Victims, Villains and Guardian Angels – Batman suicide stories

Aybige Yilmaz
Communication and Media Research Institute
University of Westminster

Keywords: gender, women, discourse, identity, nation, difference

Introduction
The following article is a part of a larger research project, which sought to expose the discursive construction of the Turkish nation through an analysis of selected case studies from the mainstream Turkish press. These case studies all shared a common aspect – not only were they all news stories about women, but they also sparked up heated debates on the meanings of modernity and national identity through women in Turkey. Among these, however, the media coverage of unprecedented rate of suicides among women in Batman in Turkey remains aside as the saddest and darkest case study. Leaving aside its distressing content, what adds to the bleakness of the stories is undeniably the plot: journalists working in the big cities for mainstream newspapers sketch a region for the readers which, at best, can be considered as the peripheries of Turkey. Through the analysis of the data, this case study not only offers us the perfect chance to glimpse at the tension between the centre and the periphery in the construction of national boundaries, but also highlights the role of women in that construction process.

The setting - Brief description of the context within which the suicides took place
This paper examines the media coverage of the unprecedented rate of suicides among women in Batman. The analysis focuses on directly related news stories that appeared between 2000 and 2001, as the suicides have reached their peak in 2000.[1]

Official records state that between 1995 and 2000 the total number of reported people committing suicide and attempting suicide in this region was 191, and 75% of these were women, a figure well above the world average. During 2000 alone, twenty-two suicide attempts resulted in death among women living in Batman area.

The setting for these stories, geographically speaking, is in the impoverished southeast region of Turkey, which hosts a large population of Kurdish citizens. Even though the area is mostly rural, dramatic levels of migration from the rural areas into the city centre resulted in a growth rate of 2325% in the city population in only about 50 years, increasing the population from 443 people in 1945 to 427,000 in 2000 (Bagli and Sever 2003, 69). Bagli & Sever point out that the discovery of modest oil reserves in the region was substantial in attracting the rural population into the cities, in the hope of finding better living conditions. However, oil profits were not enough to prevent Batman from suffering all the hazards of rapid urbanization, including escalating poverty and unemployment, and insufficient health and education opportunities.

The transition to urban life was also hastened due to terrorist activities of the PKK and Hizbollah.[2] Both of these groups benefited from the chaotic urbanization in the city and the geographical remoteness of the area (Bagli and Sever 2003, 70-71). As the armed conflict between these groups and the state escalated, Kurdish civilians were not only caught in the cross-fire but villages were also evacuated or destroyed, forcing them to further seek security in the city and thus adding unto the social and economic displacement. Even though terror in the region seems to have died down by the end of the 90s, the damage it has left behind is seen as significant, and appear as a recurring theme in the discussion of suicides.

The brief context paints an already disheartening picture in terms of standards of living, and yet, the extremely patriarchal structure of the region further deteriorates living conditions, for women in particular. For the majority of the population living in the region, patriarchal oppression is a part of everyday life, making the issue of women's problems in the region a frequent subject of debate in the mainstream press.[3] In spite of the existing Civil Law which guarantees equal citizenship rights for both men and women in Turkey, the rights of women in their daily lives, and their status in the family, as well as within the society, is still mostly determined by traditions and religious rules, which usually work or are interpreted to work to the advantage of patriarchal system (Ilkkaracan 1998). With the escalating migration into the urban areas, these existing patriarchal structures were seen as in stark contrast to the urban city life and therefore brought into media attention.

Objectives in the selection of the particular case study
The research focuses on the meanings and interpretation of difference, following the initial set of questions selected to guide the analysis:

- Who are the women figures in the case study?
- In what ways are they described as different?
- Is that difference described as a desired or an unwanted one? If the latter, what are the proposals to eliminate that difference?
- In what ways is their difference significant for a particular understanding of modernity & national identity in Turkey?

It is important to note that the goal of this study is not to offer causal links between suicides and social variables, which should be left to social researchers. Ironically, the object of analysis, namely the news stories, are themselves nothing but relentless attempts to explain the recurring suicides, providing an ongoing debate on the perceived causes and offering suggestions as to how they can be prevented. However, through a discourse analysis of this data, the Batman case study provides a perfect context for achieving the primary research goal, that of observing the construction of boundaries for the desired nation.

Lying both geographically and culturally at the peripheries of Turkey, Batman is a part of the still mostly rural and traditional Southeast region. Nor does the region allow unproblematic inclusion within the category of Turkishness due to its largely Kurdish demographic structure. Therefore what is actually being discussed is the centre's interpretation of what is going on in the "margins of modernity" (Bhabha 1990) and national identity in Turkey. From within these interpretations, we can start to understand how the centre, where the journalists see themselves as located, looks at the periphery, what they see as problematic, and what solutions they propose to bring the periphery in closer to the centre. Women's oppression in the region, which is cited as the foremost cause of suicides, also introduces an extra urgency into the situation, as liberation of women has always been regarded as the first and foremost responsibility of the modern Turkish state since the foundation of the Republic in late 1920s.

Even though the data pertains strictly to the Turkish case, the results of the analysis are important in showing how national boundaries are constructed, and furthermore, how they are constructed through and by women. In this regard, the analysis can also contribute to the academic discussions that aim to bring gender into theories of nationalism and national identity.

Overview of the data: Time frame

The initial data comprised of 48 items published in three mainstream newspapers in Turkey, namely *Hurriyet*, *Milliyet* and *Sabah*.[4] It included all news pieces related to the subject such as feature stories, interviews, columns and human-interest stories. The data was collected from September 16th 2000 to December 22nd 2001.[5] These dates do not signal the first and last suicide occurrences during the period, but roughly mark the period they started receiving the media attention and then losing it. The escalating suicide rates among women start picking up national media's interest in mid September, with the reports of about 30 women who died in suicides in the preceding six months. Similarly, media attention fades away towards the end of 2001, which can be marked by the article in *Sabah* newspaper on 22.12.2001 announcing that according to official figures suicide rates had halved. After this article, short news items still appear, but not frequent enough to set a different time frame for the case. And yet, the dimming out of the media interest does not mean that suicides have stopped. *Hurriyet* newspaper on 13.02.2003 writes that in the Southeast region suicides had started again, and on 30.04.2003 informs the readers not only that three women had attempted suicide, but within the first four months of 2003 there were 37 suicide attempts, 12 resulting in death. Therefore, the selected dates should be seen not as the start and end of events but markers of the rising and falling points of an open ended parabola showing media's interest in the issue, which reaches its peak in fall 2000.

