

Liminality and Transition in Turkey: Coded Methods of Subversion through Music Videos

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Abstract

This article provides insight into crowd manipulation methods used in modern Turkish society under an increasingly authoritarian regime while also exploring various cryptic methods of subversion used by people under free speech limitations.

Turkey is a nation divided politically, geographically and ideologically. Throughout the years, Turkey has seen increasingly limiting censorship and intimidation at the hand of the current government. Due to limitations on free speech, people have had to rely on cryptic messages encoded through symbolism in their works or online forums under the guise of being something else to convey their feelings towards Turkey's leadership and towards Turkey's unique situation.

Aleyna Tilki is a famous young singer who has faced intense public scrutiny and negative media coverage. Tilki's dress sense does not conform to Islamic standards in the context of a nation undergoing increasing Islamisation and she incorporates a range of international stylistic elements into her image and music videos in the context of a nation becoming increasingly isolationist and inward looking. Hidden messages conveyed through symbolism have been seen in a number of her works.

Turkey and Turkish politics arguably currently exist in a liminal state, 'betwixt and between' the neo-traditional (neo) Ottoman authoritarianism represented by Erdoğan's government on the one hand, and (neo)liberal Westernisation / globalisation on the other. As a result of increasing authoritarianism of the current government, political dissent is being repressed within Turkey under the current ruling party, the 'Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi' (Justice and Development Party, AKP). The 'CHP' (Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi) which translates to 'republican people's party' currently stands as the main opposition. An objective approach is required when discussing Turkish politics since both political orientations have been met with a plethora of criticisms from within and outside of Turkey, many pointing to the ways in which either party have disproportionately negatively impacted certain segments of Turkish society while privileging others. Political liminality is reflected in many of Turkey's institutions, ranging from government all the way down through Turkish pop culture. This article analyses one example of liminality in Turkish society by focusing on a young female celebrity popstar:

Aleyna Tilki. Tilki is an artist who exists in-between these contrasting political forces and tries to navigate her way between authoritarian neo-traditionalism and neo-liberal globalization.

This article begins by outlining the liminal conditions prevailing in Turkey today through situating the present with reference to deeper historical contexts. It then moves on to discuss how the virtual sphere has become both a tool of crowd manipulation by the government and a tool of political dissent by the populace. Particularly, the utilisation of the virtual sphere by the government as a crowd manipulation tool through attempting to influence public opinion is discussed while examples of political dissent conveyed through more implicit or concealed means to avoid imprisonment is also examined, exemplifying how the virtual sphere has become a battle ground for these political tensions. Furthermore, the life and work of the singer Aleyna Tilki, who has utilized her platform within the virtual sphere to draw attention to social issues after gaining a mass following at the age of 16, is used as an example of how she has become a lightning rod for conflicting and colliding forces in geo-political ‘culture wars’, and how she negotiate these ambivalent and ambiguous powers.

Following mass arrests of journalists and academics after the failed 2016 military coup and because of growing restrictions on freedom of speech, alternative public spheres have been employed as a means of conveying political discord and disillusionment with the current leadership. This is an important trend to consider since there is a wide variety of examples of alternative public spheres where messages are cryptically conveyed and more difficult for the Government to assert authority over. These alternative public spheres include online forums and social media websites disguised as dictionaries. The political dissonance conveyed in these alternative spheres reflects ideas held by sectors of the populace (notably young, urban people) regarding the political condition of their country and the policies imposed onto them by the current government. This article examines the dissonance associated with the current liminal conditions prevalent in Turkish politics and culture through analysing encoded visual symbolism in music videos of Aleyna Tilki, a popular young Turkish singer. This is carried out through a thematic analysis of various imagery within music videos. The aim is to indicate overall how websites, social media pages, music and symbolism in music videos have become appropriated by young Turkish people, who generally identify as metropolitan / liberal-progressive, as a platform for resistance to AKP policies while simultaneously avoiding any direct consequences because of these political subversions.

