion and to craft their own individualistic religiosity.

Thus, the wide range of interpretations on different topics in Islam allows Kuranist people to have different standpoints on different topics based on what fits their

logic and heart. For instance, none of the interviewees said that they only follow a single Kuranist scholar; most of them counted several different scholar names that is known for their different interpretations of certain topics. The decentralized religious perspective leads to unique Muslims and cultivates tolerance and respect towards different ideas.

For instance, during the process of becoming a Kuranist, Selim explains how he compared the Kuran translation.

> I took several Kuran translations side by side, both from Sunni and Kuranist translations. I contrasted how they translated the verses, how they translated contradictory words, then I compared how the same word is used in different verses, then I realised the Kuranist translations are the most convenient ones. (Selim, Interview, 2025)

Selim points out that the best translation or the best knowledge is gained when someone does their own research and by what they understand with their own intellectual capacities.

> There are more than fifty Kuran translations in Turkish, l study and research on many translations but l think the best translation is when you do your own research (Selim, Interview, 2025).

This pluralistic understanding of interpretations also leads to more tolerance between different understandings, both within Kuranism and with Sunni thoughts.
For instance, Selim talks positively about having different ideas and discussions with Sunni people in the association where he goes regularly.

> Sunni friends also come to the institution meetings. We do not say any negative words to them. We have both Sunni and Kuranist friends in our activities and I think this is a richness, where people with different opinions sit and discuss topics together. (Selim, Interview, 2025)

In Kuranist thoughts, people are also very respectful of different interpretations. For example, according to Sunni thought, women cannot perform salah (daily prayers) nor fast when they are menstruating because they are considered spiritually “impure”

(Scheunchen, 2024). Yet, Kuranists argue women are allowed to perform their worship since Kuran does not command otherwise. They consider this interpretation "Israiliyat," which means Muslim scholars being influenced by the Jewish understanding and their cultural practices back in the time and they used Jewish sources and interpretations in their Islamic texts (Taslaman & Taslaman, 2019, p. 139).
Yıldız explains this plurality as such:

> I mean, I don't pray or fast during my period, because I do not want to. If someone wants to do it, they can do it… Also one day l saw one of my friend who perform salah like a man (there is subtle differences between how men and women pray, women tie their hands on their chest, while men tie hands on their stomachs.) I asked her why she prays like that, and she said I feel more comfortable like that. I was like man! Seriously! Why should one not pray in the way they feel comfortable? What's the difference if you tie your hands here or there? (Yıldız, Interview, 2025)

Yıldız portrays the pluralist interpretations of worshipping during menstruation based on one's own will, which also allows her to position herself in her religious journey to a place that she feels comfortable, by actively choosing what she wants. Similarly, her friend's changing the location where she puts her hands during a prayer is considered a subtle detail, which does not affect the main purpose of the worship, "communicating or worshipping God".

These interpretations are also highly connected with a person's emotional stance. As such, Fatih defines "salah" as the Islamic prayer that includes certain movements of standing, bowing, and prostrating, and uniquely reading sections from the Koran.

> Sometimes, I look at the clouds, and I remember the Kuran verses. I feel like flying at that time. They say to contact/converse with God during prayers, for instance, when I feel like I'm praying. I guess what they say contact with God means this, it means to have that intense feeling. (Fatih, Interview, 2025)

To conclude, the motivations of individuals who convert to Kuranism are not only religious questioning but also a search for personal freedom and individual interpretation. Participants have a desire to construct their religious understanding within the framework of religious individualism and to develop a belief practice independent of authoritarian religious structures. Interpretive pluralism is another term discussed in this chapter. The Kuranist approach allows for multiple interpretations, which creates a space for personal interpretations with flexible positioning. By negotiating between their secular and religious backgrounds, participants have both developed a distance from the conservative gender roles of traditional Islam and sought individual satisfaction in their new religious understanding. Hence, what practices did interviewees change in their lives on gender-related topics?

Chapter 3: Unlearning: Modesty, Femininity, Rebuilding Masculinity

Interviewees shared their unlearning processes. The main unlearning themes are gender related. Thus, in this chapter, concepts such as the political connotations of the headscarf and how interviewees reframe modesty through Kuranism will be explained. As an unlearning process, it will also be discussed how both men and women change themselves in building new femininities and masculinities.

Headscarf is one of the main themes in this chapter's discussion, but is the headscarf solely a religious obligation or a religious practice? In Turkey, a headscarf is both seen as a religious duty and a political stance, especially in recent years. In the historical chapter above, the religious-secular background of Turkey is explained. Since the government allowed religious organizations and activities in general without strict supervision, and both political Islam and cult organizations gained power in Turkey in the 1990s, a post-modern military intervention happened in 1997 (Bakir, 2024). The military intervention put pressure on the political Islamist party to apply a set of secular rules they had announced, which caused the prime minister, Erbakan, to resign from his position. The announced rules required hijabi women to join university campuses/buildings only without a headscarf, so-called "headscarf ban" (Bakir, 2024).

The current ruling party (AKP) criticized the undemocratic practices of the universities in 1997 and used the headscarf as a political rhetoric by saying "our hijabi sisters" (Akboğa, 2020; Topal, 2022). This possessive approach towards hijabi women cultivated polarization in the society. It created an image of a woman with a headscarf, "must be voting for the right-wing parties/ supporting political Islam". Hence, the headscarf is seen as a political symbol in Turkey, along with its religious significance. In the meantime, many of the Kuranist scholars argue that there is no headscarf mentioned in the Kuran. A few of the interviewees decided to remove their headscarves after becoming a Kuranist, and they mentioned the political connotation they had to carry before.

Eylem (46) is one of them. She wore a headscarf for 30 years and decided to remove her hijab after becoming a Kuranist. She said she feels freer after becoming a Kuranist, and she was feeling restricted in Sunni Islam. One of the main reasons that she feels free is related with the discussion of the existence of headscarf in Islam. Eylem lives in Antalya, a seaside tourist city in Turkey, which is also a very secular city, where left parties are usually elected. She explains her social restrictions due to her headscarf in a secular city.

> "I was feeling restricted, I mean, first even putting on a headscarf in Antalya, a secular city, is very problematic, the mindset of the people. Hijab affects their prejudice, whether they will befriend you or not. They label you as "enemy of the Republic," "enemy of Atatürk," or they label you as a member of a certain party (right-wing), and they start speaking with you with this prejudice. I used to always feel this pressure on me when I was joining a new setting. I always felt the pressure of explaining myself to them. I am not that, or I am not like that. I always had to show that I think like you. But there is no such prejudice when you do not put on a headscarf. They directly think that she is part of us. In this regard, I feel more relaxed and freer. I do not feel restricted or pressured." (Eylem, Interview, 2025).

The Kuranist interpretations of Islam, where women are not expected to cover their hair as a way to perform modesty, opened up a space for women whose choices were politicized.

Similarly, Saliha also mentioned the political connotations of the headscarf that she has to confront. She was 9 years old when she joined kids' Kuran lessons, where she was learning the Arabic alphabet to read the Kuran. She had a very energetic and fun Arabic teacher wearing a headscarf. The teacher became an idol for Saliha, and she had a positive impression of hijab through her teacher. She explains what she thought at that time.