Type of data to be analysed

The events were covered under a variety of genres, one of which was the 14 individual columns included in the data. The columnists' need to show their concern about the high rate of suicides provides useful reference points in interpreting the results of the analysis within its specific context. Even though columnists from the same paper do not have to be in agreement about a certain issue, or comply with the editorial line of the newspaper, for this case study, their arguments pertaining to suicides did converge towards the overarching arguments found in the analysis. The language used was also not dissimilar to the language used in the human-interest features.

Apart from columns, the remaining news articles appear in different forms and styles, some of which have an intertextual mix of genres. The theme of female suicides lends itself to human-interest articles rather than hard news, yet there are a few news items, which are more perishable, and have impersonal language that is essentially institutional and bureaucratic, even when by-lined. However, even the articles that come closest to hard news genre can have varying degrees of personal language. One such example is an article with no by-lines in *Hurriyet* on 11.08.2001, which reports the findings of a research with the title "In Batman, it is

hard to be a man, too" and is decorated with a striking star graphic "they too are in depression". The tone of the article is very impersonal and bureaucratic, but the topic, and the emphasis on the headline and layout, makes it considerable for a human-interest story.

Therefore apart from a few items where distinctions are relatively clearer, it is almost futile to attempt to categorize all news stories as either hard news or human interest. Some stories, on the other hand, have clearer genre distinctions, and whenever possible, genres have been highlighted while referencing, and also noted in the bibliography section at the end -perhaps unconventionally but necessarily for the purposes of the analysis. Such is the case of two interviews – one specifically on suicides in the region and the other on the educational projects developed by an NGO – and a review of a book on Batman suicides including an interview with the book's writer. The genres in this case were clearly identifiable and therefore mentioned. Feature stories are also clearly distinguishable from the rest. There are nine feature stories, written all by women journalists where the journalist's own eye witness accounts and personal interpretation of the events are evident, even when supported by selections from interviews done with authorities, victim's families or girls living in Batman. It should be noted that while the data may not seem prominent in terms of quantity; the feature stories with their human-interest appeal and significant coverage, which can be large enough to spread over three whole pages,[6] and the accompanying visuals, helped to make the case a memorable issue in the public sphere.

Organizing the data for analysis- methodological decisions
Without exception, all stories were analysed thematically, and the main themes of the case study were mapped out. How discourses around these themes reveal themselves requires textual analysis, which is more problematic. Having such a variety of genres, it is impossible to find a selection of articles that are, in terms of language and style, representative of the whole case study. And yet, when we look at the total data in general, the remarkable feature of Batman stories remains as the continuous intervention of the journalists by subjective remarks, self-reflexive comments and opinions, which provide an excellent opportunity to follow the hegemonic discourses circulating within the suicide discussions. Discourse researchers also note that reflexivity can effectively add to our awareness of the ideological locatedness and contingency of reporting, and alert us to the discursive gaps and silences that are otherwise hard to detect (Macdonald 2003, 77). Therefore, the decision was to fix the focus on reflexivity and subjectivity, and how journalists intervene to tell their own account of the suicides throughout the linguistic analysis.

Having thus set the focus, certain generic decisions needed to be taken in selecting the data for the micro levels of analysis. Linguistic analysis was steered away from items without by-lines, or items with impersonal and bureaucratic language in the hard news style, which are not as heavily laden with suppositions, assumptions or biases as the features or columns are. This is not to say that hard news language is free of any discourses, even though, as noted previously, they are harder to identify. And yet, most of these stories will be pulled from news agencies in Turkey, only to be printed with slight alterations, while the goal in this part of the analysis is to focus on the three news organizations. Therefore the preference here was to keep the journalists' personal comments and arguments conveyed through the articles in the spotlight. Again for this very same reason, quotes from witnesses were not analysed. Whereas the selection of witnesses and their words for quotation are significant in understanding the context within which discourses are placed, the wording or arguments provided by sources and quoted directly were also not analysed on their own. The purpose in such a selection is to focus the analysis on the journalist's own input in terms of language and style, which inevitably puts features and columns on the foreground for analysis.

Thematic analysis

Certain general themes emerge through the stories about the identities of the Batman women, their social context, their perceived needs, and aspirations. The thematic analysis focuses on how these general themes are addressed through the coverage of the case study, and allocates sub-themes to the thematic areas. These themes also discuss the specificities of living in Batman as a woman.

Gender problem-being a woman in Batman

Perhaps the most recurring theme is a concern about gender roles in the region, and how they make life unbearable for women. It should be noted that the word gender is never mentioned directly in the articles, as a direct translation of the word does not exist in Turkish language.[7] Yet, reports about the condition of women in Batman, their role in society, their rights and needs, all of which appear as an urgent problem, and without exception explained as resulting from the social structure in the region, allows us to group them under the theme of gender.

The coverage pertaining to the gender problem is very much similar in the three papers. "Loss of hope" and "unwillingness to live" are the most common phrases used to describe the situation throughout the stories. Among the problems women face, the foremost is described as the gridlock of patriarchy, treatment of women as second class compared to males, not allowing daughters the same rights as sons. Journalists describe the situation as one where "women are regarded as property" (Urgu 2001), where "they are tramped on" (Tinc 2000). Cases where

suicides are beaten by their fathers or husbands are cited frequently to emphasize the bleakness of the situation, which, as described by a columnist, leave women with no alternatives but to "make a difficult choice between an authoritarian father and an authoritarian husband" (Berberoglu 2001a). This pressure on females and the extreme patriarchal structure is described as an extension of the traditional social structure, with customs and traditions as the main obstacle to the basic rights of women. The headline "Either get married or die" is a good example, which sensationalizes the drama of women attempting relationships outside marriage. The customs, making virginity before marriage the ultimate condition for women, and allowing polygamy in marriages, is shown as a main drive behind suicides in all stories (Aydin 2001).[8] What is more, families and relatives, especially men, appear as insensitive to the suicides, and not willing to change the system:

> In the meanwhile, I ask where the first wife was, and this disturbs him. He says "in the other house" and changes the subject. (Aydin 2001)

