Embracing embodiedness, desire and failure: Women’s fluid gender performances in Sevgi Soysal’s oeuvre from the 1960s

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Abstract
The ‘women’s liberation’ of the global 1960s did not entail a full range of women’s rights, feminist politics and sexual freedoms in Turkey. On the contrary, the Turkish 1960s were characterised by a patriarchal heteronormative order that imprisoned women in a passive and essentially asexual identity and denied them control over their bodies. In Turkey, women’s emancipation was postponed. At the same time, the 1960s offered a juncture of literary renewal in women’s writing and representation, embracing the dictum ‘the personal is political’. This article focuses on three works by Sevgi Soysal (1936–1976), a key name of this period whose writing is concerned with the problematisation of what Judith Butler calls ‘the compulsory order of sex/gender/desire’. Relying on queer theory, we examine how Soysal’s Tutkulu Perçem (The Passionate Forelock, 1962), Tante Rosa (Aunt Rosa, 1968) and Yürümek (Walking, 1970) represent female characters’ growing awareness of their rich spectrum of gender performances, as they embrace their desires, transformations and confusions. In this way, Soysal’s works not only take the female body ‘out of the closet’ but also explore its multitude of desires and fluid possibilities.

Keywords
embodiedness, female sexuality, gender performances, global 1960s, queer theory, Turkish literature

The Turkish-German author Sevgi Soysal (1936–1976), whose prolific writing career was cut short by an untimely death, was an insightful critic of militarism, gender inequality and social injustices in modern Turkey. Her writing first began to appear in literary

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journals in her mid-20s and she published widely through the 1960s and 1970s. Her first collection of short stories *Tutkulu Perçem* (The Passionate Forelock) was published in 1962. Her first novel, *Tante Rosa* (Aunt Rosa), came out in 1968. These works were followed by *Yürümek* (1970, Walking), *Yenişehir’de Bir Öğle Vakti* (1973, Noontime in Yenişehir, 2016) and *Şafak* (1975, Dawn). *Yürümek* received the TRT Novel Achievement Award but it was also banned for obscenity. Soysal won the prestigious Orhan Kemal Novel Award in 1974 for *Yenişehir’de Bir Öğle Vakti*. In the aftermath of the military intervention on 12 March 1971, she was imprisoned for 8 months on political grounds and later exiled. Her novel *Şafak* critiques the military intervention from the perspective of an exiled woman. In 1976, she published her prison memoir, *Yıldırım Bölge Kadınlar Koşusu* (Yıldırım Region Women’s Ward).

While feminist sensibilities were introduced into Turkish literature by a number of women writers in the 1960s, Soysal’s female characters in particular manifest novel forms of performing their womanhood. Her ironic, at times sarcastic writing style and highly self-aware female characters established her as a unique voice in modern Turkish writing. Her characters resist giving in to hopelessness or despair; instead, they reflect on their conflicts and desires. As they contemplate their lives past, present, and future, her women seek to become active agents of their own fates against all odds. Their perception of and engagement with their embodied realities, that is, their recognition of the materiality, transformation and performativity of their bodies, render them strong and resilient.

This article focuses mainly on three of Soysal’s works from the 1960s, *Tutkulu Perçem*, a collection of highly opaque short texts, *Tante Rosa*, a sequence of short stories set in Germany among German characters that approximate to a novel, and *Yürümek*, a short novel with a male and a female protagonist who do not come into contact with each other until the last section of the book. We also touch upon some parts of *Yenişehir’de Bir Öğle Vakti* in order better to situate Soysal’s take on women’s performative embodiedness. Being products of an era of global feminist politics and a new understanding of the female body, these three works stand out through their liberating representation of women’s experiences. In their choices, failures, struggles, and new beginnings, there is an undeniable agency. Soysal’s works offer a nuanced recognition of the concurrent existence of patriarchal repression and women’s endurance and resistance, along similar lines to postcolonial feminism. Especially the protagonists of *Tante Rosa* and *Yürümek*, Rosa and Ela, respectively, embrace ‘their fall’ (and failures) and insist on life. They ‘fall’ many times, but they stand up again and start anew. Resilience defines their ‘womanly unknowings’, regardless of conventional expectations of ‘success’. Judith (Jack) Halberstam argues in *The Queer Art of Failure* (2011: 87–9 & 123–29) that we need to free our minds from ‘rational choice’ models and the obsession with success. An alternative feminist project might embrace failure, together with a less ‘rational’ and more ‘complicated’ existence; offer spaces and modes of unknowing, failing and forgetting; and open up new routes outside the mainstream. Failure, in this context, is unruly and dissident, and even queer. Soysal’s protagonists also defy the narrative expectations of their milieu and their failures calculatedly defy heteronormative and patriarchal norms, reject ‘white Western feminist’ formulations of emancipation and approach left-wing intellectual ‘heroism’ with irony.

The ‘women’s liberation’ or ‘sexual liberation’ of the global 1960s did not quite translate into the same kind of sexual freedoms in Turkey, for either women or men. However,
what the 1960s made possible was the performance of a spectrum of diverse femininities along the lines of ‘the performance of gender and sexuality’ argued by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1990) and Judith Butler (1999). Soysal shows that diverse performances of gender became a part of women’s repertoire in the 1960s. These included: the rejection of the domestic ideal (in the forms of not getting married, cheating on the husband, getting a divorce, rejecting child-care); resistance to the asexual image of the ideal woman of the Republic (‘modern-but-modest’); ‘coming-out’ as sexual bodies in terms of dress, dating men and making out; and embracing less feminine gender performances (with short hair, trousers, and t-shirts, especially among those who were politically active). In fact, the idea of ‘coming-out of the closet’ used by and for queer communities in the 1960s is highly pertinent to discussions of Turkish women’s growing awareness of their embodiedness. As Sedgwick maintains, being ‘closeted’ meant more than hiding away one’s sexuality as it referred to a subtle literary style (1990: 3). By treating women’s ever-transforming bodies and sexuality ‘as the locus of selfhood’ (Erol, 1995: 187–202), Soysal asserts their embodiedness as a decisive factor in her characters’ lives. In her writings, the female body appears in its multitude of dimensions. It menstruates, masturbates and has sex. It is sexually assaulted and raped. It gets pregnant, has abortions, gives birth and breastfeeds. It also resigns from motherhood the better to accommodate its desires, loses its sex drive and grows old and undesirable. In that sense, Soysal’s writings bring the sexuality and innate and constant transformations of the body to light in a queer way not too far removed from the ‘coming-out’ analogy.

