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MARMARA UNIVERSITY
INSTITUTE OF SOCIAL SCIENCES
DEPARTMENT OF SOCIOLOGY (ENGLISH)

**NAVIGATING IDENTITY AND BELONGING:
AN ANALYSIS OF WOMEN'S SELF-REPRESENTATION AND MODES OF
SUBJECTION IN THE İSKENDERPAŞA, İSMAİLAĞA, AND MEŞVERET
COMMUNITIES**

DOCTORAL THESIS
FATMA ZEHRA ÖZYAĞLI

Advisor
ASSOC. PROFESSOR ZÜBEYİR NİŞANCI

İstanbul, 2024

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İstanbul, 2024

ÖZET

KİMLİK VE AİDİYET: İSKENDERPAŞA, İSMAİLAĞA VE MEŞVERET CEMAATLERİNDE KADINLARIN ÖZ-TEMSİLİ VE ÖZNELEŞME BİÇİMLERİ

Bu tez, İstanbul'daki İsmailağa, İskenderpaşa ve Meşveret cemaatlerin de kadınların öz-temsili ve Foucaultcu anlamda özneleşme biçimlerini incelemektedir. Bu araştırmanın amacı, Türkiye'deki dini cemaatler içerisinde kadın kimliğinin nasıl oluştuğunu anlamak ve cemaatler arasında kadın kimliğinin oluşumunda herhangi bir fark olup olmadığını incelemektir. Bu çalışma, katılımcı gözlem, yarı yapılandırılmış mülakatlar, döküman analizi ve söylem analizi gibi farklı nitel yöntemleri kullanmaktadır. Araştırmanın ilk aşaması olan veri toplama süreci, ağırlıklı olarak bu cemaatlerdeki katılımcı gözlem ve 41 katılımcıyla gerçekleştirdiğim yarı yapılandırılmış mülakatlara dayanmaktadır. Katılımcıların 15'i İsmailağa ve Meşveret topluluklarından, 11'i ise İskenderpaşa topluluğundandır; katılımcıların yaşları 25 ile 65 arasında değişmektedir. Katılımcı gözlemler, topluluk üyeleriyle etkileşimlerimden ve sohbetler ile derslerin gözlemlenmesinden elde edilen verilere dayanmaktadır. Araştırmanın ikinci aşaması olan veri analizi sürecinde, söylem analizi yöntemi kullanılarak katılımcıların kendilerini tanımlamak için kullandıkları ortak ve tekrar eden temalar incelenmiştir. Araştırmanın teorik çerçevesi, Bourdieu'nün habitus, alan ve kültürel sermaye kavramlarını ve Sembolik Etkileşimcilik teorisini içermektedir. Sonuç olarak, bu araştırma, Türkiye'de cinsiyet çalışmaları ve din sosyolojisi literatürüne, üç dini topluluğun pratikleri üzerinden habitus ve benlik kavramlarını inceleyerek katkıda bulunmaktadır. Ayrıca, bu topluluklardaki kadın üyelerin kendilerini ve diğerlerini – sufi, dini ya da dindar olmayan kadınlar ve erkekler – nasıl algıladıklarına dair derinlemesine bir analiz sunarak tasavvuf antropolojisine de katkı sağlamaktadır.

Anahtar kelimeler: İskenderpaşa cemaati, Meşveret cemaati, İsmailağa cemaati, cinsiyet, kimlik, tasavvuf.

ABSTRACT

NAVIGATING IDENTITY AND BELONGING: AN ANALYSIS OF WOMEN'S SELF-REPRESENTATION AND MODES OF SUBJECTION IN THE İSKENDERPAŞA, İSMAİLAĞA, AND MEŞVERET COMMUNITIES

This dissertation examines women's identity formation and modes of subjection (in the Foucaultian sense) in the İsmailağa, İskenderpaşa, and Meşveret communities in Istanbul. The aim of this research is to understand how female identity is formed and whether there are any differences in women's identity formation across religious communities in Turkey. In addition, several sub-questions aid in my analysis of the discursive strategies through which these women structure their self-representations and their various modes of subjection. The research employs different qualitative methods, including participant observation, semi-structured interviews, document analysis, and discourse analysis. The first phase of this research, which involves data collection, primarily relies on my participant observation within these communities and the semi-structured interviews conducted with 41 participants – of these participants, 15 are from the İsmailağa and Meşveret communities, and 11 are from the İskenderpaşa community, with ages ranging from 25 to 65. Participant observation draws from my interaction with community members, as well as my observation of sohbet and lectures. In the second phase of my research, which focuses on data analysis, I utilize discourse analysis to examine the collected data for common and recurring themes that interviewees use to identify themselves. The theoretical framework incorporates Bourdieu's concepts of habitus, field, and cultural capital, alongside Symbolic Interactionist theory. Finally, this research contributes to gender studies and the sociology of religion in Turkey by examining the conception of habitus and selves through the practices of the three religious communities. It also adds to the anthropology of Sufism through an in-depth analysis of how the female members of these communities perceive themselves and others – sufi, religious, and non-religious women and men.

Keywords: İskenderpaşa community, Meşveret community, İsmailağa community, gender, identity, Sufism.

To my mother...

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*

And finally, this thesis is dedicated to the best father. I wish he could have seen it...

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CHAPTER I

1.1. Introduction

It is crucial to first delineate the boundaries of this research and clarify its scope, particularly regarding research's exclusive focus on women. First of all, this thesis does not aim to fall within the realm of gender studies; rather, my intention has always been to contribute to the field of religious sociology by specifically studying religious communities. Although there is a short section on gender literature, this was done for the sake of understanding the conservative women literature in Turkey which would shed light into the areas of interest of this study. However, the majority of the literature primarily draws from sociology of religion and previous studies in the field of religious communities. As for the selected theories, the primary focus was on understanding the identity formation and determining whether environment had an affect on these women, as it was essential to the study to see the environmental influences on identity formation. Understanding the environmental factors aided in uncovering the intricate ways in which the members' surroundings shaped their self-conception and communal roles.