Geographically, historically, and culturally Turkey exists in the threshold between ‘Orient’ and ‘Occident’. Today, as a modern nation, Turkey is divided politically and ideologically, with a large population in affluent cosmopolitan cities and with a vast interior

agrarian hinterland with peasant villages where people live very traditional lives. Many Turkish people live in liminal spaces – in between past and future, tradition and modernity, East and West, secular liberalism and neo-Islamic conservatism. These powerful colliding forces are deeply ambivalent, ambiguous and paradoxical: global-American Western liberalism promises ‘freedom’, but often a dubious freedom of profane commodity fetishism, consumerism, nihilism, and vacuous celebrity. Neo-Islamic traditionalism promises to restore ‘morality’ against encroaching Western ‘decadence’, but usually this means the restoration of patriarchal authoritarianism and stern repression, of women especially. There is no easy solution or ‘correct’ position to hold in this enormous culture war as all possible positions are ambiguous and ambivalent. Aleyna Tilki appears to represent global Western values on the one hand, while she also represents aspects of deep traditional Turkish values and multiple cultural inheritance(s) on the other hand, thus reflecting in a hybrid image.

Background: Liminal tensions in Turkey

Liminal tensions that have been a feature of Turkish society for centuries have become particularly exacerbated in the 21st century. The post-Ottoman, modern, secular, democratic, national republican state of Turkey which was founded under Atatürk in 1923 (following the collapse of the Turkish Empire after the First World War), although relatively stable for some 75 years, is flawed in several ways. The founding ideology of the Republic of Turkey was ‘Kemalism’ (also known as ‘Atatürkism’). Mustafa Kemal Atatürk was a charismatic leader who emerged after the collapse of the Ottoman empire in the wake of the First World War, and whose personality and oratory conveyed a vision that assimilated many diverse strands of Turkish history and culture. He founded the oldest political party of Turkey known as the CHP (Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi). The origins of the Turkish nation alongside Turkish nationalism are usually seen as coinciding with one another, as many scholars point to the way in which policies of Ottoman modernisation gave rise to nationalism (Göl, 2005 p. 136). Göl theorises that Turkish territoriality was often accomplished through the othering of Armenians and Greeks in order to establish the Turkish Nation (*ibid.*, p. 122). Since the origins of the early Turkish nation were founded on the legacy of such an expansive and multi-ethnic empire, there was not as strong an emphasis on shared ethnic lineage as there have been in other nationalisms. Atatürk’s ‘six arrows’ of his vision were republicanism, secularism, nationalism, populism, statism, and revolutionism (Caliskan, 2020, p. 417). Kemalism emphasised unification through national solidarity and a secular society. This ideology was not entirely inclusive to all factions of Turkish society which marked the start of brewing resentment. Further, although neither the

CHP nor Ataturk were widely considered to be corrupt, it is notable that economic benefits were reserved to people who were close to the CHP (Baran & Davis, 2000, p. 130). This brew resentment throughout Turkish society (*ibid.*, p. 131). While most Turkish people remained impoverished, economic and political wealth and power was concentrated amongst a westernised elite. It was on the back of this continuing inequity under the guise of Europeanisation that the current regime came to power, under neo-conservative, populist Islamist authoritarian President Erdoğan. Erdoğan, the AKP and their followers enjoy wide support because many Turkish people are disillusioned with the plethora of disadvantages which came along with efforts to westernise Turkey and the propositioning of values such as liberalism, secularism, and free-market capitalism which had largely only benefitted a certain group of elites while disempowering rural people.

These tensions have become more exacerbated in the modern age of globalisation which is often criticised as being Western-centric. With growing international awareness of harmful effects of American hegemony alongside the worldwide protests of the International Monetary Fund, it is arguable that this consensus is becoming more. The AKP party was officially founded on 14th August 2001. At first, they showed promise in implementing a more democratic, less corrupt system into Turkey's government which had previously been ruled by a corrupt elite (Kubicek, 2020, p. 11). The AKP rose to power in the 2002 elections, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan became prime minister in 2003 and President of Turkey in 2014. Against the official principle of secularism, which had become associated with the corrupt powerful westernised elites, current AKP leadership promotes religion within the educational system to nurture an ethno-religious nationalism, and Islam is promoted as a crucial component to national identity (Yavuz & Öztürk, 2019, p. 2). Whereas secular-liberal Western culture was seen as having become corrupt and amoral, Islam could provide Turkey with a renewed moral centre. In the context of previous elite rulers continually being regarded as immoral, Erdoğan had a particularly strong influence on political processes and his leadership style is more authoritarian (Görener & Ucal, 2011, p. 376). The extent of Erdoğan's power over political institutions is particularly remarkable: After a 2017 referendum Turkey became a presidential system and Erdoğan can now follow his volition without approval from legislative and judiciary bodies (*ibid.*, p. 357). This represents the political transition in Turkey from a corrupt parliamentary democracy to an authoritarian Islamo-moralistic autocracy (Yeşilada, 2016, p. 19). According to Freedom House, a non-profit US-based organization which evaluates the rights and liberties of the civilians of 192 different countries around the world (Casper & Tufiş, 2003, p. 3), Turkey has been rated as 'unfree' since 2018, a classification that Turkey has not