> "Hijab was sympathetic to me; I thought it would be something I could do. I didn't know that it was something so externalizing in society."

Saliha started to put on a headscarf in Middle school when she was 14 years old. She thinks hijab was not something she internalized but was an act of being a Muslim.

> "I used to hear that when you menstruate, you shall put on a headscarf, and since I had a positive impression of hijab, I did it. But l was not a Muslim, my surrounding was Muslim, and they were acting in an Islamic way" (Saliha, Interview, 2025).

Saliha was unaware of the symbolic power of the headscarf in the society, as she states "l was not Muslim" she refers that she was just fourteen years old and she decided to put on a headscarf not very consciously but because it was part of her surrounding teachings and expectations.

Due to laicism policies in Turkey, headscarves were not allowed in schools. This allowed Saliha not to be labelled by her headscarf and gave her a smooth high school experience.

> "In high school l didn't have a serious questioning. Since there was a headscarf problem [referring to the school law] at school, people did not label me as a hijabi person." "I didn't know the political connotation of the headscarf. I mean I didn't know it was going to affect all aspects of my life, when I joined the public sphere after high school, that people would radically attribute a lot of religious viewpoints on me. I did not have this consciousness during high school; I was just putting on a hijab because it was appreciated by my parents and by the public. It was not because I thought Allah requested it, so I'm doing it. It was an act of tradition." (Saliha, Interview, 2025)

Beyond the political connotations, the headscarf is also a symbol for certain religious viewpoints, as mentioned by Saliha. Therefore, when women want to perform a religious duty, they also carry prejudices from the public, whether about their political stance, lifestyle, or viewpoints on general things. Eylem and Özge argue that carrying a symbol is an unequal responsibility of Muslim men and women in the public sphere.

Eylem says:

> " For instance, from the clothes of men, it doesn't reflect which religion they belong to. In this case [with Kuranist interpretation], we became equal to them. I mean, when we don't have a hijab, when we have regular clothes, as men do, we are also no longer symbolizing an identity. I think we are equal to men now in this topic. For instance, if a religious man goes to a bar, nobody judges them, but if a hijabi woman goes to an alcohol-consumed place, she stands out in that place and people stare at her. Hijab was a political symbol; now that I have removed it, I feel more equal with men in public settings.

Özge also talks about different responsibilities that come with putting on a headscarf.

She says:

> I think headscarf is not an obligation (farz). I don't have proof, but I don't think God would give different responsibilities to men and women. I removed my headscarf because it was hard for me. When l observed my Muslim male friends l thought that they have an easier life than me because they didn't have a physical struggle. I was going to the library, drenched in sweat. First l was sitting cooling down and then was able to start studying. But a male friend comes in and just opens his book straightaway. But I'm waiting for my neck and forehead to cool down and sweat to dry, or I have to check if my hair is visible, if my headscarf has slipped. And it is always the case when I go out. Also, **there is always something that the hijab adds to me. I was living with the labels that come from outside, like if a woman is putting on a hijab, she should be like this.** This adds too much weight on a woman, **and I don't think Allah would give such an imbalanced responsibility to men and women.** Maybe a headscarf was a needed precaution at that time in history, or perhaps it is interpreted differently, maybe it was for the wives of the prophet or noble women who

had a headscarf. I am not fully knowledgeable about this topic, but my inner feelings tell me. I don't think God would be unfair on this topic, so I don't think a headscarf is a religious obligation (farz).

Özge thinks there is unequal responsibility for dress code in Islamic traditions, where wearing a headscarf is seen as a religious duty. She thinks that it both brings physical setbacks and the "labels", prejudice attached to the symbolic nature of the headscarf. On the contrary, Yıldız believes some of the prejudices function as preconditions set in society by her hijabi status that benefit her.

She says:

> My first knowledge of hijab was that it is a command of Allah and a covering to fulfill the duty. I evaluate the headscarf with identity. I started wearing a headscarf when I was 12, and I wanted people to judge me not by my appearance but by my character. I saw the transition in my male friends before and after I put on a headscarf. I had some male friends who were inappropriately casual with me. Even when I was warning them, they did not care. But when I started to put on a headscarf, they got away from me; they started to respect me more. It made me so happy. I mean, they couldn't get too sincere; they can't be touchy; they can't catcall you. I was like, wow; I only put on a headscarf, and here is the magic. This made me feel so good. The headscarf directly drew boundaries, and my life continued like that. They think twice before they act or talk to me. I feel like my Muslim identity is automatically assigned. I like this, I don't know if it is the case for others, but I love my headscarf, I put it on by love and I have never thought of removing it.

Yıldız, although being a Kuranist and aware of the interpretations that the headscarf is not obligatory, she actively chooses to keep her headscarf. She considers it part of her identity, and she enjoys the benefits it brings to her. Although there are negative connotations or prejudice against the headscarf that one should carry while

putting on a headscarf, Yıldız considers this responsibility as an act of contributing to Islam by shattering the prejudice against Islam, through her Hijabi identity.

> When people see my hijab and when they learn my viewpoints, they get a positive impression of Islam. When I travel abroad, I usually get a response that they say you are a very different hijabi. We did not expect something like this. I am like, I don't know what you were expecting, but I am a kind of hijabi. I mean, without even noticing, with my headscarf and with my Muslim identity, I contribute to Islam being known. (Yıldız, Interview, 2025)

3.1 Redefining Modesty as an Act of Agency

The headscarf interpretation has two groups within Kuranist some scholars argue that women used to have a scarf on their head, and God revealed the best way to put on the cover, which is covering from hair to the chest. While other scholars interpret the situation as women used to put on a fabric on their head as part of their tradition, and for the requirements of the climate of the Arabic Peninsula with strong sun and sandstorms, the only part that is mentioned in the Kuran is to cover the chest. Therefore, the Arabic tradition cannot be treated as the order of God, if not explicitly mentioned in the Kuran. The second interpretation creates a new modesty understanding, where women can be modest without a headscarf.

Saba Mahmood challenges the concept of forming an agency as an act of resistance against power. Instead, she argues that agency is not necessarily about resistance to domination. Agency can also be in the form of participation in activities that are traditionally seen as subordinate (2001, p. 211). As such, we can argue that the interviewees, both those who decided to remove their headscarves and those who still choose to wear them, are actively forming their autonomous subjectivities with their ethical insights.

Eylem, who used to put on a headscarf, redefined her modesty as a self-constituting subject (Mahmood, 2001, p. 210). When I asked whether she thinks there is headscarf reference in the Kuran, she explained:

> I mean, there are some Kuranist scholars who still argue that there is a headscarf in the Kuran, and there are also others who argue there is no. I don't know if it exists or not for 100%. But when I read the verse myself, the verse talks about covering the breasts, not covering the hair. When I was putting on the logic, I had never understood why hair is so important, why they had to be covered, because it does not resemble sexuality. I was not finding it logical, but I was like, well, if it is written in the Kuran, it is what it is. It is not logical, l think the headscarf verse could be affected by customs and traditions. But seeing a headscarf in other religions also leaves me with a question mark sometimes. But even if it is mentioned in Kuran, it is not the fundamental requirement of faith. It is only hair; it is not related to moral values, it is not like adultery. I don't think hair being visible or covered is important to Allah. There is also no punishment for that; if it were an obligation, there should have been a punishment. I think it can only be advice.