> Metin Ok left his wife (...) whom he continuously beat up like his daughter, with his other children; he is now said to be preparing to remarry. (Beytut 2000)

> Nobody talks about the reasons of (her) suicide. (...) He says he had built two different houses for the two wives, and they got along very well. (Aydin 2002a)

There is also a particular attention to the families' unwillingness to talk. This is picked up particularly in the feature stories, and mostly conveyed through the choice of quoting particular remarks, but also with criticisms:

> Families don't talk. Even though they cannot understand the reason for their daughter's suicide, they agree that silence is the best attitude. (Aydin 2000a)

> That is all. She does not say a word more. However Nurcihan's neighbours tell a different story. (...) Nurcihan burned herself with a galloon of gas exactly a month ago. The mother, Makbule, says there is nothing to tell. (Sen 2000)

> Just like the other girls in Batman, Diyarbakir and Mus, the cause of suicide for Gulcan, who died at the age of only 17, was left buried under the white paint. The wall was first washed, and then painted white. As if it

was never lived, as if it never happened, all was silent, nothing was spoken. (Kardesoglu 2000a)

As well as necessitating an urgent rescue mission, such depictions inadvertently imprison women within a terminology of rescue and helplessness, as will be further discussed in the linguistic analysis. As a main part of the rescue efforts, journalists stress the importance of education and earning a living to improve the quality of life and solve the problems for women in Batman. Girls who have jobs and who are happier are shown as examples and widely quoted. In the full-page feature story 'Suicide has become fate', girls who contemplated suicide before they found jobs are shown as the perfect examples of the transformation a job can provide is strongly emphasised:

> 16 year old Aynur has dropped plans of suicide because she can earn 200 million Turkish Liras per month. She is happy for looking after her family, buying her trousseau, and dreaming her dreams (Aydin 2000a)

The same theme also appears in columns:

> When I ask the girls "*their plans about the future*", none of them say it is "getting married". I always hear "*I want to learn*" and "*I want to set up my own business.*" (Tinc 2000, author's emphasis)

In the same column quoted above, education and earning a living are described as "the only hope for salvation" in the region, while another columnist chooses the title "Women and education" (Akyol 2000b) in expressing his approval of the Ministry of Education's decision to take action and investigate the relationship between suicides and education in the region. In November 2000 and January 2001, two whole page news items, an interview and a feature story, appear in the Sunday edition of *Sabah* newspaper, both raising awareness to the importance of education for women in Southeast region. The interview, headlined "It costs only 10 million TL to give a girl an education" (Urgu 2000)9, is held with a woman activist and NGO member working with the CATOM, the multi-purpose Community Centres designed to improve the gender disparity in this part of Turkey.[10] In the January feature, again prepared by the same female journalist, this time the efforts of an NGO to educate girls in the Southeast with the help of a sponsoring mobile communication company (Urgu 2000).

The main suggestion here is that, by educating the girls and opening for them the opportunity to earn their own money, the discrepancy between the modern girls of Turkey and Batman girls will be significantly erased, and gender relations in the region will be reshaped. In other words, a career and an education are seen as the

foremost vessels to bridge the gap between the luckier girls of the big cities and the suppressed girls in Batman. While there appears to be no doubt that poor education in the region is a major social problem in general, the stress is on educating women and saving them, not much on changing gender relations through educating men in the region.

Ethnic identity & difference

There seems to be no concrete research about the ethnic origins of the suicides. And yet, the articles back up the expectation that since the region hosts a dense population of Kurdish citizens, an overriding majority of the suicides will be Kurdish.[11] Five feature stories, written by journalists investigating the matter in the city, especially emphasize the ethnic identities of the women who committed suicide by extensive descriptions of the language spoken in the households or specific cultural preferences. In these feature stories, the suicide's cultural difference is emphasized most sympathetically. In fact, efforts to illustrate this sympathy are sometimes far too much exaggerated, as exemplified in the feature story in *Hurriyet*. The feature has the subtitle "The cats that spoke Kurdish":

> I go on to explore the rest of the house. Inside a hut covered with plastic hang series of tobacco leaves. When I see the tawny cat, I walk after it and call it "psi psi" it does not look at me. Years ago Musa Anter's cats also had not looked at me. Anter had said: "My daughter, we are Kurdish, our cats are Kurdish too. How would they understand psi psi? Call it miri miri so that they will come to you." I call the tawny cat "miri miri", and it turns and looks at me. (Aydin 2001)

In the other features too, there is a particular emphasis on ethnic identity via referring to language being spoken:

> Even though she could not speak a word of Turkish, she told the truth so well with the words her neighbour translated, simple but heavy words each of which came as a blow on our face. (Aydin 2000a)

> The old woman did not know Turkish. Her younger daughter Selma, goes and sits next to her mother who tells Filiz's story in Kurdish. (Sen 2000)

In one feature story, ethnic identity is implied through the cultural preferences of a suicide that liked to listen to a Kurdish singer, but also watched Turkish movies: "...She would listen to Şiwan Perver, but she would not miss the Turkish movies." (Kardesoglu 2000a) The writer in this case approves or even legitimising her culturally specific choice of music with the subtle use of the negative conjunction "but". What the girl had done, in the opinion of the journalist, was to be open to

two identities, Turkish and Kurdish. We find that this theme gets followed up in a column published in the same newspaper almost a week later. This column is in fact the only one that prefers to directly discuss the relationship between being Kurdish and suicides, arguing that there is a clash of modern and traditional cultures and "Not being Kurdish but being Kurdish in a closed society is an additional problem in this clash of cultures" (Akyol 2000a). It might be useful to quote here the rest of the columnist's argument:

> If the multiple causes of depression, which can result in suicide, are to be shortly summarised, we can call it "the difficulty to socialize". Living in such a 'closed society', it is harder for a Kurd to overcome "the difficulty to socialize" by forming comforting relationships and communications. (Ibid.)

The columnist here makes a direct link between the suicides and the Kurdish social structure in the region, which leads to, in his terms, a difficulty to socialise. His assertions, along with the description of the Kurdish girl who watched Turkish movies, point out to the difficulty of mixing together two different worlds. In this regard, overcoming the barriers of living in a closed society and opening up to the urban/Turkish world is seen as a painful, nevertheless vital task.