had for decades since the 1980's (Kubicek, 2020, p. 2). Although the extent of Freedom House's trustworthiness has been brought into question since it is a largely government-funded institute which has been criticised for primarily focussing on US interests, this large shift in classification is indicative nonetheless of major changes in Turkey. This repression has transgressed into the realm of Turkish academia and has been seen most recently in the case of Boğaziçi University and the protests that broke out in early 2021. These protests started because of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan appointing Melih Bulu (a man who was the former Sarıyer district president of the ruling AKP party) to be the rector of the University. This was met by outrage and a string of protests lasting approximately six months ensued, attended by many Boğaziçi University academics, students and campus staff. Ultimately, Melih Bulu was removed from his position by President Erdoğan on 15th July 2021 following the controversy. It can be argued that the appointment of a man who was heavily politically affiliated with the AKP for rectorship of the university is indicative of an attempt made by the AKP to limit Boğaziçi University's academic autonomy and an attempt to expand power from the political realm alone and transgress into the academic realm of Turkish society.

The virtual sphere as a crowd manipulation tool

Power struggles have seemed to extend beyond the realm of Turkish politics and institutions and have largely played out within the virtual sphere. The Gezi Park protests (May to August 2013) were a rolling wave of popular protest across several Turkish cities on ecological, political and cultural issues, related to Erdoğan's authoritarianism and neo-Islamism. They attracted major attention both within Turkey and internationally since it had such a large reach and inspired several different events. The protests highlighted the extent to which social media plays a role within political movements as social media facilitates sharing information, communication amongst demonstrators along with garnering international recognition (Chrona & Bee, 2017, p. 57). The Gezi park protests began as a pacifist demonstration against urban development plans which erupted into larger scale protests after the police reacted violently using riot control weapons in an attempt to end the protests (Chrona & Bee, 2017, p. 57). The demands of the protesters were personal liberty, democracy and improved regard for the environment (Taştan, 2013, p. 36).

Despite having come to power as a protest movement against the unaccountability and corruption of previous ruling elites, the current government has sought to suppress any criticism or dissent against the AKP or its policies. Increasingly this is seen on social media due to the major influence that social media has had on the youth as well as on political

processes in recent years. The term ‘cyber troops’ has emerged in recent years which Bradshaw and Howard define as “government, military or political party teams committed to manipulating public opinion over social media” (Bradshaw & Howard, 2017, p. 3). These have been utilised by government actors in Turkey to spread false news throughout social media platforms (*ibid.*). The instrumentalisation of the Internet as a political tool by the government has been increased seen since the Gezi Park protests. The Gezi Park protests are believed to have inspired the AKP’s creation of so called ‘AK trolls’ (Saka, 2018, p. 172). AK trolls are internet trolls who target prominent artists, journalists and academics who are in any way critical or defiant of the current leadership (Bulut, 2017, p. 4093).