In Eylem's explanation, she admits that when she was within Sunni understanding, she thought that it was illogical to cover the hair, but she still obeyed the rules, while in Kuranism, she found a space to form her modesty and religiosity in a new form. Interviewees' interpretations of religious text, Kuran is a form of their ethical self-formation, rather than simple obeying. For instance, Sezen, from a secular background, has not and still doesn't wear a headscarf. She says she would choose to do it if she thought it was required in the Kuran, which shows her active choice and forming her ethical understanding.

She says:

> In hadith the women figure was always fully covered, but in Kuran it is not the case. If there was a headscarf reference in Kuran, it would not matter to me because l would think Allah commands what's best for us and l would try to implement it. I am not sure if l would practice it though, but l can say that there is no headscarf in Kuran but there is modesty. I think modesty is woman dressing up moderately without explicitly highlighting the sexual

> identity. I think this is one of the differences between men and women. As mentioned in verses, women are adornment (ziynet), more beautiful and attractive than men. So God says be prominent with your character in the society not with your womanhood or sexuality. Thus, dress up moderately, although it can change from one society to another there is still boundaries. In Chapter Nur, 31 says cover your adornment (ziynet) l mean the chest, says cover with a piece of cloth. I think in this verse it talks about putting on moderate clothes for the parts that highlight sexuality.

Sezen does not being rebellious against the expectations of a religion as liberal Feminists would argue, she still respects the religion and agrees with the new forms of "modesty" as a subject for her body and life choices. It is also crucial to pay attention

that the Kuranist interpretations were actually the source that provided the interviewees to change their ideas on a headscarf. So, instead of thinking female interviewee's re-formed their ethical understanding autonomously, they are influenced by the Kuranist teachings.

Özge removed her hijab a couple of later. She became a Kuranist, but she was not aware if she was influenced by the new emphasis of "servants of God" rhetoric rather than the women and men division. She says:

> I removed my headscarf a couple of years later, I became a Kuranist. But did it influence me? Well, it did… I did not think before that Kuranism and removing the headscarf could be related (Özge, Interview, 2025).

Submission, patience and being on the flow are also forms of agency, according to Saba Mahmood's understanding of the concept. For instance, Saliha is putting on a headscarf and wishes to remove it. She could choose to remove her hijab but instead her ethical values and priorities about her family influence her choice, demonstrating her ethical subjectivity.

Saliha studied philosophy for a bachelor's degree and later continued her studies for a master's degree. The questioning mechanism in philosophy influenced her, and she became an Agnostic.

> During my studies, I realised that I no longer think as a Muslim. As a Muslim, I didn't align with the image that was being projected onto me from the outside, thus l wanted to remove my headscarf (Saliha, Interview, 2025).

She spoke with her family about her idea.

> I said l will stop speaking with a Muslim identity, I can't speak up like that and l want to continue my life without a headscarf. My family did not accept it, they said it is hard for them to face the fact that I am an Agnostic, and I want to remove my hijab. I had to start a life that is away from them.

Saliha moved to Istanbul, where she came across the Kuranist Kuran translation through her roommate, but she did not remove her headscarf.

> There is no such command in the Kuran which says women should cover their hair. I still care about my family. I accept that I am performing a tradition, not a religious duty, but I also accept that people have different sensitivities. I locate myself strategically in terms of hijab, I give myself a space and let life flow.

Saliha cares about her family's feelings and does not wish to upset them, thus her choice of maintaining her headscarf is a free choice which proves her agency.

3.2 Kuranism from Theory to Practice

Kuranism by its progressive interpretations plays a role to help people form new ideas and leave their previous ideas behind. Kuranist interpretations create new ideas and practices in people's minds, as observed from the interviewees. For instance, when Yıldız came across a Kuranist Instagram account for the first time, when one of

her friends reposted it, she recognised that the page had a different Islamic rhetoric with religious women figures who are not wearing a headscarf.

She explains:

> When I came across this Instagram account, I saw a very different Islamic image; it was not like Islam, there were no sectarian scholars, but the content was religious, and I also felt it was relatively Christian as well. I thought, where does my friend belong? I followed the Kuranist account and l realised that nothing really disturbs me. Most of the girls on that account had no hijabs, and it really impressed me. They are Muslims, they have a Muslim identity, the way they talk and their life-styles are suitable to Islam. It was different than the perception of hijab-non-hijab women (Yildiz, Interview, 2025).

With Kuranists, Yıldız came across religious Muslim girls, who do not put on headscarves but are still attached to their Islamic identity, creating Islamic content on social media. Kuranism builds a new gender perspective within Islam. It emphasizes "humanity" over "gender" and respects the agency of individuals regardless of gender.

After becoming a Kuranist, Fatih changed his perception of women and realized that Kuran is more about humanity.

> With the religious teachings, I used to hear things like, women should put on a headscarf, they shouldn't be in public, they shouldn't be in the same places as men, and I used to agree with the teachings. **I used to think that where there is a woman, there is a sin.** Of course, women could work, but they should be away from the public as much as possible so that they wouldn't tend towards sins. Later, I got to know Kuran, and I realised that we are sinning when women exist in public is not because of the women, but it is about our perception towards women. It is about our "nafs" (desires). In Kuran, when addressing a topic, it does not say Oh women! or Oh men!, it is always Oh believers! For

> instance, this equality impresses me so much. Kuran does not differentiate between women and men, it sees us as humans (Fatih, Interview, 2025).

In Sunni Islam where most of the scholars are male with a patriotic structure, it is a common practice for male imams to talk about how a woman should dress or behave. They are often critical of how women dress, and they are dissatisfied. Not putting on clothes that are not loose enough, or colors that take the attention like red, putting on make-up while also having a hijab are a few of the common critiques by the Sunni scholars. Interestingly, the Kuranist scholars' general approach is non-judgmental. They do not talk in a possessive manner where they see themselves as authorities to judge or criticize the way women dress, which is not a common practice. The consequences are also observed with the male interviewees. When questions about the female dress code/hijab and general questions that are about women are asked, three of the male interviewees said that it is better if women talk about these topics than themselves. It is a surprising and uncommon situation to observe religious men giving space for women to talk, which can also be interpreted as sharing the authority with women and abandoning hegemony over the female body.

After digging into Erdem's answers on a headscarf debate, he elaborated on his general thoughts by adding that women should decide on their clothing.

He said:

> First of all, I disagree with the niqab (women covering the face). There is no reference in Islam to the niqab. This is an extreme case; it demolishes the identity of a woman. The face should always be visible because it is a reflection of someone's character, and it is a symbol of one's identity. Yet they do it to please God, but God does not command anything like that.
>
> Regarding hijab, I don't see a headscarf in the Kuran, it talks about covering, but that covering is for the chest. But if a woman puts on a hijab, I wouldn't say you need to remove it either. **It is their decision, and I don't think men have a say in that.** Also, if just the hair of a woman seduces or

> make men fall for a sin; l think there is a sickness in that man's heart… I don't think women should dress in an extremely provocative way, but neither should they cover up. For instance, if they live in a warm city, they can put on shorts and a t-shirt, I don't think it is a problem. **And I think we should trust the decisions of women, they can decide what to wear** (Erdem, Interview, 2025).