Soysal’s fictions undeniably have feminist undertones. As early as 1971, Vedat Günyol (1977: 155–62) noted that Tutkulu Perçem, Tante Rosa and Yürümek first and foremost criticised patriarchal values and defied a worldview based on male domination. Çimen Günay-Erkol (2001: 14–7; 2016) and Ayşe Gül Altınay (2011: 23–47) were among the first to engage with Soysal’s works from a cultural studies perspective, focusing mainly on militarism and feminism. However, in Soysal’s work, the analysis of gender is not limited to a given female identity and the pursuit of freedom and equality is not imagined solely for women. As Pelin Başçı (2015: 247–64) notes, a fundamental issue in Soysal’s literary world is the formation and transformation of identities. Furthermore, gender identity is conceived from an intersectional perspective, where there is a multi-layered exploration of class, politics, sexuality, ethnicity, and age (Adak, 2016: 107–111). We therefore venture beyond the tradition of looking at Soysal’s writings as being mainly ‘about women’ or ‘on feminism’ and stress the necessity of a queer theoretical perspective – as Başçı (2015), Hülya Adak (2016) and İpek Şahinler (2019) have also pursued recently.

In the light of queer theory, gender identity is now defined as a field of performative actions. Femininity(ies) and masculinity(ies) are determined by trying out, experimenting with, performing and playing certain roles. Most importantly, none of these categories are absolute, stable or immutable. Yürümek provides a brilliant analysis of these multiple interpretations of gender performativities through different life episodes of two characters, in which the title of the novel, ‘walking’, encapsulates a dynamic existence. In ‘The Passionate Forelock’ and Tante Rosa, Soysal shows the extraordinary possibilities that lie ahead of her characters in terms of defining their selves. She captures diverse gender performances from a non-binary perspective, underlining the centrality of sexuality and an ever-transforming body to the (trans)formation of the self.
Exposing heteronormativity

While there was already a considerable level of women’s rights activity in the late Ottoman era (Çakır, 2007: 61–83; Ekmekeçioğlu and Bilal, 2006), the post-1918 Republican regime certainly improved the constitutional rights of women and promoted girls’ rights to education. In fact, creating the educated modern woman as an ideal citizen was a key part of the Republican modernisation project. Yet, while ‘traditional womanhood’ was scrutinised, Kemalist discourse still defined the ‘new women’ in Turkey as ‘modern but virtuous’ and set limits to the degree they could be modern (Berktyay, 1998: 1–12; Durakbaşa and İlyasoglu, 2001: 195–203). As such, the identity of the educated Republican woman encompassed contradictory attributes. Women were expected to be ‘the exemplary daughters of the new republic’ and achieve modernity and professional status equal to men. However, they were also supposed to present a particular public comportment characterised by modesty in behaviour and dress while showing complete respect and obedience to the authority of men, that is, their fathers, husbands and, rather symbolically, the founding father of the nation, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk (Durakbaşa, 1998a, 1998b). Moreover, traditional values such as virginity before marriage, marital fidelity on the part of the wife, ‘male honour’ (namus) and ‘family reputation’ (şeref) also hindered the true emancipation of women (Paker, 1991).

Soysal exposed and challenged this sexually inhibited if not desexualised image of the ideal woman as mother, wife and caregiver; the strict conception of sexuality as conjugal, monogamous and reproductive; and the prescribed definitions of femininity which stressed domesticity, chastity, modesty and virtuousness.8 In her works, there are multiple ways in which women bend heteronormative conventions and explore the rich possibilities of their bodies. For instance, in Tante Rosa, the protagonist’s unique bodily performances range from spectacular horse acrobatics to filling the hole in a broken window with her breast immediately after breastfeeding her child. In Yürümek, Şenel explores her sexuality by setting up scenes of intimacy with her friend Ela, during which the two girls mimic sexual foreplay. The female protagonist in ‘The Passionate Forelock’ (the eponymous short story of Tutkulu Perçem) hangs ‘her desires on her forelock’ [‘tutkularım perçemlerimde’] (Soysal, 2016a: 16)9 and daringly walks back and forth in the city, flaunting her very presence and forcing people to see and acknowledge her desiring body.10

The preoccupation with selfhood, focusing principally on urban female identity, was prevalent in women’s fiction of the 1960s and 1970s. The increasing gender awareness of the 1960s had presented novel viewpoints to question what it is to be a woman in contemporary society. Soysal’s works were central in this juncture of literary renewal in women’s writing and representation, as she embraced the dictum ‘the personal is political’ and highlighted fluid performances of gender and sexuality with a close-up on the female body. By delineating the heteronormative gender regime, she also provided an insight into the mechanisms of control over the female body and the boundaries erected around women’s exploration of their selfhood. From the perspective of the political climate of the 1960s and 1970s, her works embodied the feminist critique of the male-dominated political culture and activism of the period which neglected a gendered analysis of power and oppression.
In fact, even among the young participants of the student movement of the 1960s, gender equality was not a priority despite the fact that female students were taking an active part in occupations and protests. These female students rarely had a say in decision making and almost never assumed leadership roles in student organisations (Badur, 2019: 429–45). Beyond the campus and especially within stricter political organisations of the left, women were pushed to the periphery, if not made invisible. By the same token, women’s emancipation was suppressed, euphemistically postponed until the coming of the socialist revolution. In that respect, the feminist wave of the 1960s was not embraced by either the official socialist party of the time (Türkiye İşçi Partisi [TİP]) or the radical leftist factions, which were predominantly patriarchal and militaristic anyway (Zihnioğlu, 2007: 1108–45). It is no surprise then that feminist discussions remained limited to the literary realm and were far from the mainstream.