Goffman's (1965, p. 257) "all the world is a stage" approach, which suggests that identity formation occurs in relation to social interactions, along with Bourdieu's emphasis on habitus—highlighting the unintentional and unconscious internalization of dispositions, schemas, and ways of knowing—seemed ideally suited to describe the women within their communities (Swartz, 2002). Additionally, by applying Foucauldian analysis of subjectivity that focuses on the formation of subjects through discourse, I found that the interviews revealed much more than just the participants' self formation; they also illuminated what their community considered an ideal woman and of course by relation ideal men. The Foucauldian approach further highlighted how the discourses within the community significantly influenced perceptions of the ideal in relation to communal principles. Consequently, it was evident that the core of this research centered on what these women considered an ideal community, with everything shaped in relation to this ideal. Thus, the final version of this thesis needed to include the concepts of the ideal community and the ideal woman and man, all framed through the perceptions of the women themselves.

The origins of my interest in these communities are more complex and nuanced; however, it is evident that my engagement with them deepened upon my relocation to Fatih.

The community presented itself as a distinct and unfamiliar world, one that invited exploration and understanding. Consequently, when it was time to select a topic for my MA thesis, it was a quick decision to study the İsmailağa community. This choice presented its challenges, since the community had always isolated itself and maintained a reserved position –though this has since changed. I began my research by attending *sohbets*, which provided me with crucial gatekeepers. Thus, the interview portion of my research was somewhat easier. However, when I sought to interview the male members of the community, I faced rejection, as it was deemed improper for me to engage with men. Consequently, the focus of my thesis shifted to female identity formation, a topic that was by no means less exhilarating or enriching, despite being a relatively unexplored area when I began—this field has since expanded. My interest in studying other communities increased after my MA thesis, and it became clear during my PhD that this would be my primary focus. The original proposal for this thesis included the Süleymanlılar community. I had identified four communities that, from my perspective, represented a spectrum of Sufi and non-Sufi groups, ranging from orthodox to modern. However, after about twelve attempts to secure an interview with the Süleymanlılar community, only one responded positively. As a result, I had no choice but to proceed with the other three communities. However, as will be mentioned in the Limitations and Further Research section, an ideal aspect of this research would have included the Süleymanlılar community as well as a male perspective.

Another topic I must address pertains to the concept of "religion." It is important to note that these communities adhere to a tradition of Sufi customs; however, they are significantly influenced by the socio-political environment in which they developed. Some of these communities emerged in response to the secularization of Turkey or following the hijab ban, adopting opposition roles and somewhat orthodox perspectives. Consequently, the customs of these communities were shaped by both the broader Turkish context and their interpretations of religious texts during that period. Marshall Hodgson's (1974) distinction between Islam as a religion and Islam as a culture is particularly relevant here. We must apply this framework by differentiating between the religious interpretations that these communities embrace and what religion truly dictates. Therefore, all references to "religious" rules adhered to by the communities should be viewed as part of their cultural context, particularly in terms of women's roles within the broader Turkish culture. As will be viewed in the text, most of these communities are heavily influenced by the sheiks and thus this interpretation of the religion through him becomes the primary source of religious authority and everything regarded as authentic is closely associated with the communities itself.

Finally, regarding the title of the dissertation a few clarifications need to be made. As mentioned above this thesis in no way claims to be part of gender studies, its main objective is to understand the identity formation in religious communities and as male members were not cooperative the research soely focused on female members of the communities and their perspectives. Thus, by focusing on female members the reserach revealed a heavily patriarchial formation of community and thus gender roles. This was so prominenet that it needed to be adressed. Thus, the “navigating” within this context is used to identify how female members both situate themselves and find path and manage stiutaions to both prescribe to the assigned roles or provide oppourtunites for themselves in regards to the community culture.

Thus, the title encapsulates the complexities of how women in these communities understand and express their identities while also confronting the structures that shape their experiences. "Navigating" suggests a dynamic process of exploration and adjustment, indicating that these women actively engage with both their self-representations and the external expectations imposed upon them. The analysis aims to uncover the nuanced ways in which identity and belonging are constructed, negotiated, and challenged within the cultural and social frameworks of the İskenderpaşa, İsmailağa, and Meşveret communities.

1.1.1. The Topic, Scope and Research Questions

The ways in which Turkish Sufi women construct their identities is understudied in the literature. This thesis will apply discourse analysis to examine women’s identity formation in three different Sufi communities located in Istanbul. These communities have been carefully selected to represent both traditional and modern perspectives, which includes both orthodox Islamic views as well as moderate and modern perspectives in traditional and non-traditional religious communities to truly capture the influences and provide an in-depth analysis regarding female identity formation. Worldview for each of these communities is widely different; İsmailağa community represents more of an orthodox perspective, while İskenderpaşa and Meşveret community, although quite different from each other, are somewhat structurally modern. Their distinctive mission, Islamic attitudes, and worldview will reveal different aspects of identity.

The dissertation will adopt the Bourdieusian theory and Symbolic Interactionism as its theoretical framework (see below). Thus, this research will contribute to the gender studies and sociology of religion in Turkey by examining the conception of habitus and selves through the practices of the community and contribute to the typology of Sufi women through an in-depth analysis of the İsmailağa, İskenderpaşa, and Nurcular community. The main research question

is: How is female identity formed and what are the differences, if any, in women's identity formation and modes of subjection across religious communities in Turkey.

In addition to the main research question, I will also explore the following specific questions: how do the Sufi women's activities within their communities affect their identity formation? To what extent their "sufi values" and *tariqa* duties vs. the exigencies of (late)modern lifestyle affect their identity formation? Are the female members of each community willing to subvert to their prescribed roles and to what extent do they resist the patriarchal hierarchies? To what extent do these roles provide room for agency for women in their respective communities? Are they mostly influenced by their family or their sufi environment: *medreses* and *sohbets*? Do these women primarily define themselves in opposition to other communities or in opposition to the Kemalist secular tradition, or something else? These questions will help identify main characteristics of an Ideal Muslim women as it is defined in the community as well as these women's definition of ideal men and of ideal community. Furthermore, I will also compare the community's ideal women identity to see the differences, if any, between these communities.