The use of AK trolls is an example of crowd manipulation. Due to the vast number of AK trolls that exist, they eventually begin to form a crowd within social media platforms. From the perspective of group psychology, Gustave Le Bon (1977) argues how individuals tend to do things in large groups that they would never do individually due to the fact that they are less likely to consider responsibility for their actions. Individuals also gain a sense of power in larger numbers and the activities of the group eventually become contagious (Le Bon, 1977, p. 34). This is a well-known phenomenon and has often been cited as a plausible explanation behind why many people who are not trolls or connected to troll networks can oftentimes ‘blend in’ with the crowd of trolls. Since the attempted military coup in 2016, the current government has arrested many journalists, public officials, army officers and academics – some sources claim more than 76,000 people were arrested (Ghilès, 2016, p. 2). There has also been a major increase in authoritarianism, with journalists facing intimidation and Turkey’s Internet becoming increasingly censored (Handziuk, 2016, p. 185). The national army which protected Kemalist values has found its influence increasingly weakened by the AKP. Many of the officers have been disempowered and the secular laws that were originally put in place have become rolled back (Alvi, 2015, p. 24). Due to this steadily increasing censorship and limitations on free speech, many musicians and artists have been pushed to the margins, and in fear of persecution they have had to rely on more non-explicit methods of expressing their discontentment with the direction their country is going in and speaking out against the current government. In an increasingly illiberal, neo-Islamist, authoritarian, heavily censored Turkey, people expressing their dissent with and resistance to Erdoğan and the AKP have developed carefully coded subversive means of communication to express their views.

The virtual sphere as a subversion tool

The methods used by Turkish people to combat the increasing limitations on their political liberties generally, and freedom of speech particularly, are varied. Online communities and social media pages where people can express any differing opinions or criticisms of the government disguised as dictionaries have become increasingly popular over the years. One such example of this is *Ekşi Sözlük*¹ which is one of the most frequented websites in Turkey used to discuss political issues among other topics (Akca, 2005). The topics discussed and range of discourses that occur on *Ekşi Sözlük* are extensively broad. It can be described as a collaborative hypertext dictionary but, under the guise of being merely a dictionary, it provides a forum for political discussion. *Ekşi Sözlük* combines a search engine, an online forum, a chat room, a platform for advertising and an account of history among many other things. Due to this broadness and wide range of obtainable information, it has become associated with postmodernism (Gürel & Yakın, 2013, p. 217). Due to the breadth of the topics discussed it cannot be solely classified as purely political.

Furthermore, the Instagram page ‘Turkish Dictionary’² is a social media page that has colloquial Turkish terms and phrases, news infographics and infographics about Turkish national holidays translated into both English and Turkish but with certain political undertones. Some of the infographics discuss major issues in Turkey such as femicide, homophobia, corruption scandals, banning of alcohol sales, Turkish withdrawal from the Istanbul convention and increased waste and environmental pollution. Since the infographics are translated into English and the page calls itself a dictionary, it is also not classifiable as purely political.

Online websites, such as the page Yalnzyürümeyeceksin.com,³ have provided a platform for people to anonymously discuss experiences of living under strict and conservative rules inflicted onto them by their elders (Arda & Akdemir, 2021, p. 2). While the majority of people who share their experiences tend to be female, males who face similar social pressures are free to submit to the site (*ibid.*, p. 6). It further emphasises the idea of a common bonding through discussion of shared experiences and denotes a need for change which has been seen in other feminist movements such as #metoo (*ibid.*, p. 3). A topic heavily discussed on this website is the social pressures that young women are subjected to about wearing a headscarf and conforming to Islamic dress code. Many women express unhappiness with the obligation to wear the Islamic headscarf. They further mention, since they were underage when they were

¹ [translation: “sour dictionary”]

² @turkishdictionary

³ [translation: “you will never walk alone”]

first obliged, they had a lot of power exerted onto them by parents as well as school authority figures which had a negative impact on their wellbeing (*ibid.*, p. 7). Frequent feelings of alienation as well as certain levels of resentment towards the gender imbalance that exists in organised religion can also be seen (*ibid.*, p. 8). The fact that this website allows users to share their criticisms about religion and share their personal experience represents the nourishment of critical thinking as well as giving voice to young people who are struggling in their cultural and religious contexts.