Adolescence and becoming embodied

In several examples of women’s writing from the 1960s and 1970s (e.g. Adalet Ağaoğlu, Sevim Burak, Füruzan, Pınar Kür, Leyla Erbil), the exploration of sexuality is linked to an awareness of political identity (Paker, 1991: 288). Engaging in left-wing politics becomes an opportunity for female characters to break away from domesticity and serves as a means to explore sexuality and/or to question the institutions of family and marriage in newly formed extramarital relationships. Neither Tante Rosa nor Yürümek, however, is set against that politicised background. Soysal herself was, without a doubt, a part of the left-wing milieu. Yet, she does not situate the awareness of the sexual body within any form of political engagement as she dates it to an earlier period in life: adolescence, the ‘no-man’s land’ between childhood and adulthood that translates into a serious transformation of the body. Both Tante Rosa and Yürümek begin when Rosa and Ela find themselves entering that new phase in their lives and continue on to their adulthood, and in the case of Rosa, old age. Following the characters within a life-cycle, Soysal explores the innate queerness in the constant (trans)formation of the body, an idea that is theorised by scholars of queer studies some decades later. She also stresses the importance of age and youth from an intersectional perspective in the construction not only of selves and personalities but also the gender regime in societies.

For instance, during their coming-of-age, both Rosa and Ela are taught to be ashamed of their bodies. The novelist presents this feeling of shame and the damage it causes in the characters’ sense of self to build more affirmative representations that re-integrate their bodily existence into their self-understanding. Tante Rosa starts with Rosa’s life in a convent school in Germany run by nuns, preaching asceticism, self-discipline and abstinence. The girls are instructed that ‘the body is a bad thing’ (Soysal, 2008: 24), especially the naked body. They are not even allowed to bathe naked; they have to do it in their shirts. One day Rosa falls and hurts her leg and needs medical attention. Yet, she is still not allowed to take off her tights and her wound gets infected. The outcome of their mishandling of her injury merely gives the nuns another opportunity to promote their oppressive discourses regarding how female bodies are impure, filthy and sinful and how they need to be tamed, never left
alone, never let free. By shunning and antagonising the female body as a locus of shame and encouraging its concealment even before it is sexualised, any possibility of sensual exploration is cut in the bud.

Similarly, *Yürümek* begins when most of the characters are experiencing the disconcerting transformations of puberty, a period in which ‘children’ realise their embodiedness for the first time as they change physically and become unfamiliar to themselves as they are pushed towards a new phase in their lives. There is an intellectual, emotional and physical awareness conveyed through the senses in a heightened fashion. Moreover, others notice this massive change as well, triggering in the adolescents an acute sense of self-consciousness. In *Yürümek*, Soysal depicts this period as an experience of discovering new horizons, along with coming against new boundaries. She stresses the ways in which other people’s perspectives on these young characters and their treatment of them change during adolescence as new rules and regulations are introduced into their lives. She particularly points out how girls learn how to be ashamed of their body (modesty) by being instructed to sit properly, making sure their legs are tightly closed. They also lose many of their freedoms in dress, play and other activities and they are expected to practise reserve and restraint constantly.

Ela is no longer allowed to play ‘doctor and patient’ or to look at her naked self in the mirror. On the contrary, she is expected to be disengaged from her body. Yet, she is curious about, and to some extent, envious of her friends’ sexually awakened bodies. For instance, Ela in *Yürümek* is aware that her friend Şükran has physically transformed and changed her manners at the same time. She is now the centre of attention in all the games. Boys in particular are uninterested in games unless she plays as well and when she does play, they only want to play with her. Ela notices that many girls and boys around her are discovering their bodies and experiencing new forms of fun (Soysal, 2009: 29–31). Through the establishment of these new social dynamics, Soysal masterfully portrays the awareness of embodiedness and what it entails for young people.

A scene with Şenel, another ‘sprouted’ (‘serpilmiş’) friend of Ela, shows how the dynamics of discovery and establishment of selfhood are central to the embodied experience of adolescence. The daughter of a working single mom, Şenel often invites Ela to their basement apartment. One day she makes Ela pose like a Hollywood star, exactly as she would appear on the cover of a magazine. Then, she instructs her to touch her (Şenel’s) breasts: ‘Look how big they are now’ (Soysal, 2009: 37). When Ela touches them, she feels a bit embarrassed but still enjoys it. Şenel, however, feels satisfied with Ela’s jealousy and enjoyment, as she puts oranges on Ela’s flat chest. The adolescent transformation of the body with the enlargement of breasts marks the sexualisation of embodiedness, while its manifestation in the relationship of the two girls delineates a divergence between the self and the other that defines the shame that such embodiedness entails. In another scene that involves an act of kissing (‘I will kiss you and then you will lean towards the back and lift one foot up’) (Soysal, 2009: 37), Şenel moves on to foreplay, rubbing herself against Ela. While Şenel gets aroused, Ela cannot truly make sense of what is happening to her. Inhibited by her mother’s moralism ringing in her head and struggling against it (Soysal, 2009: 39), she realises that ‘whatever is happening to Şenel is exactly what was not happening to Ela’ [‘İşte ne olmuyorsa Ela’ya, Şenel’e o oluyor’] (Soysal, 2009: 39).
After this encounter, Ela becomes aware of another imminent major transformation. Her inability to appreciate sexuality properly, she realises, is caused by the limits of her not-menstruating body (Soysal, 2009: 41). Eventually, when her ‘reproductive womanhood’ is confirmed by menstruation, she will indeed experience and learn about desire at the expense of more freedoms. Her new reproductive functions assert themselves with scary capabilities. When she dates Aleko during a summer on Prinkipo Island (Büyükada), her feeling of bodily shame will be further complicated by the fear of pregnancy. The transforming adolescent body and the accompanying feelings of desire, shame and fear thus underlie the construction of her selfhood and define the parameters of her experiences. She understands that her body is a key yet fluid determinant of her existence.