Erdem thinks that even though he does not think there is a headscarf recommendation in the Kuran, he respects both women who want to wear it and those who don't. He thinks it is up to women to decide on their dress code, and they can make the best decision for themselves.

3.3 The Female Body in Sunnism vs Kuranism

The surveillance of the female body and sexuality by the patriarchal system is widely accepted in feminist studies (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Bordo, 1993). In the postfeminist era, the female body began to be controlled through different norms, mostly in Western and secular lifestyles, i.e., aesthetic regulation, body enhancement, and self-surveillance (Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2009). In Islamic societies, it can be said that the traditional or old-school patriarchal body domination practices are more prevalent due to the strict adherence to traditions. Yet, Kuranism has created a gap with its unique interpretations between secular forms of body domination such as the fragmentation of the female body in media, cosmetic expectations (Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2009), and traditional body domination in Islamic societies, such as woman voice and body being seductive elements for men, or the emphasis on obedience to husband (Leiliyanti et al., 2022; Al-Abbady, 2018)

On the one hand, Kuranism does not interfere with things that are criticized in the Sunni conservative tradition, such as wearing make-up or being charming, and on the other hand, it does not make these things into an expectation as in the secular patriarchal system. Both maintaining a religious stance and abandoning the regulatory discourse of women, which derives from the Sunni tradition, have influenced Kuranist women, as observed from the interviews. The Islamic perspective shaped by Turkey's

secular structure, Turkish culture, and perception is naturally different as a "lived religion" than the rhetoric exists in the traditional Sunni classical books. For instance, in Fiqh studies, prominent faqih's (Islamic law scholars) built Islamic Family Law books based on hadith narrations such as "The intellect and faith of women are deficient." Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī 298; "Prayer is interrupted by a woman, a donkey and a dog, but something like the back of a saddle protects against that." Muslim (511). During the interview, Veysel argued that the difference between the lived Islam and the theoretical Sunni discourse (which is applied more in some other countries than solely being theoretical) is not sufficiently understood in Turkey.

> Everything in Kuranism is so logical. There is a big difference between Sunni teachings and Kuranism. Some people do not shake hands with the opposite gender, they don't stay in the same room, they fully divide the social settings as male-female. The further radicals can't eat freely [referring to women who cover their faces]. There is a big difference, but the people in Turkey do not see this huge difference. If they try to implement all the Sunni teachings fully, they will have an oppressed life, but the Sunnis are more relaxed now compared with the past. Some things are not applied anymore. For instance, when a Sunni man defends male circumcision vigorously. I tell my dear brother, the same sect, the same people, also claim that there is female circumcision/ FGM. If I don't remember it wrong, 200 million women have undergone FGM. If you are sincere, you should also apply this, but because we don't have such a culture in Turkey, it is not applied. I mean, there is a very big difference, but people are not aware. There is a massive gap between a Sunni woman and a Kuranist woman, but it seems there is no difference between them. (Veysel, Interview, 2025)[1]

[1] FGM practice dates back to 450 BC by the historical records of Herodotus, thus FGM was practiced before Islam however the custom is not condemned by Islamic resources (Little, 2015).

As Veysel argues, many of the practicing religious women in Turkey have a relaxed lifestyle, and they are not bonded with many of the Sunni teachings in their daily lives, which makes people not recognize the teachings as a whole.
Esma's response to a question, "What have you used to think about Kuran or hadiths that are related to women, or the general mindset of what a woman cannot do before becoming a Kuranist?" supports what Veysel claims.

> In my social circle, women were not very restricted. I grew up in a relaxed society; my father is a social-democratic teacher. We did not have "prohibitions" in our house, so perhaps that's why l did not question things about women (Esma, Interview, 2025).

Although Esma started to put on a headscarf with the suggestion of her elder sister, and was reading religious books, she did not face a lot of limitations as a woman. Similarly, Eylem was also putting on a headscarf and she was a practicing Sunni woman, but she also did not face a significant change in her transition from Sunni to Kuranist lifestyle.

> I did not grow up in an oppressive family. My husband is also not oppressive, that's why l did not face a big change or an influence in my life, after becoming a Kuranist. The only big difference happened to me was when l removed my headscarf, well and now l can have nail polish. (Eylem, Interview, 2025)

3.4 Allowing Femininity and Womanhood

The Sunni Islam that is practiced in Turkey does not apply all of the traditional teachings and has been synthesized with Turkish culture. Nevertheless, women in Turkey who strive to be more pious are relatively more affected by the traditional teachings' attempts to regulate women's bodies, femininity, and sexuality. For instance, in some of the classical narratives, women are portrayed as seductive and a creature that calls for evil. In Fiqh books written by Islamic jurists, women's presence in the public sphere can cause "fitnah" (moral or social unrest). These ideas are supported by

several hadiths (narratives of the Prophet Muhammad). Several interviewees noted an enhanced connection with their womanhood or femininity after adopting Kuranism and rejecting classical interpretations of womanhood.

Among the interviewees Yıldız is the participant who is exposed to the traditional Islamic teachings on womanhood the most, since she attended the government high school on religion (imam-hatip lisesi) for those students who plan to build their career on theology. Yıldız shifted from one religious high school to another. Her first high school was a single school with only girls, and her second school was a gender-mixed one. Yıldız says that she faced a lot of ideological and social pressure in both of her schools regarding her womanhood.

> "In my first high school, there was a constant fear among us of hadiths. For instance, teachers used to frighten us by saying %95 percent some even said %100 of the hell will be filled with women."

Although the hadith that they refer to mentions "the majority of the dwellers of the fire are women," the teachers even gave percentages of the women in hell.

Yıldız continues

> I mean, we were young, it did not matter to us if it was 95% or 100% [to ask] what the source of it was, we tended to believe. Or there were teachings like a woman should know her place [her position in life, her limits]. For instance, teachings like a woman should not walk from the middle of the street, shouldn't be in sight [shouldn't be visible in public] (Yıldız, Interview, 2025).

Yıldız then transferred to a mixed-gender religious high school. In her schoolyard, a large percentage of the space was given to a football pitch, and a small space were given to girls.

> "3/4 of the space was given to the football pitch and only 1/4 was given to girls, and there were 1200 girls that we had to fit into that small schoolyard. Yet, only

> ten to fifteen boys were playing football, and they kept all that big space. And it was not allowed for us to pass to that side of the yard. Sometimes [while playing volleyball] our ball was landing over to the boys' side and when we went to pick it, the teachers were getting angry. For instance, once, there was nobody on the football pitch and I went and played football on my own. Then I was warned by the deputy headteacher. When l argued that there was nobody, the teacher said **people are watching you from the windows**, **you are a woman you shouldn't do this."** (Yıldız, Interview, 2025)

In Yıldız's school, the expectation of a pious woman is a calm, silent, submissive person who will not draw attention in public, especially the attention of guys. Therefore, girls passing to the boys' side of the yard, or playing football, which is associated with "man game", or "making yourself be watched by other guys", were all against the teachings of the pious Muslim girl.