Therefore, with this research, my main concern is to detect individual and community-influenced perspectives and trends that shape women's identity. Based on my previous research, I hypothesize that women's identity in Sufi communities are mostly influenced by their community values as well as their religious views and personal values, which provide a multifaceted formation of identity. Finally, I will attempt to discover typology of Sufi women based on my field research, which is based on qualitative methods.

1.2. Methodological Framework

The purpose of this study is to explore and understand female identity formation in religious groups. My objective is to contribute to Muslim women literature in Turkey, an area that has, until very recently, mostly neglected the Sufi groups, which constitute a large portion of the religious female population. Qualitative methods were employed for this research since it "provides detailed description and analysis of the quality, or the substance, of the human experience" (Marvasti, 2003, p.7). I have adopted the qualitative approach based on a constructivist methodology, which is suitable to understand how the subjects of the research perceive and subjectively construct the social reality they live in (Seaman, 2021). Because my research aims to reveal and analyze the religious women's views and experiences in depth, a constructivist (rather than statistical-positivistic or qualitative-naturalistic) perspective will be more helpful. Based on this approach, I will discuss the findings of my field research that entails

the three communities in Istanbul. Within this scope, I will briefly explain my (i) data collection and (ii) data analysis techniques in the following sections. Descriptive data gathering tools were used, including participant observation, document analysis, and interviews, to attain and articulate understanding of both the community and its impact on identity formation.

Qualitative research for this thesis is primarily conducted in Istanbul with via three different data collection methods: semi-structured interviews, document analysis, and participant observation. These methods have been carefully chosen for this research to acquire the necessary information. The participant observation portion entails collecting data in each community's environment by joining their formal and informal gatherings and interacting with its members. For the second phase, a Foucauldian discourse analysis is used as the main technique of data analysis to identify the recurring themes in order to reveal an ideal women discourse in each community.

The research method – deciding on whether to use qualitative, quantitative, or mixed methods – was selected based on the scope of the research as it highly affects the research strategy, data collection, and most importantly data analysis. Qualitative research is a diverse field that mostly involves the analysis and interpretation of a numerical or textual data in order to reveal thematic patterns “to uncover meaningful patterns that describe a particular phenomenon, event, subject or object” (Chigbu, 2019, p. 2). The aim is to discover even the smallest social and cultural aspects about the subject of the research. It is essential in qualitative research to use verbal expressions in order “to understand a concept that exists in the minds, to describe a situation, to reveal the authenticity of a culture, to interpret contexts, to understand how a process progresses, or to make a causal explanation of the case” (Gökçe, 2022, p. 39). Furthermore, multiple qualitative research techniques can be used accompanied by various analysis methods; this process can provide a certain level of freedom for the researcher to incorporate methods that can be best utilized in analysis of the data. Qualitative methods have often been celebrated since they reveal depth and clarity to a particular subject. However, it has also been criticized for vague research processes, and unreliable results or weak theoretical background (Arslan, 2022, p. 396). The indication that the analysis is subjective since it is contextual, interpretive and researcher centered has been highly criticized. There is no single approach to the analysis of the data; based on the method selected there can be multiple interpretations depending on the approach and the technique (Yin, 2011; Ravitch and Carl, 2019). Thus, a systematic approach and an analytical structure to the research is crucial in achieving reliable results.

1.2.1. Data Collection Methods

The first phase of this research primarily draws on semi-structured interviews with 41 participants, 15 from the Meşveret and İsmailağa communities and 11 from İskenderpaşa community, between the ages of 25-65. Participants are further selected in four main groups based on education: middle school, high school and university graduates; occupation (working women vs housewives), and class position (low and high-income recipients). The interviews are selected to ensure to include members who are born and raised in the community as well as those that joined later but have had a long experience with the community's practices. This strategy aided in discovering the divergences in experiences of the members based on late or early affiliation (Kümbetoğlu, 2017, p. 82). Semi-structured interviews and qualitative analysis are especially suitable in uncovering a complex process or controversial or personal issues. Semi-structured interview is particularly instrumental in achieving rich results provided by multi-dimensional nature of lived experiences that offer new possibilities in understanding complicated phenomena (Galletta, 2012, p. 2). In addition, by allowing the respondents to freely answer the questions – rather than limiting the answers to certain categories – semi-structured interviews also capture the emerging themes in their entirety.

Furthermore, this method offers a great deal of flexibility that ensures precise answers and non-verbal cues to aid in understanding the validity of the response (Baily, 1982, p. 182). The interviewer, in this sense, plays a crucial role in asking the questions in a certain way and maintaining control over the structure of the question and the interview process to ensure that the questions have been fully answered without probing the participant. Furthermore, interviewer has the ability to deflect misinterpretation and rephrase the questions for clarity. The interviewer can add or remove questions during the interview to ensure a response for each question (Baily, 1982, p. 183). This method also allows the researcher to observe the changes in demeanour of the participant since their behaviour is not fixed and only occur during the interview. Furthermore, the contradictions in the answers given can further be explored simply by additional questions (McIntosh, 2015). The researcher can also direct additional questions in response to particularly interesting statements that emerge during the interview. Thus, semi-structured interviews for this research will consist of pre-prepared questions as well as spontaneous ones to ensure an interactive discussion that will capture subject narratives for discourse analysis. Although individual interviews are time consuming, labour intensive, and require additional skills from the interviewer; they, nevertheless, ascertain vast amount of information from different individuals' perspectives regarding their experience in the topic of research.

The anticipated outcome and the main objective of the semi-structured interviews is to gather as much detailed information as possible from a small sample about the opinions, thoughts, and experiences of the participants (Seaman, 2021). Thus, the semi-structured interview method for this research, is employed to reveal members' perceptions, attributed meanings, definitions, and most importantly their construction of reality. Based on the narratives of these women, I identified the recurring and common themes that aided in discovering how women in religious communities form their identity in reference to their Sufi and community background.