**Bodies and desires that matter**

With the global omnipresence of miniskirts, mini shorts, bikinis, stretch tops, and blouses with low necklines, women’s ‘coming-out’ in the 1960s was their assertion of being sexual bodies, and seeing and showing themselves as such. The women of the Turkish 1960s also followed this global ‘mini’ fashion. However, patriarchal interventions into the realm of women’s clothes were also prevalent during this period. Women were often criticised by the men in their social groups about the colour or the length of their skirts, and eventually, these fashionable clothes were either sent to the back of their closets or tailored into more modest styles (Badur, 2019: 441).

As noted earlier, the Republican hegemonic gender regime prescribed the conditions of women’s presence in public spaces to be kept within the limits of asexuality (Kandiyoti, 1987: 324–34). Similarly, the limitations to the dress code of women who were active in the political movements of the 1960s and 1970s in Turkey translated into the choice of midi skirts just on their knees and short-sleeved shirts that did not reveal much beyond forearms. They would also refrain from wearing make-up so as not to attract too much attention to themselves, that is, to their feminine bodily presence (Beşpinar, 2019: 467). Many female student activists of the 1960s also recount that they preferred to wear trousers when they visited factories and low-income neighbourhoods. As the student movement evolved towards a more radical and violent political struggle, women in these groups quickly abandoned the feminine looks of the ‘mini’ fashion and (re-)assumed the asexual looks of the Republican ideal (Badur, 2019: 441). While wearing miniskirts or ‘bra burning’ transformed into serious forms of political activism all over the world, from the United States to Mali, from Yugoslavia to Brazil, women in Turkey were timid and not prepared to embrace their embodied existence as a political issue in such an outwardly performative fashion due to the Republican morality that underlies Turkish modernity (Jian et al., 2018: 131, 138–45, 147, 193).

Soysal seeks to counter the ways in which the majority of Turkish women are alienated from their bodies as a result of such arrested development and the systematic denials of bodily needs, sexual and other. For instance, at the convent school young Rosa is often punished for tending to the needs of her body, such as thirst and hunger, and for not being able to suppress her desires as required by the asceticism of convent life. She is a ‘sinner’ who is unable to kill her ‘inside’ that is, the self that makes her who she is, body and soul: ‘You are a sinful girl who doesn’t know how to reign in her desires, you don’t know how
to kill your inside!' [sen arzularına gem vuramayan günahkar bir kızsin, içini öldürmeyi bilmiyorsun] (Soysal, 2008: 24). The denial of bodily needs and desires is the foundation of the negation of the self that maintains the nuns’ religious path as it is depicted. However, Soysal was well aware that this disregard for the needs of the body was not peculiar to Germany or to the Catholic nuns. As Karin Karakaşlı (2010), Ahsıka (2015), Adak (2016), and Şahinler (2019) have already noted, while Tante Rosa’s setting might not be Republican Turkey, the ways in which the novelist engages with issues regarding womanhood establish transcultural links, highlighting the shared patterns in the repression of women’s embodied experiences. Being born of the same moralism that underlies many belief systems, heteronormative intimacy in any patriarchal society requires the denial of female pleasure.

Soysal writes against this denial and asceticism. For instance, the desire for affection, attention, and physical intimacy is central to her short story ‘The Passionate Forelock’, as the narrator walks around the city with her feelings hanging on her forelock and complains about not being seen (Öztürk, 2015). She passes ‘the two-lane boulevards, shop windows, construction sites, and political party headquarters’. She thinks that people would see her if she were ‘a trolleybus pole or a road machine’ (Soysal, 2016a: 16). Her reference to the mundane details of daily life having more presence than her before the eyes of the people maintains how woman as a desiring subject is ignored, and thus her agency devalued in society. Moreover, when she forces herself upon people, pushing them to see her as she wants, the men in particular divert their gaze or they walk away. Their reaction symbolises the broader blindness to and refusal of the reality of women’s bodily existence and desires. In the end, the narrator, unable to carry on with such neglect, ‘throws her passions in the sewage’ (Soysal, 2016a: 16) in a double symbolism. Her desires are both being wasted and becoming waste. Moreover, her projection of her forelock as the bearer of her passions and hence to blame for their flaunting is both a defence mechanism and another symbolic form of denial. The synecdoche built on the rather feminine piece of hair represents the whole of the narrator as a woman and through her any woman in the general population, while the discarding of the passions hung on it represents the loss of a substantial part of the self in having to give up desire.

Rosa, however, has different opportunities for sexual encounters as she actively responds to her being denied pleasure and chooses to seek fulfillment. For example, with her third husband, after his unwelcome return from the war, she feigns desire and satisfaction but eventually concludes that it is better to move forward to new ‘foolish beginnings’ [‘enayi başlangıçlara’] than to repeat the ‘ugliness’ of the fake moans (Soysal, 2008: 46). Embracing her real desires and choosing not to fake them, she embarks upon different sorts of adventures. In an earlier marriage, she did not hesitate to leave her husband and children behind and was excommunicated by the church. She becomes a newspaper vendor, works as a cashier at a brothel, and crosses the English Channel to marry a man after seeing a classified ad in a newspaper.