After all the gendered pressure she have faced, Yıldız started to become more rebellious.

> "I was seen as the problematic girl, it made me feel so lonely but also powerful. Sometimes I was yelling or sniping at boys, I was shouting from the schoolyard to teachers, complaining out loud." (Yıldız, Interview, 2025)

Later on in university, Yıldız was in a secular atmosphere and she slowly recovered from the image of a woman that was taught to her in religious schools. She came across with the Kuranist social media accounts and got to know more on different existing Islamic interpretations.

> The interpreters of Islam were all men, but then I realised there are alternatives in interpretations where they locate women in the center. Then when l realised it, l thought we (women) are actually insiders, we are not excluded from the religion. We are not sitting outside the door, because in my high school, there was pressure on women. That's why I feel relieved [now]. I loved myself and my womanhood more in religion [after coming across Kuranist interpretations].

In Kuranism, all the historical patriarchal and sometimes misogynist exegesis, comments, and narrations are eliminated. The Kuran verses are interpreted in a more progressive way, which takes the most of the heavy weight of the patriarchal expectations embedded in Islam from the shoulders of Muslim women. When this suppression is removed, the Kuranist women naturally embrace their womanhood gradually.

Eylem also mentioned her connection with her femininity through Kuranism. When it is asked to Eylem, what do you like in Kuranism, she responded:

> For instance, I can polish my nails, which does not invalidate the ablution (cleaning rituals before daily prayers), and I can put on makeup. I perform ablution when I have a makeup. **These feelings exist in women, I mean the instinct to beautify yourself, but when you are a Sunni Muslim, it is restricted.** I did not polish my nails for thirty years, or I did not do makeup for thirty years. When l was putting on makeup and when l needed to perform ablution, l was feeling the necessity to remove my make-up first. This is also a freedom (Eylem, Interview, 2025).

Eylem pointed out that women have natural instincts to beautify themselves through making their hair, putting on makeup, or polishing their nails; however, in Sunni Islam, these feelings are considered dangerous and women are permitted to beautify themselves only in their household next to their husbands. Eylem allowed her womanly feelings to be practiced in public, which are not considered a public threat "fitnah", nor practices that invalidate the ablution for daily prayers.

3.5 Interacting with the opposite gender (Namahrem)

In traditional Islam, people learn, either explicitly or subtly, that there should be limited social interaction with men and women. With Kuranist teachings, the emphasis on men and women is replaced with "Servants of God." Men and women are united under the umbrella of being "humans" again. Kuranist scholars preached that

women and men can interact with each other and referenced their arguments mainly with two verses in the Koran.

In the Kuran chapter Nur, 61, men and women can dine together. Additionally, in Hud 71, Abraham's wife Sarah laughs next to a stranger messenger angel who comes as a human.

"And his wife was standing, so she laughed when we gave her good news of Isaac, and after Isaac, Jacob." (Chapter Hud, 71, Kuran)

Furthermore, the new Kuranist teachings make interviewees change their behaviours in interactions with the opposite gender. In other words, we can say that they learn to undo Islamic self-surveillance. Banet-Weiser (2018, pp. 65-67) argues that women self-regulate themselves with the societal expectations of beauty, slimness, and youth to avoid humiliation or public pressure. As such, Sunni Muslims self-regulate themselves in gender related topics. Many women internalize the teachings and apply Islamic self-surveillance not to be too loud, not to be too visible, not to be too attractive, not to be too interactive with men.

Özge talks about her self-regulation and how she ceased the internalized teachings and regulations that she used to apply to herself.

> As a woman, with the traditional understanding I had internalized that I should be silent, and I should take less attention. I had very limited communication with men; I overcame it. Now I have closer relationships with my male cousins (Özge, Interview, 2025).

Thanks to Kuranist thoughts, Özge and some other participants recognized that the interaction with the opposite gender is not a problem. However, it is not always very easy to unlearn the earlier teachings, especially if one has internalized them deeply. Yıldız is one of them:

> My perception about "the sinful woman" has changed, but I don't think I have fully overcome my traumas. In high school, teachers were explaining that men

> are evil and women should escape from them, hide from men, etc. It really traumatized us, after the class, girls were crying and shaking, they were saying, " I dated a guy before, how will I ask for forgiveness. I don't think I can overcome this trauma. I'm still reserved around men. For instance, when I had just started my bachelor's, I felt uncomfortable and had low self-esteem when greeting a guy or in a simple conversation**.** I slowly improved, but the **teachings are so much at the root. They emphasized that women should hide from men, and they scratched it into my subconscious.** For instance, I used to walk hunched over so my breasts wouldn't show, and now I have a hunchback because of it (Yıldız, Interview, 2025).

The patriarchal teachings aiming to dominate the woman's body, femininity, and womanhood are deeply ingrained in Yıldız's case due to facing these ideas in her adolescence, embedded in her self-regulation trajectory. Moreover, Ülfet a middle aged woman was able to unlearn many of the regulatory practices she used to perform against the opposite gender.

> Kuran allows men and women to dine together, with the guests that you trust you can sit and eat together. Before I got married, I considered applying a segregated lifestyle (haremlik-selamlık) where men and women socialize entirely in different places. I have never applied it, and it is not where I am today, absolutely not! One thing that I changed in interactions with the opposite gender, there was a rhetoric don't look at men, don't do this or that. **A lot of things were expected from women**. For instance, women shall not raise her voice [or make her voice hearable to men], women were creating the "fitnah" (moral and social unrest), but nobody was focusing on the "fitnah" that was inside of the brain of men. For instance, now we think "fitnah" is in the eyes and mind of men. A reasonable woman can have dinner with the male guests who come to her house, she can sit and have conversations with them, within the propriety. I used to avoid eye contact with men. Men gaze at you disturbingly, but you shall not look because "fitnah" is in your eyes [as a woman], this was the mentality and l got rid of it. I now maintain eye contact

> in a formal way like a civilized person. I now give importance to eye contact so much, because we communicate with people with eyes, we understand the emotions and expressions with eye contact (Ülfet, Interview, 2025).

As Ülfet elaborated in the classical Sünni teachings, interaction with the opposite gender should be minimal. Yet, much responsibility is expected from women. The system is designed to control society by controlling women. Ülfet's example shows that even when men look at a woman in a disturbing way, women are expected not to look, instead of putting the emphasis on men regulating themselves.

The Kuranist interpretations give emphasis on the self-surveillance of men. As such, Fatih explains that he changed his mindset and his interactions with women.

> I used to approach women with more "nafsi" with desires. I polished off this a lot. I mean l realised that it is wrong, l should not differentiate as man or woman but see everyone as humans, they are all individuals and l need to interact them or approach them with this mentality, and this is how l approach to women now. I used to approach women with my impulse, I mean, would approach beautiful women, I would segregate them, but now I approach them thinking everyone is so precious because they are humans. (Fatih, Interview, 2025).