The interviews were conducted with female disciples and members of each community; and to incorporate the Sufi aspect, the it includes women who have been following the Sufi practices for a certain period of time. At least one of these communities –İsmailağa – are skeptical in terms of trusting modern education system and have opted to educate especially women within the community. Thus, the interviewees include women who have only received *kurs/medrese* education as well as women who have received both formal and *kurs* education. I have used personal contacts that I have established in my previous research and the snowballing method to find my informants.

As for document analysis, I have collected the published texts of the *sohbets* of current supreme Sheikhs of Sufi communities, or current leaders of the communities. Brian Silverstein describes *sohbet* as “companionship-in-conversation”. He argues that it is through these oral transmissions of texts and interpretations that followers try to constitute an ideal self, as Sufism is not necessarily the “mystical union with god” but rather a journey towards an ideal self that is inclined to follow the commands of God (Silverstein, 2011, p. 135). Furthermore, document analysis of texts that are considered essential or even symbols of the community, as in the case of Meşveret group with *Risale-i Nur Külliyyatı (RNK)*, can provide confirmation or verification of the evidence collected from interviews (Yin, 2003b). In the İsmailağa community, text studies primarily centered on the *Sohbetler* by Mahmut Ustaosmanoğlu, a 10-volume collection of transcriptions from the *sohbets* he delivered during his lifetime. For the İskenderpaşa community, the texts primarily drew upon the *sohbets* of both the previous sheikhs and the current sheikh. Documents play a central role in the way we act and interact and how that can change over time. Thus, it is particularly vital to understand how a text is read and also received by the reader. These texts in the context of communities are not just “situated products” – signifying somewhat a picture of a certain reality in a specific time, situated in a socio-historical context – but instead indicate “social products” in the way in which they are incorporated in

social life and action” (Wyatt & Davie, 2011, p.151). Thus, it is a crucial part of this research to understand both the effect of the tradition and the transition of knowledge in the community.

I have also examined the *kurs*, *sohbets* and simple gatherings and other events to identify the patterns and collect data on gender roles and the division of labour within the community. Thus, participant observation will be used in addition to other qualitative methods for this research by drawing information from my interaction with the community members as well as my observation of *sohbets* and lectures. This method is essential in revealing information on community’s ritual practices, organizational structure, everyday social practices, hierarchical arrangement, and political stances. Participant observation is a research method in which the researcher “takes part in the daily activities, rituals, interactions, and events of a group of people as one of the means of learning the explicit and tacit aspects of their life routines and their culture” (Musante and DeWalt, 2010, p.1). Thus, enhances the quality of the data and quality of the interpretation of the data obtained during fieldwork. I have attended their *sohbet* and *ders* activities as a more or less passive participant, observed their behaviors, and taken descriptive and analytical notes. I have spent approximately two years as observer during my fieldwork. Furthermore, joining these gatherings – *sohbets* and *ders*’ – also allow me to understand the certain patterns of actions, ways of being, their everyday interactions and the nonverbal communication style of the community.

Furthermore, participant observation provided the necessary data to understand how women perform in certain settings. Close observation of their interactions provided detailed information regarding the influence of family and community on identity formation. Once again, the objective is to identify an existing and ideal women discourse, with a sociological perspective, to further analyze whether there are discrepancies or unanimity in terms of women’s identity in regards to religious communities. I will examine the recurring terms and adjectives used when discussing women’s nature, as well as her roles in the community. Finally, the second phase of my research will utilize discourse analysis to examine the collected data to find common and recurring themes that interviewees particularly used to identify themselves.

1.2.2. Discourse Analysis

Discourse is vastly used for different research in various fields as it offers great deal of fluidity (Mills, 1997, p.3). It primarily focuses on the endeavour to understand social issues and inequalities. Furthermore, it is essential in understanding how language functions in “constitution and transmitting knowledge” (Foucault, 1972). This research, as previously

discussed, will predominantly borrow from Foucauldian theory of discourse and methodology of discursive analysis as emphasized in *The Archeology of Knowledge*.

Foucault (1972) defines discourse as “the general domain of all statements, sometimes as an individualizable group of statements, and sometimes as a regulated practice that account for a number of statements” (p. 80). Thus, discourse as “the general domain all of statements” refers to all utterances, statements and texts that have meaning and effect. The individualizable group of statements, on the other hand, refers to the statements or utterances that form a unity or a group and become discourses. This indicates that we can talk about certain discourses such as a “discourse of femininity, a discourse of imperialism, and so on” (Mills, 1997, p. 7). Foucault also references to the particular structures and rules within discourse that form and also aid in identifying discourses. His final definition “regulated practice which accounts for a number of statements”, indicates a rule-governed nature of discourse that suggests a particular structure within discourse that yield particular utterances. Foucault’s main concern was not the subject but rather the “rules of formation through which groups of statements achieve a unity as a science, a theory, or a text” (Smart, 2002, p.38).

Discourse, then, is not the signification of what is, and its rules of formation do not follow the outline of some deeper ontological truth. Yet neither is it grounded in the speaking subject. All aspects of discourse will instead be regarded as constructions, the rules of which are the outcome of a complex historical process that is not just found in discourse but is the very condition of discourse itself (Webb 2013, p. 85).

Discourse than is a grouping of a certain statements that unite with other statements in expected ways. Discourse is governed by rules and practices which ensure the distribution of these statements. Although some statements are widely distributed, others are not. This exclusion indicated that these practices while ensure the distribution of certain statements on the one hand, they also force other statements out of circulation. This places emphasis discourses’ relation to power.

We must make allowances for the complex and unstable process whereby discourse can be both an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling block, a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy. Discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines it and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it (Foucault 1978, p. 100-101).

Thus, discourse is the sum of all statements, rules that make up both those statements and allow for its circulation and through that exclude certain statements. Foucault refers to terms such as episteme, archive, discursive formation and statement within the theory of discourse. Discourses are produced through power in the social order, this power entails certain rules and categories that legitimize the knowledge within the discursive order. Foucault argues that the existing discourse, relations, and statements need to be treated as merely having a close relation to each other. By doing that we suspend their continuity and unity which “reveals a vast field of spoken and written statements, ‘discursive events’, of these it is those that conventionally define the science of man to which Foucault has devoted attention” (Smart, 1985, p.38). These systems of formation reveal the prediscursive level which identifies the conditions which made the discourse possible. Discursive practices are historically and culturally set rules that allow certain statements to be made. Thus, discourse is constructed upon discursive strategies to form discursive unity.