Even though her great expectations often end in disillusionment, Rosa’s story is an extraordinary saga of fearless beginnings. Her daring failures and renunciations are expressions of her passion for freedom and her resilient hope to live a free life. Starting with a chapter on horse acrobatics, which immediately sets the tone as her first ‘failure’ with its title ‘Tante Rosa could not become a horse acrobat’ [‘Tante Rosa at cambazi
olamadı’) (Soysal, 2008: 16), Rosa’s entire life is a testimony against patriarchal and heteronormative restrictions. Already in the first episode, she faces her father’s rejection, the circus manager’s complicity with the father (by giving her the worst horse), and the pain of falling off the horse. Yet, she still perseveres. The novel stresses the character’s resilience regardless of conventional expectations of ‘success’. At a socio-historical moment when leadership, victories and heroism were particularly in fashion and the perceived sparks of ‘revolution’ created several absolute heroes, as an anti-hero(ine) (İdil, 1990: 82) Soysal’s protagonist underlines the ironies, inconsistencies and trivialities in a woman’s life.

Rosa never misses an opportunity to show her ‘rebellious joy’ ['isyankar neşе’] (Türker, 2010) and physicality and sexuality are natural to her off-the-beaten-track journey. In a rare instance, where the narrator distances herself from Rosa, she notes that ‘Rosa may have been secretly thinking’ that anything can be envied and anything can be desired. Anything can be equally noble or equally base. One can desire to be ‘the most sparkingly clean family woman’ ['en temiz pak aile kadını’] within the context of a house visit, and in a brothel, one can desire to be ‘the greatest whore among the whores’ ['orospuların yanında en orospu’] (Soysal, 2008: 69). What is important is the desire and no one desire is nobler than any other. Soysal’s emphasis on the idea of desire, which is also at the centre of queer theory, problematises the essentialism of a single and true self. Instead, she underlines the variability and non-linear structure of the concepts of self and desire in their relation to one another (Şahinler, 2019: 105).

**Heteronormative sexuality**

In her article on the formation of Republican male and female identities, Ayşe Durakbaşa (1998b: 47) notes that in the 1960s young single women were supported by their fathers to receive a good education and find a good job. However, these women had to be very careful in their personal relationships and suppress their sexuality until marriage. Oral testimony of 1960s Turkish youth also stresses the burden bestowed on the young women by their families, particularly in regard to their virginity, when they were sent off to the universities in the big cities (Beşpınar, 2019: 453). Furthermore, once again, even among the radical revolutionaries, flirting was shunned and love was deemed a bourgeois invention. Many couples were pushed to pursue what were then called ‘revolution marriages’ ['devrim evlilikleri’] (Baydar and Ulagay, 2011: 137). Such attitudes loaded marriages with a sense of duty that ignored the very private nature of embodiedness, that is, intimacy and sexuality, especially in the experiences of women.

Soysal was preoccupied with this often unacknowledged prevalence of women’s unsatisfied desires and the difficulty, even impossibility of satisfying them under a patriarchal and heteronormative gender regime. In her analysis of women’s position in society, Soysal diagnoses that patriarchal heteronormativity is a deeply established structure, which is not simply produced by a domineering father or a husband, but also exercised by women depending on their intersectional positioning. Long before Kandiyoti’s ‘Bargaining with Patriarchy’ (1988: 274–90), Soysal problematises the ideal of sisterhood or female solidarity and demonstrates how women – mothers, mothers-in-law, aunts, friends – contribute to women’s domination and marginalisation in society. In this
sense, Soysal goes beyond the feminist critique of ‘women’s rights’ and embraces a queer critique of the heteronormative regime.

Many women characters in Soysal’s works are aware of the prohibitive control over their bodies and they dare to criticise and challenge the patriarchal honour codes that maintain it. For instance, in *Yenişehir’de Bir Öğle Vakti*, Şükran, a bold, young woman from a low-class background, wears miniskirts and blouses with low necklines, dances with her boyfriend and even makes out with him in the basement of a department store (Soysal, 1996: 26–8). *Tante Rosa*’s Rosa and *Yürümek*’s Ela revolt against their fathers or husbands early in their lives. At a young age, Rosa defies the sacred value of virginity by making love with her boyfriend. She is later depicted reclaiming control over her own body by locking her husband out of the bedroom. She also cheats on her different husbands and leaves them without much care. Likewise, Ela, despite her father’s prohibitions, follows her boyfriend to the desolate corners of the island so that they can kiss freely. Later in life, she cheats on her husband and at another point she lives with a man out of wedlock as a divorced woman.

These are very bold moves on the part of the female characters, for both young maidsens and divorced women share similar types and levels of social surveillance and criticism. These pressures are rooted in the patriarchal morality that becomes manifest through the collective control over the feminine body. While the youthful body is protected from sexuality until it can experience sex in a culturally sanctioned framework, broader social morality is defended against potential contamination by the now uninhibited female subject. Essentially, the protection and restriction of the female body is carried out for the good of the general morality of the society.