Not all columnists discuss the specifics of ethnic identity in the region. In fact, as with the most news items on Batman, the Kurdish make up of the region is not directly discussed. However, it should be noted that euphemistic terms like "differences in ethnic origin and religious sects", "regional difference" or "Southeast" are used while referring to Kurdish citizens. Therefore most news stories do allude to the ethnic particularity of the region, even though it is the feature stories that stress this difference most.

Poverty
Another very much repeated theme throughout the stories is the economic condition of the suicides, as a clear link is made between economic backwardness of the region and suicides. Since the researches done by government institutions, such as the Diyanet[12] and the Family Research Institution of the Ministry, have put forward economic inequalities as one of the prominent causes of suicides, news articles covering the findings of the researches bring up the issue of poverty very frequently. However, this is emphasised mostly in feature stories and columns, as it allows a dramatic human-interest angle. The suicides are described as no longer being able to bear the circumstances in which they live.

> She lives in that ruin, which destroys mental and physical health, is too small even for the minimum amount of reason. She wants a fridge, a TV.

> She misses things. It does not happen. It makes her commit suicide. (Aydin 2000a)

The poverty of the families is conveyed through descriptions of the houses the journalists have been into for reviews. Such descriptions are told from the journalist's eyes to the reader, adding to the dramatisation:

> The house, which was transformed from a one floor squatter into an apartment with three floors (Sen 2000)

> That night, I cannot find anything to say in that room where the smell of dung and sewer does not even for a second let a person alone (Tinc 2000)

Another feature goes to lengths in describing the poverty of the suicide's family:

> According to police documents, her address is "The Opposite Neighbourhood13, the house next to the electric transformer". Semra's house does not have a legal address because it does not have a place in the housing development plan. There are squatters and windmills sparsely scattered in the middle of a plain. There is no public transportation. Semra's house is an unfinished squatter. No outside painting, no door, no glass on the windows. (Aydin 2002b)

For the columnists, the picture is one of a high contrast between the rural and urban parts of Turkey, and this economic inequality is found responsible for the "social outbreaks" which can result in suicides (Berberoglu 2001b). One columnist remarks "terror in the region has ended but the economic wreckage is devastating" (Mengi, R. 2000). In fact, all columns refer to poverty directly or indirectly, pointing at how economic change had brought up social change in an unbalanced, undesirable way. This is because, it is largely argued, the region goes through a technological change but social infrastructure cannot catch up with this change. One columnist ironically mentions how the local education centre had to open up a course on "how to use mobile phones efficiently" (Tan 2000). This, for the columnists, produces "another Turkey" in the Southeast, which, for the inhabitants of Istanbul's high streets is "another planet" (Turgut 2000; Tan 2000). Another columnist describes the gap as the "clash of times" and asks if "Turkey had grown in a more balanced way, would the "clash of times" be so violent?" (Atikkan 2000)

Protecting moral values – the dangerous media
For the journalists, then, the "other Turkey" clearly differs from the western cities with its poor villages, traditions, and gender inequality. This difference is seen as

posing the greatest problem, not only because they need to be eliminated to improve the life standards for women, but also the media makes women aware of this difference by presenting them alternative life styles, which makes their lives more unbearable. Journalists emphasise this connection out very clearly, as can be seen in the subtitle "the only way out is television", followed by the journalist's observations:

> In the Southeast, the only thing that brings the outside to the young girls is television. For this reason as soon as work is done they set in front of TV. In front of that a TV that is taken out in the terrace passes days, years, lives. Seeing lives that are so much more colourful than theirs, young girls go under depression. (Sen 2000)

Again, this argument is often discussed within the context of economic inequality. A columnist argues, "Our society has had a serious, very heavy blow. Lives have been deformed" and explains:

> In the other Turkey, people want to be happy, fall in love, be with beautiful women and handsome men, earn money, buy a car, in short, live like a human being in this short life. Before, when there was no television and so-and-so, it was possible to hide the possibility of alternatives from them. Not anymore. (Turgut 2000)

This awareness, to re-quote a columnist's words, is actually what causes "the rebellion of the slaves", for "Now they see a light oozing from TV screens, radios, and newspapers into their worlds which are no longer as small as they used be, and they try to reach that light." (Gokturk 2000)

Not all journalists are as optimistic about "the light" emanating from the media. Most of the news items point out to the main danger here: women are influenced by outside infiltration coming from via TV, not only in the form of demanding more, but also in not being able to tell the good from the bad TV programs, such as celebrity shows.[14] The recurring argument is based on the findings of Diyanet's investigation in the region, and the President of Diyanet' harsh criticisms towards these programs, as well as the observations of other witnesses, such as families, friends, local bar and security organisations. As will be further discussed below, this provides a mutual agreement between the journalists and the state institutions on the limits of modern life.

This becomes particularly evident as journalists frequently highlight the negative influence TV has on women and young girls in Batman. Even as they back up their case by quoting complaints and criticisms about TV programs, it remains the

journalist's decision to highlight or prioritise this issue. Such is the case in the full-page feature story "Suicide has become fate" (Aydin 2000a). On the left hand side of the page runs a one-column box, which is about an interview with a police official in Batman Security Office, where he shares his observations about the causes of suicides. His last criticism notes the influence of TV in the region; however, the box has a title in bold letters calling "Televole programs should be stopped". The most evident support can be observed in a human-interest story in *Sabah* newspaper, titled "Bad Examples". The news reports a speech by the President of Diyanet, where the journalist openly shows his support:

> Diyanet Presidency has made important warnings about the images of "fake world" that are broadcast to millions on TV. (...) The devastating consequences that these images can lead to were again revealed by a research done by the Diyanet. (...) (The President) Mehmet Nuri Yilmaz invited the rich and the famous to act more responsibly and made the following call... (Cetingulec 2001)

Six visuals accompanying the article also give strong support to argument. One of these is the picture of the Diyanet President, the second a clipping from a (possibly) local newspaper showing a young suicide's picture and calling "Again a suicide, again a young girl". On the top part of the news item, there are three pictures, showing girls drunk in nightclubs, or dancing ecstatically. Perhaps the most striking visual on the page is a small illustration of two women dancing in a nightclub with the banner "fake world" circling around them.