Aleyna Tilki as a symbol of Turkey’s cultural and political liminality

Aleyna Tilki is a musician who utilises her large fanbase and online platforms to exhibit symbolisms in her music videos as a means of criticising patriarchal aspects of Turkey through the virtual sphere. Tilki is a famous Turkish musician who rose to prominence after the release of the hit single “cevapsiz cinlama”⁴ which currently has over 545 million views on YouTube. Tilki is an artist who is known for introducing international stylistic elements into her music videos and image. By combining various international elements, Tilki represents all that is liminal and transitional about Turkey today, and for this she is a highly ambivalent figure. She is celebrated and idolised by many and equally hated and reviled by many others, particularly traditional and neo-Islamists to whom she embodies all that is Western, corrupt and immoral, influences that have ‘ruined’ and are ‘ruining’ Turkey. She is particularly targeted by AK trolls, for whom she is a convenient scapegoat to redirect focus on populist authoritarian neo-Islamic politics. Tilki embodies many influences: she represents all of the multiplicity and diversity of historical and cultural influences – Eastern and Western; secular and Islamic; male and female, amongst many other elements, that constitute ‘Turkish’ identity as composite and complex. Thus, Tilki cannot be reconciled with Erdoğan and the AKP’s envisioned version of Turkey, but at the same time she is not easily assimilated into Western culture either and so she continues to be irreducibly Turkish.

Aleyna Tilki has combined many cultural influences into her music and performances to produce a unique individual style. This individualism is arguably a subversive approach in the Turkish music industry since Turkey as a country is remarkably inward looking and issues arise when an individual defies social and political norms (Haynes, 2010, p. 326). Tilki emerged from the sixth season of ‘yetenek sizsiniz Turkiye’⁵ where she placed as semi-finalist.

⁴ [translation: “unanswered ringing”]

⁵ A Turkish reproduction of the ‘Got Talent’ global series.

Since this success, she has released multiple music videos and signed with Warner Music. Tilki has also received English language training in Los Angeles, which makes her a perceived representative of modernisation, globalisation and Westernisation in Turkey. She is seen by many to be the embodiment of all that is immoral about that global culture industry – vacuous and trivial, hyper-individual, anti-social – as a celebrity, a product in a corrupt, decadent and amoral commercial market.

Tilki can be considered to represent the rift and the collision between two Turkeys: On the one hand a modern, secular, global, Western, progressive Turkey in continuity with the lineage and inheritances of Ataturk. But that lineage from Ataturk for many Turks had turned out to be only a false promise of secular-liberal Westernisation and a corrupt lie. A significant portion of the population have recently turned to another, different lie: the false promises of a neo-traditional, neo-Islamist, authoritarian Turkey on the other hand, which re-aligned as a major regional power and asserted leadership in what had formerly been its Empire. And in the middle of all this conflict between ‘new’ and ‘old’, between two completely opposite sets of lies and false promises is Tilki, a young woman who has become the subject and object of these enormous social and political forces, ambivalently heroized and demonised. Her lyrics also express the lonely, anxious child, born and raised in an inland provincial city in Turkey’s rural and conservative heartland, aspiring to break out and become an international celebrity, a star on a world stage, an aspiration that she has expressed since her childhood and particularly represented in her choices of style and fashion, an assemblage of the multiplicity and variety of cultural influences in what is contemporary Turkey.

In terms of her fashion, Aleyna Tilki is seen regularly sporting midriff tops which are an example of a Western international stylistic element into her look since they were originally introduced by French fashion designer Madeleine Vionnet in 1932. Coincidentally, the 1930’s were the highpoint of Ataturk’s political career and also the high point of the French colonial empire throughout North Africa and the Middle East. Vionnet was also widely credited in the Western world for her contributions to women’s fashion which included liberating women’s bodies and even introducing more androgynous elements to women’s clothing (Stewart, 2008, p. 9). The midriff top is an exemplary instance of French Orientalism, the exoticisation and eroticisation of Arabic / Middle Eastern and Turkish culture, and its appropriation and assimilation into Western fashion (Scarborough & Hunt-Hurst, 2014, p. 49). The frequency of this clothing item in Tilki’s image can be interpreted as a fashion statement aimed to affirm agency over the orientalist gaze in the face of Western-dominated globalisation. Tilki’s music usually consists of synth-pop fused with Middle Eastern music, potentially striving to establish

a middle ground between the Western orientalist imagined reality of the Middle East and Tilki's lived experience of the true reality.

In her English language debut 'Retrograde', Aleyna does a pole dance to synth-pop with Turkish inflections. The lyrics assert a woman's choice in rejecting her would-be boyfriend and declares her intentions in a refrain "I ain't goin' backwards now' / ain't doin' retrograde". This apparent a message to her boyfriend is a coded message against Erdoğan and the AKP's authoritarian retrogressive backwards revolution. Tilki is part of this culture war. How much does it control her? How aware of the historical-political context is she? How much is she in control of her representations and performances; and how does she consciously and deliberately play with all these various contradictory contexts in the political theatre of contemporary Turkey? These are complex and difficult questions.