Furthermore, “discursive formations” refer to the grouping of certain statements that form a similar effect. Discontinuity indicates ruptures and sudden breaks in history which points to a change in ideas and knowledge. When we suspend unity there appears an “order, correlations, ‘positions in common space, a reciprocal functioning’” (Smart 2002, pg. 42). Thus, when we suspend unity, we become aware of the fact that ‘naturally’ formed knowledge may be the result of the rules of formation, which may indicate that there may exist other unities. Therefore, in order to reveal whether these unities can be naturally formed, we need to break them apart to see if they are naturally formed.

Furthermore, these discursive practices are the formation of a particular episteme, thus with discursive formations meanings are discovered. Thus, through this research, I will try to compile discursive strategies that combined with discursive techniques will aid in discovering an ideal women formation in each community. Textual analysis of sohbet, participant observation, my interaction with the community and semi-structures interviews will yield discursive strategies that female members of the community use to construct their own identities.

Foucault looked at continuities and discontinuities between epistemes, and in what conditions and context knowledge and practice merged as acceptable or changed. In addition, Foucault focuses on the dynamic relationship between discourse and subject, how subject is constituted by discourse and how power is exercised through discourse in which individual subjects are governed. Discourses differ in social practices and institutions in which they are produced and according to “those who speak and those whom they address” (Mcdonell, 1986,

p.4). Thus, Foucault's subject is not the locus of meaning but is the result of discursive practices.

1.2.3. Modes of subjection and the formation of an ideal women/disciple

Foucault's focus was mostly on ethical substance, ethical work, mode of subjection and telos. This thesis will utilize his work to reveal an ideal women subject. The formation of ideal women subject is a complex process that is constantly changing depending on the context. By distinguishing discursive strategies and techniques my aim is to identify the differences in subject formation in Sufi communities through modes of subjection which is the way in which an individual associates and forms a relation with the rule and is obliged to conduct herself in reference to it. This thesis will thus examine the discourses that convey conceptions of the self as well as ethical ideals. Foucault is more interested in genealogy of the subject as a subject of ethical action. He defines modes of subjection and gives an example on conjugal fidelity in *The History of Sexuality*.

The differences can also have to do with the mode of subjection (*mode d'assujettissement*); that is, with the way in which the individual establishes his relation to the rule and recognizes himself as obliged to put it into practice. One can, for example, practice conjugal fidelity and comply with the precept that imposes it, because one acknowledges oneself to be a member of the group that accept it, declares adherence to it out loud, and silently preserves it as a custom (Foucault 1990, p.27).

Subjectification entails how individuals see themselves as subjects; the internalization of the type of subject the individual wants to be and "what the subject must be, to what condition he is subject, what status he must have, what position he must occupy in reality or in imaginary, in order to become a legitimate subject of this or that type of knowledge" (Florence, 1998, p. 495). Thus, a mode of subjection is the process in which the individual establishes a relationship to society's moral obligations and rules. It is based on these modes of subjection that people are made subjects. People are made subject through power relations and forms of knowledge. The circulation of 'truth', through ideals of nationality form rules and procedures that in turn constitute a 'true' discourse which legitimizes certain actions. The same can be argued about these communities. In this sense, the research reveals the ways in which gender is both constructed within communities and reflective of the communities in which characters live. The complexity of the community is highlighted in this particular research, as charters are embedded in multiple often competing, layers of community including social class groups, friendship circles, and family- that all intersect with the development of gender. Discursive strategies are small units which structure the discourse, they aid in constructing meaning in

relation to social, cultural, and political contexts. Discourse defines its own borderlines and subject in respect to other discourses. Discursive practice on the other defines itself in reference or opposition to other discourses. Furthermore, people often identify themselves as ethical subjects in context of subjection to others. Although the process of subjection can entail choices through speech, knowledge, or action but it also entails submission and subordination to external others: such as a sheikh. People mostly define themselves with their relation to others who are “above” them. This ethical formation occurs in the context of subjection.

Thus, a discourse is not a disembodied collection of statements, but groupings of utterances or sentences, statements which are enacted within a social context, which are determined by that social context, and which contribute to the way that social context continues its existence. Institutions and social context therefore play an important determining role in the development, maintenance and circulation of discourses. (Mills, p.11)

Thus, there is no fixed or definite personal or social identity, it is socially/discursively determined. Therefore, the Foucauldian theory of discourse and his method of discursive analysis will assist in understanding the rules of formation that constitute the ideal women discourse in each community and how they differ from each other as well as how individuals think and act as they construct themselves as the members of their community. Thus, we can argue that discourse develops not in separation but through dialogues and in reference to others. Thus, each community may develop a discourse in reference to group itself but also as a dialogue between communities and their relation to the state. With regards to identity, the community’s perception is of the utmost importance. Hence Foucault argues that:

the target of analysis [isn’t] ‘institutions’, ‘theories’, or ‘ideology’ but practices – with the aim of grasping the conditions that make these practices acceptable at a given moment...It is a question of analyzing ‘regime of practices’ –practices being understood here as places where what is said and what is done, rules imposed and reasons given, the planned and the taken for granted meet and interconnect (1991b, p. 75).

Thus, through interviews, participant observation and discourse analysis, I will try to identify the recurring themes and strategies that female members of each community use to construct their identity. This identity construction reflects the attribution of value or meaning to pre-existing environmental elements. In order to describe the subject formation, we first need to identify the strategies that interviewees used to refer to themselves and others. Discursive

strategies will aid in forming a Sufi women discourse which will then enable us to not only understand the constitution of identity but also of ideal women in each community.

Textual analysis of sohbet, participant observation, my interaction with the community and semi-structured in-depth interviews will yield “discursive strategies” (Foucault, 1972) that female members of the community use to construct their own identities. These strategies also have sub-categories of “discursive techniques”, a term introduced by Nurullah Ardiç (2012, p. 35), referring to the subsets of strategies, which support the unique identity formation in the community and further categorize discursive strategies. These discursive strategies and techniques further construct the subject formation of the female members of the community.