This is indeed nothing new but echoes the hegemonic discourses about modernity and women that are engraved at the heart of the Republic with the Kemalist modernization project, which heavily promoted the 'modern but modest' outlook for women.[15] One need not know about Batman to hear warnings of the dangers of "too much modernization" that will lead to sexual promiscuity, and witness the carefully portioning of what modern life entails for women citizens. Toprak gives a good example in this regard in his discussion of how during the first years of the republic, in late 1920s, suicides of young women had been covered by numerous publications (Toprak 2002). One writer who wrote abundantly about the problem was Dr. Zeki, who would relentlessly propose mechanisms of control and discipline to protect young girls from depressions as they grow up, such as the prohibition of love novellas, police-action or thriller novels that could disturb their psychological balance, and asked for "strong action to be taken against the evils of fashion" (Toprak 2002, 15-16). Toprak argues that this was in line with the Republic's male dominant discourses and was a part of the attempts to discipline women and foreground her biological role. We can argue that Diyanet's warnings, supported by journalists, is not a far cry from this.

Terror, insecurity and instability

The damage terror has left in the region is another often-appearing theme in the suicide stories, which again emerges as a differentiating factor for the region from the cities. Stories usually mention this problem by referring to the relevant findings of investigations carried out in the region, like that of Diyanet, or provide eyewitness accounts. There is one news article focusing solely on this subject, published in *Sabah* newspaper, titled "Depression caused by terror kills." (Hosgor 2000) The news item, which with its subject is a human-interest story, is written in the traditional news style, and is made up of the indirectly quoted comments of three MPs from Batman, each representing a leading party. Two of the MPs mention terror among the other causes of social distress in the region; however, with the title and subtitle the journalist prioritises terror as a main cause, pointing out to terror as the major cause of suicides:

> According to the MPs from Batman, the reality behind the increasing suicides in Batman is that the depression caused by years of terror is at the point of bursting (Ibid.).

Many journalists point out to the heavy feeling of distrust and insecurity in the region, but not always with the same emphasis. For example, Ferai Tinc, from *Milliyet* newspaper, draws attention to outlaw groups and their assaults, and how people living in the region were given false promises by these groups:

> Black clouds gather on this city, which was famous for murders with unknown perpetrators, and its Hezboullah. (...) For 23 years, these lands have grown suspicion. All tales of liberation have ended in disappointment. No one saves anyone. Neither the Hizbollah, nor the PKK. But now women want to save themselves. (Tinc 2000)

Here, Ferai Tinc distinguishes between the terrorist groups against whom the curfew had to be implemented, the population who is exploited, and who, by implication in the very last sentence quoted here, are male, and the women, who "now" are no longer content with false promises and want to save themselves. The state, by its very absence, is detached from this chaos and only indirectly enters the picture as the implementer of a curfew that appears both necessary and inevitable.

On the other hand, the state is located more inside the apparent feeling of mistrust in Gulden Aydin's feature storie in *Hurriyet* newspaper. Even though she

appears as only retelling what was told by her sources, using as many direct quotes as she does, the angle from which she chooses to tell the story distinguishes her features from others. She particularly stresses how one of the suicides missed the village she had left behind in two consecutive features,

> The state had emptied their village ten years ago. (Aydin 2000a)

> She also wanted her village back, which was emptied ten years ago. (Aydin 2000b)

In a following feature story (Aydin 2001), she interviews the family of a suicide who bring up how the armed conflict between the state and the terrorist groups had influenced them psychologically, and she also adds her own observations:

> (...) we set on the road. On certain points, there are queues because of army controls.

> Oztekin family used to live in a village (...) 35 km further from where they now live. Armed conflicts, deaths, raids take place and at last in 1992 their village is burnt. Nurettin Oztekin first tells those days, then the beauty of their village.

> The household point to the Heybeli Mountain which goes down to the other side of the river. Two years ago 16 people were killed. Their skeletons were still there. They say Sabriye had witnessed this fight, and the same day saw that nightmare after having been forced to look at the corpses whose noses and ears had been cut, and following that nightmare she was no longer the same Sabriye. (Ibid.)

Gulden Aydin here paints a vivid picture of terror, and while she does not spell out any names to put on the blame, by the choice of memories she decides to bring up from her interviews, she takes a critical position against the state that appears as responsible to some extent for the insecurity in the area. This is a divergence from other stories where criticisms are directed more at educational or social or even political policies, but not at a military action level.

In criticisms on the state's handling of the problems in the region, the focus is largely on the discrepancy between the region and the cities of Turkey. One columnist argues that "Clash of the times" results in a "the clash of the cultures" also because

> Turkey missed the importance of education, and whenever regional differences was brought up as an issue, had seen them as the *fantasy of the leftists*, so today two different times clash in her! The rules, traditions, clothes, food and hopes of the two times clash. (Atikkan 2000. Original emphasis)

Seeing education as the only cure to bridge the gap, she asks: "Now, if Turkey had developed in a more balanced way, would the clash of times have been so violent?" (Ibid.)

Another columnist hints at the negligence on the part of the state:

> The lifting of the political ban on the Southeast has now helped us to re-discover the bitter tragedies. (...) If we think about the fire that took over the whole region, and the blood that was shed, we cannot tell for sure whether or not the deaths of the young girls, one after another, would be lost in between all that was taking place. But even if this tragedy were noticed, its interpretation would probably be limited to *a relation of political causality*. (Berberoglu 2001a. Original emphasis)

In short, then, journalists agree on the duty of the state to "give hope and excitement to the people in the Southeast, which has been cleaned of terror" (Mengi G. 2000) and urge the state to develop policies to help people in the Southeast, which can mean a change of approach to the region now that terror threat has been overcome. However, the degree and content of the criticisms do vary when discussing the past policies of the state.

Arguments, overarching arguments and the main discourse
As noticeable from the analysis of main themes emerging through Batman suicides, apart from the quantitative differences, there are no prominent divergences between the three newspapers, such as in terms of the degree of criticalness towards the state, in their emphasis on the hardships of life for women in Batman, or in portraying the Southeast for the readers. This is not unexpected given the very similar political standpoints of the newspapers within which the journalists work. However, divergences are observable on a more individual level depending on the journalist. This occurs mainly on the role and responsibilities of the state on the suicides specifically, and on the demise of the region more general. In this regard, the father state swings from a benevolent father to a malevolent role associated with the fathers in Batman region.