Despite being brave enough to experiment and take responsibility for her own failures, the adult Ela experiences the same dissatisfaction in her sexual encounters as both the nameless woman of ‘The Passionate Forelock’ and Rosa. Her desires are suppressed, silenced, and unfulfilled until she is married. Even after her marriage, she is not satisfied nor are her desires acknowledged. Beginning with their honeymoon, the sexual life of Ela and Hakkı is described mostly with reference to its non-consensual nature. The short section on their marriage is compressed into the wife’s ‘obligation’ to have sex with the husband (Soysal, 2009: 83) and several instances of involuntary sexual acts, suggestive of rape within marriage (Soysal, 2009: 104). Furthermore, the novel stresses that the heteronormative sexuality regime renders Ela a commodity to be used and abused as her husband pleases. Already during their honeymoon in the newly-opened, luxurious Hilton Hotel in Istanbul, the so-called ‘best place for newlyweds’, she feels like a brand new toy for her husband, who claps his hands happily when they enter their hotel room. They have uninterrupted sex for a week, but Ela does not enjoy it. Still, she feels obliged, thinking that if you get married and if your husband books the Hilton for a week of honeymoon, it means that you are ‘supposed to’ have sex there for a week, ‘just like those who think they should swim all the time because they paid all that money to be at the seaside’ (Soysal, 2009: 84). Ela questions her obligation to have sex with her husband for a week due to general expectations, while her likening her honeymoon to paid vacations by the seaside highlights the commodification of the female body in marriage.

Yet, Ela also recognises later that marriage becomes her sexual liberation. Without the inhibitions of virginity, she is free to explore her sexuality as she wants and with whom
she wants. So, she cheats on her husband with her ex-boyfriend from her university years, Bülent, whom she had rejected at the time because she was a virgin. One evening they reunite at a social gathering with other couples. At some point, Ela leaves briefly with Bülent to pick up some music from her place and they have sex. The presence of flirtation among the two is suggestive of potential challenges to the conventions of monogamy, in other words that she will have an affair with Bülent, while remaining with her husband. However, the incident with Bülent leads to Ela’s divorce from Hakkı. Moreover, the anticipation that Ela’s sexual liberation might lead to her reclaiming and enjoying her bodily desires is not fulfilled. On the contrary, Ela’s response to the experience is rather anticlimactic in its matter-of-fact tone. She does not interpret her agreement to have sex with Bülent as a revolt against her marriage, but as a natural extension of it in order not to ‘randomly break the chain of meaningless sex’ [‘Daha önceki anlamsız yatmalar zincirini rastgele koparmak’] (Soysal, 2009: 104). After all, since she did not say no to her husband on many nights even though she did not desire him, refusing Bülent would be absurd. Sexuality becoming devoid of meaning for Ela liberates her counterintuitively from the moral impositions on her embodiedness in the paradoxical transcendence of indifference.

Through her awareness of the heteronormative order, Ela acknowledges that her desires are deemed irrelevant in her relationships with men. Even though her affair with Memet starts promisingly, as the novel’s two protagonists are finally united, Ela realises soon enough that Memet is not so different from Hakkı and Bülent in seeing sex as the only proof of his manhood and masculinity. The novel familiarises the reader with his ‘rites of passage’ (in the neighbourhood, in the boarding school, in a brothel, etc.) which are associated with a toxic masculinity. After having sex with an older woman in their apartment building, Memet comes home happily, declaring to his mom that he has ‘taken back his gun from Nuri’ (Soysal, 2009: 82). Recovering from all his humiliations, he finally assumes his ‘rightful’ place within the heteronormative order and ‘becomes a man’ through the workings of his penis. This ‘masculine happiness’ of repeatedly proving and re-proving manhood disturbs Ela deeply, as Memet always wants to have sex, like a ‘professional Romeo’ (Soysal, 2009: 123). Especially during their days in Cyprus, he appears to Ela as someone who thinks about nothing but sex. He is indifferent not only to the ordeal of the people of the island, especially the Greeks, but also to the feelings and (non)desires of Ela.

Reproduction, contraception, motherhood

As a part of the pro-natalist politics of the early twentieth century, the 1930 Public Hygiene Law (Umumi Hıfzıssıhha Kanunu) made abortion illegal in Turkey and contraceptives were prohibited. Throughout the early 1960s, however, the country’s population policy was re-evaluated and changed. In 1962, the Turkish national assembly officially adopted a more anti-natalist position. In 1965, the Population Planning Act was passed and the same year abortion was partially decriminalised. It should, however, be noted that even prior to decriminalisation, abortion was widely available in Turkey. Over one-third of the women in the country are estimated to have terminated their pregnancies in the 1960s (Miller, 2007: 60). In the meantime, the first combined oral contraceptive was marketed
in the United States in 1960 and in the United Kingdom the following year. In Turkey, the Five-Year Development Programme published in July 1962 recommended the provision of contraceptive pills at low prices or free of charge (Benezra, 2014: 41–56). Globally many women embraced the pill enthusiastically in the first half of the 1960s, as it made an enormous difference in women’s lives by giving them control over their body in regard to sexuality. It meant the separation of reproductivity from sexuality, as well as liberation from moral stigma, forced marriages, and the invasiveness of abortion.

Similar to her portrayal of menstruation as a key aspect of female embodiedness in the adolescent years of a young girl, Soysal emphasises pregnancy, contraception, abortion and giving birth as being central to a woman’s experiences in her adult years. For instance, at the beginning of Yenisehir ‘de Bir Ogle Vakti there is a dialogue on contraceptives, namely, ‘the anti-baby pill’, between two women talking about weight gain that is caused by it (Soysal, 1996: 10). The conversation refers to the late 1960s discussion on the pill’s adverse effects on women’s bodies, clashing with the pill’s initial popularity. Soysal might have also been aware of the feminist critique of the pill as an instrument of ongoing male domination of sexuality (Silles, 2015).

The risk of pregnancy and the stigma that comes with it usually prevented single women from having sex and married ones from having affairs. Soysal portrays the consequences of such risks in her depiction of Rosa whose early first marriage is forced. Rosa gets pregnant after her very first intercourse with Hans in the woods: ‘like the way it is in all those lame romance novels, she got pregnant as soon as she slept with him’ [‘o bayagı aşk romanlarının hepsinde olduğu gibi yatar yatmaz hamile kaldı’] (Soysal, 2008: 30). To avoid being a ‘dishonoured’ [‘namusu kirlenmiş’] girl and giving birth to a ‘bastard child’ [‘piç kurusu’], she marries Hans and thus fast-forwards from youth to adulthood through motherhood, simply because her body is capable of it.