1.3. Literature Review

For this research I have carefully selected three communities that have strong Sufi traditions and communal ties. Second, the communities that were picked for this research represent both modern and relatively “anti-modern” perspective. Furthermore, these communities were selected in reference to their structure and worldview. In addition, I have tried to select communities that have large representations in the population. This dissertation is located at the intersection of the sociology of sufism and gender studies. Thus, this section will first provide an overview of Sufism, the development of Sufism in Turkey, and continue by providing a brief information regarding the formation of each community. Finally, the last section will entail a brief gender discussion.

1.3.1. Origins of Sufism

Sufism or Islamic Mysticism has multiple definitions; it is mostly identified as a path or journey toward God. “It is related to asceticism, rooted in divine revelation and comprehended through shari’a” (Saeed, 2006, pg. 74). The term “sufi” originated from the Arabic term *suf* (wool), which was worn by the Muslim ascetics. Its clandestine nature ensures that it is only experienced and disclosed through the progression of the individual. Thus, it is understood to be more of an individual journey towards God by letting go of the worldly pleasures. Furthermore, Sufism can also be described as “an aspect of eternal wisdom” (Geoffroy, 2010, pg.1).

The origins of Sufism can be traced back to the 8th century, although its institutionalization did not happen until 12th century. The popularity of Sufism stems from the direct and immediate connection to God without a mediator. Mecca, Medina, Basra and Kufa were the initial centers of ascetic life. Next, Iran and Khurasan had become popular as their inhabitants embraced Sufi tradition (Mir and Ghosh, 2017, pg.77). The term *tasawwuf* (mysticism) originated as a derivative of the word *sufi*. In the early *sufi* tradition the emphasis

was placed upon “ritual observance and legalistic morality” (Trimingham, 1971, pg.2). These sufi orders are mostly based on the system of master/leader (*murshid*) and disciple (*murid*). Murshid (or sheikh/veli/dervish) represented those who had traversed the stages of the Sufi path and were chosen by the previous *murshid*. The lineages (*silsile-i sadat/golden chain*) of these orders can all be traced back to the Prophet Muhammad. Sufi orders form brotherhoods that are grouped in to *tariqa* (path). Each individual sufi order is in itself a distinct spiritual discipline (van Bruinessen, 2009, pg.127). Sufism in its essence teaches “the practices of *adab*, *dhikr*, and *muraqaba* passed down by its masters, with the aim of experiencing the destruction (*fana*) of the lower-self (*nefs*), that leads to survival (*baqa*) of the higher-self (*ruh*)” (Green, 2012, p.9). This spiritual awakening is achieved through *dhikr* (recollection).

Sufism gained recognition and popularity when well respected scholars such as al-Sulami (d. 4124/1021), al-Qushayri and Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (d. 505/1111), have also started following the sufi path. Many sufi convents had been established by the eleventh century and by the thirteenth century tariqas took today's form; established by a single sheikh who is permission was handed down through the golden chain (Saeed, 2006, pg. 76). These lodges (*zawiya*, *khanaqah*, *tekke*) gained large followers.

Sufism in Turkey

Islamic Mysticism or Sufism had become a crucial part of Ottoman society. Several Sufi orders gained prominence in Ottoman Empire, including Bektashi, Halveti, Mevlevi, Rifa'i, Qadiri, Naqshbandi and Bayrami. Şentürk (2015) argues that Bektashi order specially played a vital role in the establishment of the Ottoman government. Later most Janissaries were all disciples of the Bektashi order. Furthermore, Mevlevis sometimes became as important actors as Bektashis in their prominent positions in the palace. In addition, it was the Mevlevi sheik who presented and oversaw the ascension and sword girding ceremonies after Mahmud II (2015, p. 94-5). Ceyhan (2015) argues that from its formation to development, the close relation of the Sultan's with the sheikhs, such as Osman Gazi with Sheikh Edebali, Orhan Gazi with Davud-i Kayseri, Yıldırım Beyazıd with Emir Sultan, and Fatih Sultan Mehmed with Akşemsetdin, encouraged to maintain a friendly relationship with the sufi lodges throughout the empire (p.37).

The Turkish modernization period painted a different picture. Starting in the 19th century, Sufis (like the *ulema*) faced a decrease in influence. Although most religious communities showed an overwhelming support during the “war of independence” and Sheikhs still held political authority as they were present during the first formation of the Turkish parliament, this changed relatively quickly in the following years. In the early years of the

Turkish Republic the laws and reforms were implemented brought an end to certain institutions, including all sufi orders. Specifically, a law enacted in 1925 rendered religious affiliations and ranks illegitimate and closed down lodges. These new laws indicated that state and religious affairs are fundamentally different, and religious involvement in government issues was no longer permitted. Saatçi (2005) interprets this as “the subordination of Islam to state objectives, and active management of religious institutions and affairs by the state” (p. 234). A significant indication of this was the formation of the Presidency of Religious Affairs (*Diyanet*) in 1924. Sufi Lodges were assigned to the Department of Religious Affairs after its formation. After the Sheikh Said riot in 1925, Sufism was banned, and most *tekkes* and tombs were closed. The 1938 Law of Associations, furthermore, put further restrictions on associations with any religious relation. “Turkey was the only Muslim country to ban all orders and close the tombs and shrines that were objects of popular veneration, but most other states have also attempted to bring the orders under some degree of control and curtail ‘excesses.’” (van Bruinessen, 2009, p. 125). The opinion was that Sufism was the source of ignorance and superstition. This was also part of his power struggle against actual and potential oppositional power centers in the country.

However, this did not with certainty indicate an end to any forms of religiosity; rather, communities and organizations found different ways to cope with the system. There were new internal and external connections developed by the religious communities. The gathering places had now changed from public spaces to privacy of homes. Moreover, Mevleviye and later Bektashiye orders, had managed to regain a little public presence. In fact, the first officially approved Mevlevi “whirling” ceremony took place in 1953. Although organizers had emphasized that this was not a religious but rather a cultural ceremony, it nevertheless carried religious codes (Sağlam, 2017).