The convergences are much more apparent and striking. Certain journalistic preferences in coverage apart, we can see the following common arguments emerging through the discussion of the themes:

- Batman is a part of the Southeast, which has suffered from terror in the past.
- There is a clash between the cultures of Turkey and the Southeast, which is not easily bridgeable.
- Social class and lack of education are major impediments to achieving freedom and happiness in the region.
- The traditional structure in the region resists change and modernization.
- Women in Batman are very much oppressed and silenced by their society, and therefore urgently need help in order to be saved.
- Most of the women, who committed suicide, are Kurdish.
- Relatives of the victims are not willing to change the social system, or investigate the reasons for suicides.
- Women in Batman often cannot differentiate between what is modern and what are degenerate forms of modern way of living.
- Women in Batman, along with other residents have also been victims of the armed conflict between the state and terrorist groups.
- It is the state's responsibility to help these people.

When we consider the arguments as a whole, we can find them converging towards a general and overarching argument, which can be summarised as the contention that women in Batman in particular and the whole region in general are in urgent need of the centre in order to be saved. The centre here emerges as the other of "Other Turkey" where journalists clearly locate themselves along with the state and the inhabitants of the big cities. In other words, the centre is where modernity exists, as opposed to the "other Turkey", where not only poverty but also gender inequality, oppressive traditions, unfulfilled wishes from life, ethnic differences and serious problems caused by armed conflicts in the region prevail. The stories written from the centre then turn into the accounts of outsiders/journalists visiting the peripheries and the other people who live there. In this respect, the occasional divergences among the journalists' criticalness towards certain policies of the state also lose their significance, as it is not the state in particular but the agreed image of the centre as a whole, which becomes the motor of change by representing the model for the 'Other Turkey'.[16]

And yet, Turkey is not only a model, but also a protector and guardian for the "Other" one. This entrusts the centre with certain responsibilities, while enhancing its superiority and power. In fact, there is an agreement among the journalists that whatever is going on in the Southeast is/should be of great

concern for the centre. "Until what is going on in the Other Turkey is a matter of conscience for this country and people take active action, such a country cannot have a future" calls one columnist, carefully distinguishing between this country (Turkey) and the other country, the other Turkey (Turgut 2000). His demand on active action/help to the region is an important one, replicated in many other columns and features, and in fact reminds us of Spivak's criticisms on the role of the Intellectuals in perpetuating hegemonic relationships. Even though Spivak's concern in her writings was on the Subaltern, and she took careful effort to make it clear that it is not enough to be postcolonial or the member of an ethnic minority, in order to be subaltern, since "that word is reserved for the sheer heterogeneity of decolonised space" (Spivak 1999, 310), the discussion that she develops is nevertheless applicable to our analysis. In her well-known article (1988), she argues that the intellectuals, in representing and speaking for the oppressed, naturally take the position of the "Self", and they persistently form the oppressed as the "Other". Through this process, the oppressed turn into what Spivak calls "the Self's shadow, the periphery". Such a perspective does not only disguise the power relationship implicit in this positioning. It also locates the agency of change not in the oppressed, who are seen as too helpless or incapable, but in the intellectuals, who emerge as the saviours.

In the suicide stories written by the intellectuals of this case study, namely the journalists, we can observe the formation of a similar discourse on the centre/periphery relationship in Turkey. As journalists clearly distinguish themselves and their lives from that of the region, they create a problem-free centre to represent Turkey and Turkish people, and offer it as a model, which can be replicated, with their help, to solve the problems in the region. This approach not only locates the source of progress outside the Southeast, but it also further enhances the divide between the two regions in Turkey, and results in the construction of the discourse legitimising the superiority of the centre/us with regards to the periphery/them.

The discourse defining the centre and peripheries of Turkey is apparent not only on a thematic level, but also more importantly, realized through discursive strategies at language level in the texts. The next stage of the analysis seeks to display the linguistic means through which this discourse is fleshed out in the texts. While exposing those means, the analysis can also help us reveal the intricacies of how centre-periphery relationship is built through women and by women in Turkey.

Processing the text- how the discourse was realised in the texts
There are two main literary mechanisms that enhance the superiority of the centre in Batman stories, which are narration and characterisation. In analysing these, the

linguistic means that are used were studied on different sub levels of description, focusing on first the general look of the articles, the graphics, headlines and other elements used to attract the reader's attention. The analysis then turns to word, sentence and rhetorical levels. While the word level focuses on the particular choice of vocabulary, the sentence level focuses on the grammatical particularities of the sentences. The last is the observation of other rhetorical means, such as implications, exaggerations, sensationalism, metaphors etc. It should be noted that since the analysis is undertaken in Turkish language, many of the nuances that allow meaning are realized through specific rules of Turkish language, which may not be very meaningful in English. At such times, the closest translation was sought to capture the meaning, and the effect was described to help the readers understand these nuances.

The narration part of the analysis, where most of these linguistic nuances, as well as the general style of the news stories were laid out, will not be examined in this paper. The focus will rather be on the second part of the analysis, characterisation, which underline the overarching discourse in full colour.

Characterisation- Main actors/ victims, villains & guardian angels

As with all good stories, Batman suicides offer a well-defined cast of dramatis personae that act to a narrative line. The characters in the suicide stories can be grouped into villains, victims, and guardians who offer their help, which works to victimization of women, villainisation of men in the region, and securing of the role of centre as the guardians.

The foremost victims in the stories are without doubt women who commit suicide. As discussed previously in the thematic analysis, women in Batman are often discussed within the rhetoric of saving, as helpless women to be rescued. The theatrical depictions of how women committed suicide in a state of hopelessness also confirm their victim status. Again literary tools are used frequently to enhance the status for the characters, one of which is the negative descriptions. Images of "dying women" "children crying" "children left behind" "girls forced into marriages" "women who want to be saved" "suffering women" are accentuated with the metaphors such as "slaves" "young girls running towards death one after another" "women beaten up blue by their husbands." These "stories of tyranny" also stand in sharp contrast to the authority of the female journalists who interview or write about them.

The victim status in Batman stories firmly place women within the terminology of slavery and rescue. And yet, women are not only portrayed as passively suffering the patriarchal pressures, but also as actively trying to "protest their lives", "determined to save themselves" (Aydin 2000a; Tinc 2000). They are described as "forever slaves" wanting to have a future (Kardesoglu 2001), and it is particularly

for this reason that they must be helped. The most dramatic use of this depiction is a column headline by a female journalist, which describes the situation as "The rebellion of the slaves" and the suicides as the "martyrs of liberation" (Gokturk 2000). She argues that:

> Those young girls are looking for a way out of their lives that are turned into hell by traditions, customs, feudal morality and religious pressure. They now know that there is a world out there where to love is not punished by death, where men and women take part as equals (Ibid).