To conclude, this chapter has nuancedly explored several topics related to how Kuranism influenced its followers' lives, practices, and ideas on modesty, femininity, and womanhood. It is observed that with progressive interpretations, not taking classical Sunni resources as a reference point brought more gender-equal interpretations in Islam. The interviewees elaborated on the changes in their lives, which are the headscarf with its political connotation in Turkey; secondly, the theoretical difference between Sunni and Kuranism covers topics on agency, Islamic self-surveillance on femininity, womanhood, and interaction with the opposite gender. However, are progressive interpretations enough to emancipate women in every field of life? The next chapter discusses some of the constraints Muslim women still face.

Chapter 4: Continuity: Performing Gendered Religious Identity and Female Authority

Performativity is executing the performance in order to actualize one's identity in religion, gender, and other social identities. Identities are not fixed but in need of repetitive actions to manifest in real-life settings (Butler, 1999, pp. 45-65). Judith Butler (2018) explains gender performativity by linking it to social norms. What a society accepts as normal in assigned gender norms are the results of gender performativity. For instance, it is ordinary for women to be emotional, easygoing, and caregivers; however, this does not derive from one's sex, instead it is constructed by the expectations of a society and culture of a gender.

Identity is a sense of self, group affiliations, and earned statuses of people, and a process of becoming (Peek, 2005, p. 217). As such, religious identity represents one's inner sense and the practices to make them become "Muslim," for instance. Thus, religious identity is in need of being performed repeatedly. In this research, it is observed that performing religious identity in interviewees' new Islamic understanding is correlated with their gendered performativity. In other words, interviewees perform their religious identity based on gender roles. For instance, as supported by the previous research (Vince,2019; Mitchell & Mamone, & Rane, 2021), men have a tendency to position themselves in a knowledgeable status or leadership positions in the new religions they convert to. The same pattern is observed with the male interviewees in Kuranism in comparison to women.

The male participants are proactive and often assertive in advocating the Kuranist ideas. For instance, Erdem stated that he initiated an Instagram account on Kuranist ideas where he regularly publishes short anecdotes from Kuran, to draw attention on reading and understanding Kuran as a source of worship. At the same time, Veysel quitted his job and changed his entire career ten years ago. He started to work at a publishing house to support the publication and distribution of Kuranist books, as a way to show his dedication to Kuranist ideas. Veysel stated that every year they give

away hundreds of Kuranist books to people who are curious about Kuran-centered Islam, and they participate in book fairs in different cities in Turkey to acquaint Kuranism with a wider audience. He also admits that giving away books and participating in book fairs are in fact costly, but he, with his publication firm, does it for his commitment to outreach to more people and to make people meet with Kuranism. Again, Turan initiated the translation of the "Women and Islam" book by Prof. Taslaman to his native language, and he is still actively publishing new articles on science and Kuran compatibility. Hence, three of the five male participants are playing an active role in the dissemination of Kuranism in public, which confirms the previous studies on men's positionality as "intellectuals and/or leaders" in the new religious understanding.

As such, Fatih, a Turkish teacher in Middle School, also feels a duty to disseminate the Kuranist ideas, not to the public but at least to his network. Fatih is one of the most assertive people among all interviewees. He states that he always reads Kuranist books in school, leaving the book on his desk, hoping that someone would be curious and read it. He also publishes Kuran-related content almost every day on his personal Instagram and WhatsApp stories.

He says:

> My colleagues are sick of me because every time I try to open topics related to religion, I push them to question things. Before, I also used to hate people who always talk about religion, but those people were doing it for their own interest through the sectarian organisations. For me, l do not have any interest from it. I just want people to be more aware of God, death, and how life is too short, because I think most of us are really not aware of these things. There are some of my colleagues who I think are happy about my change. But there are also some others who don't like it. We had an argument with two of my colleagues regarding the existence of God (Fatih, Interview, 2025).

The male interviewees perform their religious identities with the gender roles that are assigned to them from a very young age. In their new Islamic understanding,

they perform what society typically considers male features such as being intellectual, knowledgeable, courageous, or becoming leaders. Yet, female interviewees did not position themselves in authority status like "they are knowledgeable, and they will teach others." Instead, they were more individualistic in living their religion, without the intention of changing the beliefs of others around them and avoiding potential confrontation with others on religious debates.

Yıldız explains why she does not share her ideas with others:

> I stopped conversing with the ignorant. When you explain to them, they always find an excuse to invalidate your arguments (Yıldız, Interview, 2025)

Indeed, Özge said her friends are mocking her for being a Kuranist. They call her "Salafi," which is a fundamentalist understanding under the Sunni branch. Salafism has a rigid understanding of interpreting the Kuran, and Özge's friends link it with Kuranism because they also focus on understanding the verses.

There are two layers of the avoidant behaviours of the female interviewees about advocacy of Kuranism, inner and external layers. In the external layer, as explained by the interviewees above, they are being mocked or criticized when they intend to position themselves as authority or knowledgeable in religious topics, which is dominantly seen as a male sphere. The second reason is that female interviewees have already internalized the gendered expectations of themselves, which is part of their *habitus* reflected in their ordinary decisions and actions. Female participants avoiding conflicts with their social circles on their lifestyle or belief system is the reproduction of the societal expectations on women, where they are expected to be humble, easygoing, and compliant, not outspoken or defiant.

These expected gender roles lead female participants to perform their religious identities in socially accepted ways. The gender roles are repeated in their religious performativity. For instance, Ülfet states that her mission is an act of goodness (iyilik).

She performs her religious identity through a caregiving position, which perfectly aligns with the features of being a woman.

> "I love volunteering. I support an elderly woman who lives alone without any expectations. I help her with everything she needs, as she is my own mother. I do not do this merely for religious command, but because it is a necessity of being a human. I mean it is for the elevation of my humanity. To reach a state of Kamal (the highest spiritual and moral status in Islamic thought), we need to do it."

4.1 Household as a sphere of influence

Most of the female interviewees did not mention their passion to advocate for Kuranist ideas or a more gender-equal interpretation of Islam. However, there is a natural influence observed in their stories. Even though they do not prefer to face the confrontation or rejection of their ideas or arguments, they might feel more comfortable sharing their ideas in their households. A safe place where they would not be harshly rejected, or where they would not be influenced by something they are not conscious of. It is observed that women naturally influence their children, husbands, sisters, cousins, or friends in the process. For instance, Özge explains her story on how she became a Kuranist by saying:

> "It's a bit like something I inherited from my mother…. I grew up with the traditional Islamic understanding, then my mum started to develop herself. She started to listen to the speeches of Mustafa İhsanoğlu, Mehmet Okuyan, and Abdülaziz Bayındır. These days my mum is listening to Şaban Ali Düzgün regularly, so do I. I just like it."

Similarly, both Ülfet and Eylem stated that their daughters became Kuranists. Eylem stated that her two daughters switched to Kuranism with her, and she teaches her youngest daughter religion, directly with a Kuranist perspective. Eylem says

> I now know that my third daughter can perform daily prayers in Turkish. She got rid of that pressure. She doesn't have to learn Arabic. She doesn't have to read the Kuran in Arabic or pray in Arabic. She will be able to do these in Turkish. As far as I see, my daughters are the ones who are affected the most by my change (Eylem, Interview, 2025).