For many married women, however, unwanted pregnancy quickly translated into abortion. In Yenisehir ‘de Bir Ogle Vakti, Gülsen has three children and fifteen abortions. Soysal writes it as plain as that: ‘fifteen abortions’ (Soysal, 1996: 80). As a result of the deprivation and fatigue caused by the reproductive pressure and the invasive operations on her body, she looks much older than she actually is. Her husband does not take responsibility for what she has to go through each time and even complains constantly of her exhausted and worn-out state. In the end, he divorces her to marry a younger woman. Her husband’s not taking responsibility and eventually pursuing a younger woman is also a natural outcome of the commodification of the female body and its ‘legitimate’ abuse and exploitation within the heteronormative gender regime. Through her focus on ‘male-friendly’ contraceptive methods, in the form of either pills or abortion, Soysal also stresses the heteronormative double standard of the society with regard to the ‘sanctity of motherhood’.

The assumed link between womanhood and motherhood is further challenged in the birth scene in Yurumek. In contrast to physicality of giving birth, with detailed descriptions of Ela’s labour and medicalisation of her body, there is a certain sense of shock that she feels about the transformations of her body and ‘becoming a mother’. Her alienated positionality demystifies the supposed ‘sacred bond’ which comes from giving birth. The novel also desanctifies motherhood by referring to the ordinariness of a birth as observed by the medical personnel. While Ela suffers silently, two nurses talk about a new
melodrama in the cinemas. Then, one of them interrupts the conversation, points at Ela, and asks, ‘girl, does she have a urinary catheter already?’ [‘sondası yapıldı mı kız?’] (Soysal, 2009: 91). They go on to discuss the lachrymose details of the film, then the nurse asks again, ‘has this one been shaved, yet?’ [‘traşı yapıldı mı bunun?’] (Soysal, 2009: 92). At first the nurses’ manners might appear insensitive or lacking empathy. However, this is their ordinary approach to a patient: it is yet another woman giving birth and they simply follow a procedure with the shaving and the catheter. In fact, such a scene emphasizes the biological embodiedness of motherhood while at the same time exposing the uncanny capability of maintaining two bodies at once: as her bladder will be emptied artificially, a baby will come out of Ela’s perineum.

Soysal also focuses on breastfeeding in a way that underlines and challenges the functions of the female body and what it represents in motherhood. For instance, in one scene Rosa is nursing her third child on a snowy Sunday and watching the crowd return from the church. A child throws a snowball and breaks her window causing the cold air to enter the room. Since her baby has had enough milk and is asleep, ‘Rosa fills the hole on the windowpane with her breast’ [‘Rosa memesiyle camdaki deliği doldurdu’] (Soysal, 2008: 34). Paralleling the biological function of the breasts in motherhood with another but rather absurd function highlights how a woman’s body becomes a tool beyond the self that it maintains. A similar effect is created in Yürümek, in which Ela wakes up to her new-born’s cry and puts her to her breast for feeding: ‘The child was sucking on her flesh unconsciously, regardless of where’ [‘Çocuk bilinçsizce emiyordu etini, neresi olursa olsun’] (Soysal, 2009: 94). This vivid depiction of the female ‘flesh’ serving the greedy needs of another being highlights the embodiedness of motherhood in a way that also exposes the continuous transformation of the body and the self.

Motherhood is often considered an even more effective way of restricting women’s lives and what they can do with them than marriage itself. Yet, Soysal’s Ela and Rosa are not to be deterred by its implications. Rosa’s quest for new discoveries about herself cannot be reconciled with her motherhood. So, she leaves her three children behind and moves on with her life. Her children reappear in the narrative, but Rosa is depicted primarily as a woman and not necessarily as a mother. Similarly, Ela does not hesitate to break the ‘sacred bond’ of her marriage either, despite the unending advice that ‘a woman with a child must be more careful’ and that ‘a child should be raised by a mother and a father together’ (Soysal, 2009: 95 and 125). After she falls in love with Memet and they begin living together, she feels the burden of not being able to share the responsibility of motherhood with her lover. The child, she realizes, is hers alone and not a ‘burden’ that she can share. It is remarkable how little information is given about the child. We know neither its name nor its gender, and it hardly figures at all in the narrative. Ela is an exceptional female figure in that she calls her child a burden, defying both the expected sublimation of motherhood and the primary definition of her womanhood through such sublimation.

**Conclusion**

As an old woman, Rosa dreams of an impassable forest, where she comes across a mole hole: ‘Rosa glided through the hole in the youth of a forest nymph’ [‘Delikten bir orman perisi gençliğinde süzüldü Rosa’] (Soysal, 2008: 87). She sees her body young and feels
as if after endless ‘crawlings’ [‘sürünmeler’], she has found in this hole the satisfaction she has always been looking for. All of a sudden, a naked man appears behind her. His introduction into the dream is a mistake according to the narrator, because Rosa did not choose to keep any of the men in her life. Her nakedness with men was only to forget and to escape. So, the narrator intervenes:

Oysa hatırlamak için soyunulur, hatırlamak için, yüzyıllardan beri unutulanları hatırlamak için. Neyin olmadığını, neyin olamayacağını hatırlamak için, yeniden başlamaya gücü olmak için, seçim yapmak için, seçim yapabilecek açıklığa kavuşabilmek için. Hayır demek için, evet demek için, başkaldırmak için, yakıp yıkmak için, barış için soyunulur, soyunulur.