The articles define suicide as victim-women's last attempt at saving themselves, and makes death and suicide synonymous with freedom: "The name of *liberation* in Batman is *suicide*" (Kardesoglu 2000b Emphasis added). Within this context, suicide resulting in death can be described as a tragic "success", as visible in headlines "When she could not *succeed* in dying, she ran away" and "In the seventh try, she *succeeded* in dying" (Beytut, 2000 Emphasis added; Aydin 2000b, Emphasis added).

Through this narrative, the news items not only attempt to dramatically describe the bleakness of the situation, but also call for action to save women, which is at times voiced urgently in the headlines as in "Hear This Scream", "Southeast should be declared a disaster zone", or "Come on" (Aydin 2002a; Mengi R. 2000; Mengi G. 2000). To accentuate the conceptual imagery around victims, powerful photographs are used. In some items, photographs of young girls who are saved and happy are displayed. When considered within the whole context of Batman stories, these photographs not only create a "before and after" image for the readers, but also create a small myth about the saved women.

In addition to this, covering the stories within the rhetoric of saving has further and more important consequences. Firstly, it further defines and discusses women within the cliché of victimization. A female journalist notes the danger of this in her column, where she argues that thinking within the discourse of social clichés leads us to accept and normalize violence within the family, that lead to suicides and honour killings:

> Let alone changing stereotypical roles, we have internalised and accepted them so much that we keep reproducing these and setting them out as examples. As the society defines (and since we live in a male hegemonic society, defining from men's perspective), women are "Mother" "Sister" "Housewife" "Honourable woman" "The bird that makes the nest" "Angel" "One that needs to be protected" "Altrustic women" "Weak and helpless" and many times, we have elevated them to the status of

> "victims". (...) Unless we overcome these clichés, these stereotypes, this
> perspective and this discourse, I do not think we can end violence within
> the families. (Oral 2000)

In fact, the totality of the stories does exactly what the journalist warns us not to do, and works to strengthen clichés. Ironically, just like in most other journalists do, this journalist herself uses in her very same column the emotional and cliché laden descriptions17, without which the victim character could not have been realized.

Second, the victim character helps to portray more convincing villains out of "husbands/fathers beating up wives/daughters" "authoritarian fathers/husbands" "oppressive customs and traditions". It should be noted that the men are not described with the same dramatic details as the victims are. This is not only because the already powerful presence of the helpless victim already makes any further details about the oppressors unnecessary, but also men themselves are seen as victims of their surroundings.

Therefore, victimization occurs at two levels through the stories, first for women and then for men. Men are also portrayed as suffering from poverty and terror in the region, as discussed previously, even though there is only one human interest story reporting the findings of a research under the title "In Batman it is hard to be a man too/ they, too, are in depression," which clearly reflects this concern (11.08.2001). However, columnists often do bring up the issue of men as they discuss the situation in Batman. At such occasions, the rhetoric used for men is similar to that used for women, albeit less emotional. Men are described as "hopeless" and "who have had a blow from life" (Turgut 2000), and in urgent need of a rescue, just like women: "not only young girls and women, but also the army of jobless young men, sons, fathers who from morning till night stroll around in boredom should be considered" (Tinc 2000). What is going to be "saved from the tyranny of traditions" is often described as "the people of the region" (Mengi R. 2000).

The categorization of first the women and then men as the victims furthermore establishes the significance of the centre as a protective force. As discussed previously, the centre is associated with the journalists, the readers, and certainly involving the state. The state is one of the problematic characters in the stories, as the role played out by it is changes throughout the stories. At times, it is described as "flooding into the region with its institutions" (Beytut 2001), and as in the coverage of Diyanet, emerging as the ultimate defender of the women's rights, even against some liberal/extravagant groups within the centre. At other news items, it is criticised for negligence, or for its military policies, which was analysed

in the thematic analysis of terror. Nevertheless, this does not reduce state's prominence as a part of the centre, and as a necessary mechanism that needs to be operated efficiently to help the suicides.

With the inclusion of men and the whole region in the victim category, the centre/periphery divide gains a more precise meaning in drawing the national boundaries through social, geographical and ethnic tracings for the "real Turkey", and the "other Turkey". While national boundaries are acted out, boundaries of modernity are also confirmed by associating the centre with modernity, education and progress, and the periphery, which lies in the east, with traditions, customs, backwardness.

Placing it within context & more about the guardian angels
Buried underneath all the sad stories, the Batman case study can offer the readers one or two rare instances, which, even though they were never meant to be funny, can't help but put a smile on the readers. Such are the complaints of a sociologist about the government's policies on modernizing the women and young people in the region that are perceived as stuck in between modernity and traditions (Dogan 2000). He explains how, in an attempt to ease their decision, the government had distributed six thousand free hand radios to young girls in education centres, so that they could bond with the popular culture. In a similarly ambitious project of modernization, pop stars would be brought in to the city to give public concerts in stadiums and sport halls, and young people who had recently immigrated form the villages would be taken into these concerts.

Let alone the doubtfulness about the success of such projects, such attempts make the mistake of sharply dividing up the two regions once again into two perfectly unrealistic and monolithic entities, the centre with the modern and global popular culture and the periphery with all its backwardness. In spite of all the criticisms and demands the journalists voice about government's policies in the region, they unfortunately also reproduce the discursive separation. Through this division, the centre emerges as without any divisions within itself or problems of its own, in short, as the model to be replicated and also the guarantor of that process.

In fact, the whole problem is perceived as a difficulty in replicating the centre. The stories share the wish that all would have been better if the periphery could have been like the centre. This wish, which holds for the whole region, is clearly audible regarding the condition of "other Turkey"'s women in Batman. In fact, women in Batman become a means through which boundaries are built within Turkey. This mechanism is generated through one of the main discourses embedded within the Kemalist modernization project, which take women as the strongest signifier of

modernity and therefore modernizing women as the sine qua non of the new nation (Kandiyoti 1997, 125). Within this context, women in Batman can be seen as the unfinished parts of that project, which not only the state but the whole centre, in all its modernized form, is willing to participate.