Furthermore, Esma also explained how his husband was gradually influenced by her research.

> I am not alone; my husband also thinks more or less the same as I do. He used to practice Islam traditionally. Before, when he was hearing my opinions, he was thinking that l am wrong, and he was even anxious that I was losing my faith. Later on, he was listening to the videos with me when I was listening to them. When I was reading, he was also reading; he was also doing research. Now we are on the same page, even sometimes he is going further than I. We were talking about the act of sacrifice (Kurban) in Eid ul-Adha, he went as far as to say, "You know what, there is no act of sacrifice." For instance, I am not in that state (Esma, Interview, 2025).

Saliha also mentioned bilateral influences between her and her parents on Kuranist ideas. Although Saliha's parents would not label themselves as Kuranists, they have been aware of Kuranist discussions for over a decade, and they blended the Kuranist perspective with traditional Sunni Islam. So, Saliha first learned about the Kuranist approach from her parents.

> I have witnessed these processes a little. I did not experience the first encounter individually [my parents did].

Saliha has interacted with Kuranist thoughts since she was in high school. She has joined women's gatherings and conferences with her mother.

> I mean, I had not understood the root of the conflict, but I witnessed the discussions. For instance, at a conference, a woman told me the hair is not an

> adornment (ziynet). I mean, I did not think about it, but I heard it. (Saliha, Interview, 2025)

While the household and parents were the initial step in Saliha's encounter with Kuranist discussions, thus an indirect influence, Saliha also influenced his father in the headscarf debate with Kuranist arguments.

> "Even though we think differently, we put reasoning at a center of our discussions. I explained to my father the Kuranist arguments on hijab. I explained in these videos that they argue this and that, and my father got used to the reasoning realm. I told my father that I find hijab being a tradition rather than a religious obligation a reasonable argument. I asserted that removing the headscarf is not an act of desire (nafs) but a result of societal transformation. I mean, in the headscarf discussion, manhood and womanhood concepts changed a lot. He adopted a question mark over whether the headscarf is a definitive command in Islam or if it can be approached differently. I told him to do his own research, too. Even though we could not come to the same point in our debate immediately, later on, he watched the YouTube videos of Kuranist people. Many scholars on social media are in his age group. When my father saw that scholars from his own generation, with the same traditional background, actually spoke a similar language to me, it gave him relief and calmness. I mean, the tension of our debates decreased. Ultimately, we agreed that it is up to women to decide. I mean they (women) can consider hijab as a religious command or a tradition." (Saliha, Interview, 2025)

4. 2 The Agency of women and Leadership

Saba Mahmood's (2005) book on Egypt's mosque movement argues that women engage in religious practices such as organizing religious lessons among each other and choosing to perform piety as an act of agency. As such, the female interviewees, although not performing the typical leadership positions as men, engage in active initiations as an act of agency.

In fact, the Turkish Kuranist female interviewees also mentioned of study-Kuran gatherings. For instance, Ülfet and Esma met with each other in a women's Kuran reading gathering in Ankara. Similarly, Sezen is leading weekly meetings with other Kuranists in her city, where they gather and do critical readings on the Kuran. Saliha also mentioned her mother joining Kuran discussions, ups, and conferences, where she used to join as a teenager. They are active agency initiatives of women that should be appreciated. However, it should also be considered that these initiations are very traditional.

Religious female leadership to other women is allowed in the traditional Sunni understanding in Islam. In all of the four Sunni sects (Hanefi, Shafii, Hanbali and Maliki), women are allowed to teach religion to other women, preach, and advise them. Except Malikis, women can also lead a prayer to other women (Albayrak, 2016, p. 318) The hierarchy is between men and women in patriarchy, therefore women gathering up together and learning religion is not seen as a threat against patriarchy. This creates a situation that male religious authorities give a "playground" to women to perform what is permitted for them. Thus, if the traditional understanding is not challenged, female agency could also support the reproduction of patriarchy. Indeed, the pressure on women when they attempt to be religious authority is so intense that two of the interviewees explained their interest in feminist advocacy in secular manners, instead of owning religious advocacy. For example, Özge is a member of a feminist organisation in Ankara, where she was volunteering as the secretariat of the organisation during its first months. The feminist organisation has an Islamic intersection, where they evaluate the cultural and religious background of the problems women face in Turkey.

Yıldız is also a member of an Islamic Feminist organisation in İstanbul. She says

> Our sex is not something that we choose; it is given to us. Why am I deficient because I was born as a woman? I still couldn't understand that. I am deficient both in intellect [due to the belief that a woman's mind is "half"] and in rights. **I've been actively involved in this feminist fight for many years.** I met with

> Havle [the Islamic Feminist organization] during the COVID pandemic. After I saw that I am not alone, I mean I am putting on a headscarf and I'm a feminist and I'm not alone. After realising it, I really felt a power in me, a bravery. I felt the urge to raise my voice. I started by joining feminist marches.
>
> Later, I started to speak out about these topics in different settings. I thought I would be judged with my headscarf, because I have the opposite [*she means the secular Feminists*] and in the mind of my opposites, they think you put on a headscarf, there is no space for women in Islam, and if you are a Muslim, you cannot be a feminist. They directly write you off. When I saw that it is not the case, I exist. When they write you off, it does not make me disappear. I started to become stronger. And for 4-5 years, I have been active. I mean, I continue to speak about it, raise awareness, participate in marches, and engage in such activities, and it makes me feel so good and so strong. (Yıldız, Interview, 2025)

While Yıldız earlier mentioned that she stopped conversing about the progressive interpretations of Islam on women, it is obvious that she feels more motivated to join the larger feminist advocacy. In fact, it indicates that advocating for women's rights in a more secular sphere, i.e., political and social rights, is easier than advocating for women's rights under a religion. The dogmatic nature of a religion limits gender-equal arguments within its borders. In addition, a woman is not expected to talk about religion; when she does, her authority is more likely to be questioned.

Furthermore, Özge also mentioned that she joined the feminist march for the first time this year on the 8th of March, and she is active in her Islamic Feminist organisation, but she did not mention any desire to spread Kuranist ideas on gender related topics. To sum up, women actively exercise their religiosity. They gather weekly and make critical Kuran readings, or they channel themselves to more secular Feminist advocacy. Are Kuranist women not interested in religious leadership positions, or are there some invisible barriers behind it?

4.3 Glass Ceiling in Female Religious Authority

Kuranist understanding ignores the traditional male leadership in religion and promotes female leadership in every field of life by referencing the historical figure in Kuran (Neml, 20-44); Queen of Sheba (Belkıs in Muslim world). They argue that Kuran talks about the leadership of the Queen of Sheba and does not criticize her leadership, which indicates that female leadership is allowed in Islam. Whereas in Sunni Islam, there is a hadith narrated by Abu Bakra: When the Prophet heard the news that the people of Persia had made the daughter of Khosrau their Queen (ruler), he said, "Never will succeed such a nation as makes a woman their ruler." Sahih al-Bukhari 7099

Traditional interpretations strongly oppose female leadership and create a barrier against women. Kuranist scholars and prominent actors are both advocating for women's rights in Islam and are willing to create a space for women. Veysel explains his ideas on female religious authority.