[one gets undressed to remember, to remember those that have been forgotten for centuries. One gets undressed to remember what is not, what cannot be; to find the strength to start over; to make a choice, to have the clarity to make a choice. One gets undressed to say no, to say yes; to revolt, to destroy; one gets undressed for peace, one gets undressed.] (Soysal, 2008: 88)

Rosa finally understands the meaning of her ‘falls and failures’ and comes to terms with them. The references to remembering, starting over, and making a choice highlight her resistance and resilience against passivity and victimhood. The revolt, the destruction and the peace can be considered as instances of her active agency in repeatedly deconstructing herself and all ‘conventional wisdom’. Most importantly, her existence is a refusal to be categorised and to be designated from within a stereotypical perception. Rosa resists to be fixed in an absolute and stable self.

The ‘women’s liberation’ of the global 1960s did not necessarily mean a full range of women’s rights, feminist politics, and sexual freedoms in Turkey. On the contrary, the Turkish 1960s were characterised by patriarchal relations and the postponement of women’s emancipation. The ‘coming-out’ of women in Soysal’s oeuvre from the 1960s was a calculated challenge to the patriarchal heteronormative order, which imprisoned them in a sexually inhibited self geared towards reproduction and nurturing. Soysal’s characters were undeniably oppressed, but also resistant and resilient, exercising agency as they embrace their embodiedness, become aware of gendered realities of lived experience and try out fluid gender performativities. Rosa, Ela and the nameless protagonist of ‘The Passionate Forelock’ embrace their bodies and desires, challenge the ‘purity’ of virginity, leave the protective cloak of matrimony, defy the ideal of a monogamous marriage and do not take their ‘sacred duty of motherhood’ as a given. The female body, which is central to Soysal’s writings, appears in constant transformation through and within life, in its multitude of functions and dimensions, with its queer passions and desires, and mutable gender performances. In her work, the body is finally ‘out of the closet’ and the self is dynamic, ever-transforming, ever-trying, ever-failing, failing better.

Notes
1. For a detailed English biography of Sevgi Soysal, see Egem Atik (2017). There are also Turkish (Doğan, 2003) and German biographies (Furrer, 1992) about the author.
2. Apart from Tante Rosa and Yenişehir’de Bir Öğle Vakti, which were translated into European languages in 2016 and 2017 (see References section), her works are only available in Turkish. The translations of the quotations in the text are our own.
3. Judith Butler (1997) calls this the paradox of subjectivation, arguing that the processes and conditions that secure a subject’s subordination are also the means by which she becomes a self-conscious identity and agent.

4. As Saba Mahmood (2001) notes, agency is not only the capacity for progressive change but also the capacity to endure and suffer.

5. With regard to ‘success’ or fulfilment, we agree with Meltem Ahıska’s (2015) interpretation of Tante Rosa. As she stresses, Rosa’s life cannot be read as a failure. On the contrary, it is the story of always starting a new life. It is resilience in life. İpek Şahinler’s (2019) recent analysis of Tante Rosa is also along the lines of falling, failure and the queer.

6. Silas Morgan (2015) Symposium Introduction: The Queer Art of Failure.

7. Altınay (2013: 123–33) defines Yıldırım Bölge Kadınlar Koğuşu ‘an antimilitarist feminist manifesto’.

8. Essentially in the 1980s, a new wave of feminist criticism that developed alongside the women’s movement problematised this understanding of a Republican ‘state feminism’ (Tekeli, 1988: 307–34). It challenged the Republican reforms that hindered women’s true liberation by burdening them with larger than life expectations and limiting them to be the breeders, caretakers and educators of the new generations, that is, ‘the enlightened mothers of the nation’, Tekeli (1988) and Kandiyoti (1987: 317–39).

9. All translations from Turkish to English are done by the authors.

10. Despite, and probably because of, their bold presentations of sexualised female bodies, Soysal’s works were only embraced and praised decades after their publication. Her liberated portrayal of women’s bodily experiences challenged mainstream literary expectations. One of the important critics of the time, Atılla Özkırmıl argued that Tütülü Perçem was not a ‘promising beginning’ as a first book (Özkırmıl, 1977: 7–15). Tante Rosa was criticised in Turkey for reading too ‘foreign’, ‘as if translated’ and just generally ‘bizarre’ (Ahıska, 2015: 65–80). Yürümek was censured and banned on the grounds of ‘violating public morality’ (müstehcen neşriyat) after its publication in 1970, Soysal (2009: 17–20). The edict was reversed in 1974.

11. Some examples of such noteworthy works are Leyla Erbil’s Hallaç (The Wool-Carder, 1961), Sevim Burak’s Yanık Saraylar (Burnt Palaces, 1965) and Adalet Ağaoğlu’s Ölmeye Yatmak (Lying down to Die, 1973).

12. Butler (1999: 140) stresses that identity categories, as well as bodies, are not fixed, that they are always in the process of (trans)formation, meaning that they can be refused, resisted and subverted.

13. ‘Memelerim annem kızar diye mi büyümüyor acaba: “sana göğüslerini büyütme demedim mı?” diyebilir anası [I wonder if my tits are not growing bigger because my mother would get angry: her mom could say ‘haven’t I told you not to grow your breasts any bigger’]

14. ‘Ne ayaşışı?’ [‘what menstruation?’]

15. The title is inspired from Judith Butler’s Bodies That Matter (Butler, 1993).

16. ‘İstemediği bunca gece “hayır” dedi mi Hakki’ya. ‘Hayır’ın ‘evet’in önemini çoktan unutturmuş kendisine’ [‘Has she said “no” to Hakkı all those nights that she didn’t want it. She has long forgotten the importance of “no”, “yes”’].

17. As Foucault noted, more than 10 years after Sevgi Soysal, according to the general sexual mores of bourgeois society, ‘normative sexuality’ corresponds to married heterosexual sex, wherein normative gender roles translate into masculine dominance and female commodification (1985: 215–20).

18. ‘Birhaftadır, aralıksız’ [‘continuously, for a week’] (Soysal, 2009: 84).

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