Of course, again as discussed previously, as national boundaries are built through women, they also set certain boundaries for women. Within the Turkish context, the most popular discourse seems to be the one arguing that women, rather than men, can be influenced by (and therefore should be protected from) the too liberal by-products of modernity. This argument places the need to liberate women through modernizing them alongside the need to protect them from the presumed threats that modern life can entail. We can see the same discourse emerging with regard to television paparazzi programs, which the Diyanet takes care to differentiate from the centre, describing them as the "lives of an eccentric small group". As the centre, which includes the liberated women journalists of modern cities, sets the limits for the women in Batman, they in fact echo the Kemalist project which would carefully detach any signs of sexuality from the meanings of "modern".

When we consider the news items in their totality, we can see that the discourse on women and modernity works to separate first the women and then the whole population of two Turkeys, feeding into and strengthening the centre/periphery relationship, while offering ways to incorporate them into a desired and pleasant version of modernity. This, however, is a tedious process and requires the centre to propose ways to eliminate undesired differences, which can vary from distribution of free radios to more serious projects for creating work opportunities. But the picture gets even more complicated given the ethnic differences, which are not easy to eliminate and which can be tightly bonded to cultural differences. Kirisci and Winrow note the connections between assimilation and modernization, and explain that members of threatened ethnic groups could feel that their culture was under attack from the state, and may perceive the state as identifying itself with the interests of a majority/dominant ethnic group/nation (1997, 4). Equating modernity with the centre and backwardness with the periphery where a major Kurdish population lives can only intensify the possibility of such a conflict and obstruct the channels for progress.

Conclusion

So far this paper attempted to expose how women could be an important means in constructing national boundaries. And yet, that says nothing much about the women who actually and determinedly committed suicide. While this might have been disappointing for a reader who would have liked to learn a bit more on why all this happened, searching for the reasons is beyond the scope of this

dissertation, and perhaps never fully within our grasp. As Henry Montherlant writes:

> There is nothing more mysterious than a suicide (...) When I hear someone explain the reasons for one suicide or another, I always have the impression of being sacrilegious. Only the suicide has known them and was in a position to comprehend them. I do not say, 'to make them comprehensible'; they are usually multiple, inextricable, and beyond the reach of any other person. (Cited in Minois 1999, 323)

While no explanation can solve all the mysteries behind all the suicides, attempts to interpret them will (and in fact, should) continue to understand and perhaps prevent further deaths. In fact, this was what the journalists had sought to do all throughout their stories and columns, as well as government institutions, NGO's, and social researchers who went to Batman region to investigate the deaths. Some others were hopefully sparked by this analysis. And yet, at the heart of all any such interpretation and explanation process lies the very same and simple question: "What can I do for them?"[18]

One should admit that it is easier to criticise the offers that are being made, than to offer a better solution. This work had no unrealistic ambitions to offer a solution to female suicides in Batman, but attempted to show them as a part of wider discourse shaping the boundaries of national identity in Turkey. Yet, by doing just so, it sought to prove that understanding the female suicides in Batman and finding the right answers needs to go beyond just the woman question in Turkey and has to take into consideration many other factors, and perhaps the most important of all, avoid causing the creation of discursive distances on cultural identity in our clumsy attempts to eradicate them.

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[1] Further details and statistics can be found in Deniz (et. al.) (2001).

[2] PKK is a separatist Kurdish organization, Hizbollah an ultra-religious organisation operating in the Middle East. Both groups were strongly committed to using violence against the Turkish state.

[3] An example is the problem of "honour killings" of women, which has been a particularly hot debate in 2003-2004, and mostly associated with the culture and traditions of the Southeast Turkey in the press.

[4] Mainstream here implies not only the circulation numbers of the newspapers but also political affiliations of the newspapers- which can be described as the centre right, showing strong favour of economic liberalism and some degree of political liberalism depending very much on the subject.

[5] The only exception to this time frame remains on an article published on June 16 2002. Titled *Hear this scream*, this article formed the major news piece for the Sunday supplements of *Hurriyet* newspaper with coverage too extensive to ignore. Spread over three pages, this is a feature story that aims to follow up on the problem of high rate of female suicides, this time in a neighbouring city to Batman, in Urfa, where, it is argued, female suicide rate has highly exceeded that in Batman. The journalist had written extensively on Batman in 2000, so this feature, in terms of narrative style, is same as the other suicide features published in 2000.

[6] A good example in this regard is Gulden Aydin's feature *Hear This Scream*, and *In the last five months, thirteen women committed suicide in Urfa*, which are the same story continued in the inside pages has the largest coverage on 16.06.2002, *Hurriyet*.

[7] The dictionary translation of gender is 'cins, cinsiyet', but these words also correspond to the translation of 'sex, sexuality'.

[8] The tone in such remarks is very direct. Consider for example Figen Unal Sen's article in *Sabah*, *The truth behind the suicides* on September 16: 'This was actually the "problem" that led Filiz to death. (...) Losing her virginity at a young age in Batman city in Southeast had led Filiz to death.'

[9] Back in 2000, 10 million TL would probably equate to approximately six or seven pounds.

[10] CATOM provides classes on various subjects, and skills and workspace for women where they make crafts that are to be later sold through the Center.

[11] News items, which report new suicides or the researches done about the increasing rate of suicides, do not share the same emotive descriptions on ethnic difference.

[12] The Republic of Turkey Directorate of Religious Affairs

[13] In the original text, 'Karsi neighbourhood.' In Turkish, 'karþý' means 'the opposite.'

[14] What is especially seen as dangerous are the Turkish celebrity programs, called *Televole* among the Turkish public, and commonly criticised for broadcasting nationwide the eccentric world of a minority, movie stars and members of high society, as if their lives were the norm in the big cities.

[15] See Kandiyoti (1997) for a further elaboration of this.

[16] How journalists linguistically separate themselves from the "other Turkey" and incorporate themselves within the centre will be further analysed in the following paragraphs.

[17] The following quote from her column is a good example here:

> A few years ago in Hakkari, in between the seeds that were beginning to sprout, I had from time to time witnessed gazes with no hope of future**...** The feeling of not being able to see the light at the end the tunnel was growing through scarcity and poverty...

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[18] See Spivak (1988a, 135) where she notes that this question lies under all western feminist attempts of studying third world women.

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