With regards to her image, Tilki incorporates a wide range of different cultural influences into her fashion and music video imageries. In terms of more far-Eastern international stylistic elements, Tilki incorporates a certain number Kawaii⁶ elements into her image. The influence is seen in her music videos which is noteworthy as this has been a growing fashion trend in Turkey over the years with the increasing popularisation of Japanese brands such as Hello Kitty and the widespread viewing of anime and manga (Duman, 2020, p. 88). Kawaii is a gendered term with the origins and usage in traditional patriarchal masculinist Japanese culture. More recently in contemporary Japanese culture, however, these meanings have been appropriated and inverted, embraced by young Japanese women who recode them to signify their empowerment (Kinsella, 1995, p. 244). The word Kawaii was an ancient Japanese word that originally meant something along the lines of 'ashamed' but is now a word that is typically defined as 'cute' when translated into English (Nittono *et al.*, 2012, p. 1). Kawaii culture represents an idealised childhood but became a way in which women could express independence. Japanese women and Turkish women arguably share a certain affinity, as constrained by the traditional patriarchal cultures in their respective societies, and their search for codes and languages and styles through which to express themselves.

Kawaii culture is often popular among unmarried women since it represents freedom from marriage and distances them from being oppressed by social expectations (Kinsella, 1995, p. 244). This relates to Tilki as she has continuously incorporated it into her image, suggesting her seeking more empowerment in addition to making her image more internationally influenced. In regard to her music videos, a commonly occurring colour scheme used in Tilki's

⁶ Kawaii aesthetics originates from Japan.

music videos is pastel. In her music videos for her song “sen olsan bari”⁷, there is an involvement of Kawaii elements such as a big teddy bear and a toy unicorn with various pastel-coloured foods. In her music video for “dipsiz kuyum”⁸ there is a more “kimo kawaii”⁹ touch, as her style is slightly more gothic and the visuals and colours are darker and bolder, including a red-and-black colour scheme in one shot and a bright pink neon LED colour scheme in the second shot. Her music video for “sen olsan bari”¹⁰ uses similar elements as well as pig tails, pyjamas and LED lighting, which give the music video a childish touch (Duman, 2020, pp. 102–103).

Since her rise to national stardom at age 16, Tilki has become a controversial figure in the Turkish music industry. Her outfit choices do not conform to Islamic dress code standards. The Quran emphasizes modesty, which is practiced by many Muslims worldwide by wearing clothing that does not expose too much skin (Esposito, 2003, p. 105). Tilki not dressing ‘modestly’ arguably challenges cultural and social norms which are rooted in Islamic teachings. At the same time, she is highlighting the contradiction and sexual double standard that the same patriarchal Islamic culture that preaches chastity and modesty also institutionalises the harem, the belly dance and the sex slave. The essential problem is that while she is denounced as Western, Tilki is unmistakably and defiantly Turkish, and because of this irreconcilable collision of cultures that she represents, she is targeted by Erdoğan, the AKP and their social media trolls. She has been repeatedly publicly criticised by government officials and national news outlets for performing in alcohol-serving venues underage and faced multiple claims that performing in bars is deeply harmful to her mental health (Cantürk & Toracı, 2016). In late September 2017, she has also received nationwide negative media coverage after allegedly rejecting to switch off her phone on an airplane. National news outlets did not report impartially about the incident and used defamatory headlines such as “someone tell this spoilt child to stop!”¹¹ Many news outlets tended to characterise Tilki as spoilt as a result of this incident. Beyaz TV, a national news broadcasting network, had a sensationalised national news broadcast about the incident, making remarks such as “Aleyna put everyone’s life in danger.”¹² Besides the exaggeration, the story could equally been a fabrication or twisted narrative, considering that most of her media representation is negative and paints her in a bad light.

⁷ [translation: “Solitary flower”]

⁸ [translation: “My bottomless pit”]

⁹ [translation: “Creepy cute”]

¹⁰ [translation: “If only it were you”]

¹¹ [original: “Biri bu şımarık çocuğa "dur" desin!”]