> I have a friend who does not put on a headscarf, and her voice is good. I told her to read the Kuran translation out loud, record it, and then we can publish it on the Kuranist social media channels that I manage. [When we posted] We received a lot of criticism, there were comments like "Kuran translation with a female voice? What are you trying to do? [Are you bringing reform/ Don't you know the voice of women is haram] (Veysel, Interview, 2025)

When Veysel and his friend initiated this uncommon practice, in fact, they challenged the concept that "a female voice is a voice that attracts men, which should be kept silent" to the idea that a female voice can be a voice for religion, it can be listened to, and can be a tool to connect with God.

Veysel continues

> There are a few friends who do not cover their hair, and they make religious programs on social media. I think these practices get attention from a certain group of people. The number of these programs should increase [led by female

> members] because I think those people who are afraid to be "too conservative" can see the programs. I mean, for instance, a woman who has a secular life might think being religious means putting on a black chador (loose Islamic dress) and can have prejudice against Islam. However, if we have role models who do not have headscarves, perform daily prayers, create religious content, and talk about the Kuran, the image will change a lot. For instance, when a woman listens to Kuranist scholars, it won't influence her much, but if there is a female scholar who is equally equipped and knowledgeable and explains Kuran, it will be different. I think being a role model is more effective than a man explaining things (Veysel, Interview, 2025).

Veysel explains that Kuranism needs female role models and leaders to be publicly visible and change the general perspective on women's religious leadership positions. Female religious authority is a very challenging situation. In fact, Sezen, one of our interviewees, is one of the few female actors in the forefront of social media. She creates religious podcasts where she discusses different religious topics and gives insight. Interestingly, Sezen did not mention her social media initiative in her interview until I asked at the end of the meeting. She mentioned her podcasts briefly in contrast to the other male participants, who mentioned their initiatives at the very beginning of the interviews while introducing themselves.

Sezen could be subconsciously behaving in gender roles where a woman should be humble and should not talk about her success, but it could also be related to the religious authority position she takes as a woman in a society that expects the opposite. Authority is performative according to Butler (1997). When men in history repeatedly hold authority, it becomes "natural" and "normal" in society. Therefore, once it is performed enough times, it becomes associated with a male feature. When a woman challenges what is perceived as usual, especially in religious authorities, since there are fewer religious positions taken by women than the achievements in secular settings, it might also create discomfort in the person herself. The public easily and constantly judges Sezen's legitimacy, knowledge, and actions.

To sum up, women face invisible barriers in leadership positions, either due to internalized gender roles or public criticism. Kuranist scholars and interpretations are ready to support women in their religious authority journeys. However, it would be unfair to ignore the social challenges women face when they speak up.

Conclusion

This paper explored how Kuranist teachings on social media influence the Kuranist followers' gender perceptions and practices as shaped by Islam in Turkey. By rigorously collecting and analysing the personal narratives of twelve interviewees who transitioned to Kuranism, the study found that adopting progressive religious discourse fosters increased acceptance of gender equality practices among Turkish Muslim communities. Notably, the study's findings indicate that people who converted to Kuranism either came from a secular background or from religious individuals who did not identify with orthodox Sunni fundamentalism or secular values. Several study respondents stated that their families were not oppressive or strict in Islam. The Habitus concept explains this narrative well, where people's background identities shape the evaluations and new decisions. The individual religiosity and interpretive pluralism nature of Kuranism emerged as another pull factor for the Kuranism conversationists, because it allows people to negotiate their fluid and intersecting identities that are sometimes contradictory in an Orthodox Islamic environment. Examples of those are secular perception of gender equality or justice terms, vis-à-vis the traditional Islamic teachings and principles.

The second main finding of the study is that the progressive teachings of Kuranism in gender related topics influence the perception and practices of its followers. Many female interviewees explained the changes in their lifestyle and worship practices. They expressed how Kuranism felt like a liberatory space that allowed women to liberate themselves and re-interpret Islam in a more non-patriarchal manner. Female participants stated that they improved their self-acceptance with their modesty, femininity, and womanhood, as these were traditionally oppressed and condemned in Sunni Islam. More importantly, male interviewees also stated their support for women's emancipation, and some of them changed their sexist attitudes towards women.

Lastly, the research found that although Kuranist rhetoric is quite progressive and in support of women's emancipation and leadership, due to the embedded gender roles, many women avoid making use of this space to take authority positions. This

visible persistence of the notable absence of women in our religious leadership positions despite conversion to Kuranism presents a critical gap that warrants a rich potential for future research. Empirically, this research shows that digital religious movements like Kuranism reshape followers' gender-related beliefs and behaviours. It contributes to feminist anthropology and religious studies by combining Bourdieu's habitus, Butler's gender performativity, Robbins' conversion theory, and Crenshaw's intersectionality to analyze the transformation process of Kuranists. Indeed, the study would have benefited more from a longitudinal study to understand how these perceptions float over time and over space. Moreover, this is the gap my PhD dissertation will bridge as I aspire for a further research career.

Overall, Kuranism is an Islamic minority understanding with a growing impact in Turkey. The theoretical reforms strongly resonate with their followers and lead Kuranist people to change the way they think and live. The research faced a limitation while defining Kuranism and representing the theoretical framework of the Kuranist understanding, since it is a tiny community, specifically in Turkey. Most of the Kuranist arguments are distributed through social media channels, to reach people rather than to keep it a scholarly debate. In fact, this is the first anthropological research and the second qualitative research on the Turkish Kuranism in existing scholarship that I know of at the time of writing this dissertation. The other research paper is a PhD dissertation written by Dr. Filiz Orhan, where she provided a broad sociological analysis of the discourse around Qur'an-centric Islam in Turkey, based on the interviewees' narratives. My research largely drew from how Kuranist social media interpretations influence followers' perceptions and practices regarding gender roles. Unlike Orhan's work, which emphasizes discourse and diversity within the movement, this study is rooted in feminist anthropology and centers on the lived experiences of the Kuranist people.

I believe this research, with its intersection of progressive religious understanding with a feminist debate, will contribute to religious studies and gender studies (Islamic Feminist) scholarship. This research proved that theoretical and theological teachings strongly influence and contribute to a more just and gender-equal society. For further studies, it would be crucial to determine if there are Kuranist

participants from ex-cult organisations and how their change would be from radical gendered teachings to a more liberal one. The research includes elements on historical, political and social settings of Turkey which could be a trajectory in understanding the overall situation of Turkey in its swing from an EU candidate position which also represents the liberal values and ideas, to becoming an authoritarian regime; and how the political situations wave the religious debate in the country. From the interviews conducted, it is evident that many Kuranist people compromise their faith with their culture and viewpoints, and the Turkish Kuranist case serves as an example of intra-Islam and religious diversity. Lastly and most importantly, Kuranism theologically challenges symbolic classical structures and interpretation embedded in traditional Islamic thought, yet rooted in patriarchal norms that have historically justified women's subordination roles within the Islamic environment.

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