¹² [original: “Aleyna herkesin hayatını tehlikeye attı”]

Another incident causing nationwide media hype and public discourse included the release of her second music video “Yalnız Çiçek” which portrayed Tilki pretending to eat various foods (such as a pizza slice, spaghetti, multicoloured cereal and a pink doughnut) which was considered troublesome by some people because the video was released during Ramadan, which is widely practiced throughout Turkey. While this religious transgression is the one that is mainly focused on – even though ironically there is no transgression, for in fact she is not eating and thereby fasting – they miss her point completely: American junk food, shown in sickening ways and eaten on a bathroom floor, in a sink or in a bathtub, draws an association between the junk food and bulimia nervosa as bulimic patients tend to consume meals in bathrooms (Woods, 2019, p. 9). Tilki’s code references the travails and pains of her generation of young Turkish women trapped between two cultures, namely the neo-traditionalist and the hyper-modern, with two sets of expectations for young women, both gendered and harmful to young Turkish women, albeit in different ways. The AKP, their bots and media trolls focus on controversies such as these to try to systematically damage Tilki’s reputation, public image, and her mental health. Many of the comments on her social media pages are negative and disturbing comments towards the young singer and her family with the usage of a lot of profanity and sexual remarks (Sözcü, 2018).

The music video for the famous song “Yalan”¹³ by Tilki is a noteworthy example of non-explicit defiance due to its references to Turkish history, Turkish culture and possible references to the issue of femicide in Turkey which has become a rising topic throughout Turkey, frequently described as being political. When this music video was released in 2020, 300 women were killed by men and a further 171 were found dead in suspicious circumstances that year (Kadın Cinayetlerini Durduracağız, 2021). A motive behind a considerable number of femicides is that the women in question wanted to become more independent and make their own life decisions such as starting to work (Atuk, 2020, p. 285). In the first 30 seconds of her music video “Yalan”, Tilki is seen weaving a carpet on a hand loom which has her name woven onto it. Anatolian rugs represent a highly important component of Anatolian culture. They were most typically woven by young women due to their superior physical skills and mental abilities in comparison to older women who typically wove less valuable or important objects (Öter, 2009, p. 654). Tilki’s weaving indicates the importance placed on the loom historically in Turkish traditional society and how a woman’s purpose in life revolved around the loom. Turkish carpet weaving is a very old tradition in Turkish society and women were usually their

¹³ [translation: “lie”]

artists as well as labourers for centuries. Carpet weaving was one of the only ways in which women were historically able to earn money in the context of repressive sexism in Ottoman culture. The income they generated was vital for the survival of the household and the method of carpet weaving was in tune with the Middle Eastern tradition of women's restricted movement beyond the domestic realm (Berik, 1986). Tilki is seen weaving her first name, symbolising her attempt to create a name for herself. She is sporting pink clothing, a short skirt and pigtails which are all stylistic elements that are traditionally associated with femininity and youth. In the next part of the music video, Tilki displays a bubble container with a cherry symbol and a bubble wand. This further gives the music video a youthful touch to it which relates to her Kawaii stylistic elements previously discussed. The symbolism of the cherry is significant since it is one of Turkey's main exports since the climate of many Turkish regions nurture their growth (Demircan *et al.*, 2006, p. 1762). The cherry could symbolise Tilki's effort to export Turkish music to the rest of the world in the same way that Turkish cherries are exported all over the world. The bubble-wand (filled with blood) and the teacup (a symbol of Turkish domesticity) represent the blood of Turkish women killed by Turkish patriarchy in its traditional and contemporary variants. The cherry's liquid also resembles blood. The blood may also represent menstrual blood, and the cherry symbolises the hymen, both relating to the expectation that Turkish women should be virgins at marriage, and the dire consequences and punishments they would suffer if their husbands, in-laws or fathers suspected that they were not virgins. All this dark history of patriarchy and femicide – in Turkey' past, and on the increase again in Erdoğan's Turkey – is subtly encoded in Tilki's music video. The small ceramic cup is one that is used for hot beverages such as tea or coffee. Tea and coffee, much like the carpets, are both important components of Turkish culture. Tea is very widely consumed in Turkey, topping international consumption per capita charts. The frame of the liquid (which has an uncanny resemblance to blood) right in front of Tilki (dressed in such a traditionally feminine manner) could symbolise the sharp increase in violence against women and femicide that has occurred in Turkey. Furthermore, the liquid's positioning in the ceramic teacup could symbolise how femicide and violence against women is so normalised due to the fact that tea and coffee are such important aspects to everyday Turkish domestic culture and society.

Femicide is a serious issue in Turkey with an increasing number of femicides occurring in Turkey over the past few years. Many men who have murdered their wives revealed that their motive was protecting honour and asserting male dominance (Altınöz *et al.*, 2018, p. 4182). Numbers have increased dramatically since 2012 (Afsar, 2016, p. 78; Cetin, 2015, p.

350), in parallel with the AKP obtaining more power and a major share in parliamentary representation (Alvi, 2015, p. 22). The increase in murder of women is directly correlated with the changing status of women and the collision culture that exist when tradition and modernity meet (Cetin, 2015, p. 346). When investigating motives for femicides, a common thread exists: A woman is acting independently of her husband's wishes and taking initiative over her life and/or wishes to separate from her husband (Cetin, 2015, p. 353). The issue at stake is invariably the charge that a woman has transgressed a perceived limit, crossed some or other traditional patriarchal threshold and is therefore the cause of a troubling liminality. One aim of the AKP government is to increase the importance of religion in society and as part of a national identity (Lüküslü, 2016, p. 639). This recent trend of femicides by reason of protecting honour in the context of a country whose government promotes Islam to such an extent is telling that honour has been becoming more and more important in Turkish society. Tilki signifies the breaking of limits and crossing of thresholds as valuable and important, as necessary and as beautiful, and for this she is hated, feared and thus targeted by the neo-traditionalist Turkish regime.

In the last scene to “Yalan”, Tilki is presented with a large white teddy bear with blackened eyes. Various details on the bear resemble injuries found on other high-profile female murder victims both in Turkey and in the West, indicating that the issue of femicide is a complex global issue. One of the most well-known photos of Ayşe Paşalı, the victim in an infamous case of femicide by her former husband, shows her with bruised eyes wearing a white coat. The popular image of Paşalı has become a symbol in protests against violence towards women (Cetin, 2015, p. 356). The bear also has a ‘Glasgow smile’ which is an injury to the mouth area made by making an incision on the corner of a person’s mouth until the wound reaches the person’s ears, eventually forming the shape of a widened smile. This is an injury that was found on the high-profile murder victim Elizabeth Short’s body. Similar to how Ayşe Paşalı became a symbol of femicide in Turkey and had her picture become widely used in demonstrations, Elizabeth Short’s murder became a symbol in Western popular culture (Havermans, 2021). Tilki’s bear shows a combination of these two well-known injuries from femicide victims in Turkey and United States, thus drawing attention to a global issue. The last few seconds of the music video to “Yalan” show Tilki reaching out her hand before the colour red appears on screen. Reaching your hand out and exposing your palm is a commonly known gesture for telling someone to stop.

Conclusion

The main issue this article addresses is the methods that Turkish people have had to resort to in order to voice political dissent as a result of increasing authoritarianism under the rule of the AKP and repressive policies restricting freedom of speech. People in Turkey have had to employ alternative spaces of protest and present their dissent in a much less explicit way to get their messages across through the virtual world where they can gain a wide viewership. Aleyna Tilki utilises her large virtual platform as an accomplished singer and presents encoded symbolism in her music videos that highlight misogyny and femicide in Turkey. As a young woman, Tilki represents both Turkey's political liminality and cultural liminality. Politically, Tilki represents the drift of the Turkish youth towards more individualist values and less religious lifestyles, for which she is targeted by AK trolls. Culturally, Tilki represents the vast cultural influences within Turkey through her usage of international stylistic elements as well as the struggles that young women in her cultural context face being on the margins of both the Eastern and the Western worlds. This theme is particularly addressed in her song and music video for "Yalnız Çiçek".

Tilki herself symbolises the Western influence in Turkey, with all its faults and false promises, and thereby has also become a symbol of resistance to Erdoğan, the AKP, and their new web of lies and false promises. Tilki on first impressions seems a trivial pop-star, but in carefully crafted coded messages articulates a powerful critique of the regime.

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