Other sufi orders however went underground and continued their activities in secrecy for a long period. The communities studied in this thesis have had similar reactions during the early periods of the republic. Ali Haydar Efendi, the *murshid* of Mahmud Ustaosmanoglu, who would later establish the Ismailağa community, continued their activities in secrecy. Said Nursi as well as Suleyman Hilmi Tunahan, although had to discreetly continue on with their activities, today both communities have become one of the largest in Turkey. Said Nursi especially wrote and published his *Risale-i Nur* collection during this time. Although, his books were mostly written by hand by his students due to close scrutiny, there was, nevertheless, about 600 copies in constant circulation (Şentürk, 2015, p. 158). The next part of this section will provide a brief overview of each of these communities.

1.3.2. The İskenderpaşa Community

For this section, I will briefly examine the literature on the İskenderpaşa community. Since my objective for this study is to discover differing practices in Sufi and non-sufi communities to detect various identity formations, I have selected İskenderpaşa community, after through research and based on several criteria, as one of the four communities to be examine in this research. Iskenderpaşa community is one of the most widespread *Nakşi* formations in Turkey and is fundamentally different compared to other communities based on their attitude towards modernity and community structure, and their knowledge and progress driven nature. The community is not nearly as reclusive as others, mostly operates within their own “economic, educational and communicative webs”, has a large political presence and influence; strong media connections and economic power (Yavuz, 2015). Thus, it sets as a great contrast to Ismailağa and Süleymanlılar community as a modern Sufi order.

İskenderpaşa is relatively well studied as a community –compared to others mentioned in this research- as it is visible and relatively open to outsiders. There are two studies solely dedicated to the community, which will be examined below, and also several articles and books that partially mention the community, its structure and function. The İskenderpaşa community is mostly studied in terms of its modernization practices that largely differ from other *Nakşi* communities. Most of the research regarding the order is written specifically through Mehmed Zahid Kotku and Mahmud Esad Coşan; two of the most prominent Sheikhs in community’s history. Most of the research mentioned in this section falls into the sociological approach category with one exception.

Hakan Yavuz in *Islamic Political Identity in Turkey* (2003), outlines a typology of Islamic social movements in Turkish context; he argues that Iskenderpaşa fits into both categories first “as a case-study of a society-oriented Islamic movement and a model of horizontal Islamic identity building”. Furthermore, he indicates that “Society-oriented Islamic movements seek to transform society from within by utilizing new opportunity spaces in the market and media to change individual habits and social relations” (p.30). Prominent research that briefly examines the community is that of Mustafa Kara. In his book *Metinlerle Günümüz Tasavvuf Hareketleri* (2002) he analyses various contemporary states of Sufi communities and religious movements in Turkey starting from Tanzimat to today. The İskenderpaşa Community is also examined in this book with a particular focus on the socio-political evolution and stances of the community by focusing on the two of the most prominent sheikhs: Mehmed Zahid Kotku and Mahmud Esad Coşan. These sources provide vast information about the structure of the

community, its formation and in Yavuz's case the community's relation with politics throughout the years.

Compared to Kara's and Yavuz's multi-perspective approach, Çakır's provides in *Ayet ve Slogan* (1990) a more skeptical attitude towards communities in general. He examines several communities and provides description of their structure, ideology and political presence; and in İskenderpaşa's case, he specifically outlines the community's modernization process. This analytical study also describes in detail the evolution of the relationship between the political parties in Turkey and the religious communities since the 1970s. Çakır argues that although Kotku's sohbetes were widely known; there was no interference or preventative measure taken by the state when most other communities were forced to shut down. This was both due to Kotku's ability to acknowledge progress by accepting modernization practices; and also states over all acknowledgment of defeat against Sufi and religious movements in Turkey. Kotku's approach as a sheikh differed in terms of his methodology. It was his ability to maintain a mystic and poetic discourse that provided hope in times of "despair and insecurity" for the conservative youth. Moreover, he argues that this poetic dialogue was closely associated with the sheikh and reproduced through murids.

Furthermore, Çakır also examines the *İslam* periodicals published by the community and suggest that the content from even the earliest publications advise the readers on every aspects of their daily life. Çakır argues that it would be ignorant to simply look at these writings as "trying to Islamize every area of life"; he argues that these publications encouraged the reader to question politics, economy, and cultural authority in Turkey by contributing significantly to the development of civil society (pg. 36). Finally, Çakır argues that the biggest threat the community is facing today is maintaining the balance between modernity and tradition. The community will either remain as a political Sufi movement or become a political movement with Sufi characteristics (p. 49). Finally, regarding the future of the movement Çakır argues that the İskenderpaşa community mostly appeals to a highly educated urban youth. These individuals will mostly become government officials, engineers, economists, etc. which indicate that the community will continue to be led by and mostly consist of conservative educated "elites" (p. 44).

The community's emphasis on education is stressed by various sources. Hulusi Şentürk, for instance, in *İslamcılık: Türkiye'de İslami Oluşumlar ve Siyaset* (2015) argues that İskenderpaşa's emphasis on modern education beyond/alongside *fiqh* and *aqidah* separates the community from others; this emphasis produced great number of scholars within the

community (p. 344). Silverstein stresses, community's progressive nature, since it experienced increased rationalization, bureaucratizing, and disciplining effects of state power during the late empire. Thus, compared to other communities studied in this research, İskenderpaşa's emphasis on progress through "modern" education is unparalleled. Furthermore, Efe, in similar fashion, argues that Kotku's message appealed to university students, academics, technocrats, bureaucrats and politicians; thus, fundamentally transforming the order by drawing a "modernized group" of people. Büyükkara (2015), similarly adds that the community was known as a lodge for university students (p. 270). Şentürk, also emphasizes that the İskenderpaşa mosque was no longer a place for the "old man to sit and pray", it was a gathering place for young students (p.342). Silverstein (2011) also acknowledges community's emphasis on education by stating that:

Knowledge per se is, in fact, something Esad Coşan has cultivated almost as a virtue, and many observers have commented on the disproportional percentage of members who have completed a university education. Indeed, in the eyes of many other orders, the Iskender Pasha group is quite intellectual and scholarly. (p. 152)

One of the only studies purely dedicated to İskenderpaşa community is Yılmaz's thesis, which provides detailed information on community's *rabita* practices. Yılmaz's (2017) thesis is unique in a sense that it explores the notion of *Rabita* "as a technology of self-care" in Sufism specifically focusing on the discourse of İskenderpaşa community's sheikhs and disciples. Yılmaz's thesis provides a sociological approach by providing a Foucauldian conceptualization of subjectivity to better understand how *Rabita* functions as a technology of self in Sufism. She builds on this research with further discursive strategies and modes of subjection that for Sufi members both disciples and sheikh to becoming ethical subjects. The most notable study regarding the Iskenderpaşa community is Brian Silverstein's analytical approach where he discusses the continuities and ruptures in Turkish Islamic tradition starting from the final decades of the empire to today. He focuses on two primary questions: the transformation of Islam from a community to personal sphere; and why this practice has been widely and relatively quickly accepted by the society rather than treating it as a foreign aspect. He argues that Turks are highly satisfied with Islam being a private matter. Silverstein by using Foucauldian genealogy, argues that scholars of Ottoman Empire already had secular inclinations toward religion and politics; thus it is important to study Islamic practices by taking into account their institutional origin and history. Furthermore, Silverstein focuses on Discipline of Presence to illustrate why Sufism is relevant in Turkey. He argues that Sufi institutions are crucial in

building personal networks and most importantly “certain Sufi groups (and other that are offshoots of Sufism, like the Nurcus) have had significant impact on the formation of Muslim sensibilities in the country, especially regarding engagement with characteristically modern social forms, practices and regimes of knowledge and power” (p. 98). *Sohbet*'s (which he translates as “companionship-in-conversation”), according to Silverstein, are key in understanding the true Islamic practices in disciples' lives. *Sohbets* he emphasizes mostly focus on “the good (*iyilik*) and morality (*ahlak*)”, thus it is imperative to approach the Sufi practices not as a “mystical experience” but “rather through an analysis of the relationship between traditions of discourse and practice and the kinds of the ethical selves associated with them” (p. 135). He argues that it is during *sohbets*, through oral transmission of texts or face-to-face interactions that Muslim subjects are constructed and sustained since these practices are “effective means for cultivating an ethical self” (p. 135). “Participating in these Sufi orders is a way for people to become the kinds of Muslim selves they want (or believe they are supposed) to become and gives them techniques for understanding, defining, and reproducing a certain kind of ethical self” (p. 99) Although they widely differ in terms of context and structure; *sohbets*, nevertheless, are essential aspects of Sufi orders. The İskenderpaşa community's reliance on mass communication tools such as radio, TV, and periodicals to reach as many people as possible is unparalleled.

During 1990s the community established their own radio channel and by the end of 1990s with the advancement of internet, the community no longer relied on face-to-face interaction with its members; thus was able to reach a larger audience which vastly increased its numbers (Efe, 2013, p. 168). Furthermore, Kotku due to his character and political interests has transformed the order to a “tasavvufi sembollerini kullanan dini bir cemaat”. Efe argues that it is community's reliance on mass communication tools that sets it apart from others. Thus, Kotku was able to adapt to the changes and renew the community based on the needs of the progressive world and a modernized society. Çakır (1990) argues that this move towards publication was due to the inadequacy of traditional Sufi structure in now the modern world; the move to publication acted as a way for the sheikh to address disciples in various different locations and to consolidate control over them (p. 27). The community, although, overtly established their negative position against western civilization; they were aware that the positive science and technology could not be overlooked. Thus, Pala argues that the community chose “critical participation” (*eleştirel katılım*) rather than outright rejecting or accepting the western style modernization.

Pala (2016) also argues in her thesis, which examines the 1980s religious movements in Turkey by focusing specifically on Esad Coşan and consequently İskenderpaşa community, that the single most distinctive aspect of the İskenderpaşa is their non-dismissive approach to modernity. The “rational” approach urged the community to not only benefit from technological advancements, but to acquire factories, publication houses, companies and become highly involved in politics, which all aided in community’s success and impact in civil society as well as political sphere. The community become safe haven to those, especially young people, who struggled in adapting to the new modern lifestyle, after the disintegration of traditional ties. However, this transformation also effected the community. Efe explains that the community transformed from a congregation to a religious community in four phases: starting with a political party influence, establishing a foundation for the community, starting a publishing house, and finally launching a company. Furthermore, Sözer, with an analytical approach, examines the modernization of the community and argues that there is a discrepancy between Nureddin Coşan’s image of the community and the community itself. The overwhelming opinion with the community is to preserve its traditional form while Coşan’s attitude is that of change. Society is in constant transformation; thus, the community cannot sustain itself without progress. Sözer argues that the community will either take the form of a non-governmental organization or will remain in its Sufi form and reserve its traditional community status.

This community most importantly was chosen due to its a large educated female presence in almost every capacity within the community. Efe (2013) argues that this was largely due to Coşan’s advocacy to encourage women to undertake social responsibilities and improve their education. Sözer (2019), on the other hand, argues that Coşan responded favorably to female member’s aspiration to “join” and become “visible” in the public space. It was not solely his vision to promote female public visibility but rather the outcome of several reasons. Primarily, compared to other communities, the female members of Iskenderpaşa was – and still is- highly educated. Secondly, there was a universal shift in regards of women joining the work force. Finally, the impact of the development of Islamist feminism during 1990s was highly effective in the community. Conservative women especially with hijab protest have begun building “Muslim Women” (İslamci Kadın) identity. However, there was still a strong emphasis on traditional gender roles within the community by the sheikh (p. 123-28).

Compared to other communities that were selected for this research, Iskenderpaşa community is less marginal and maintains an accommodationist approach to modern Turkish state. One downside to this aspect of is that capitalism might undermine the community’s

culture and identity. When compared to other communities İskenderpaşa branch has adapted to the changing circumstances of Turkish society and politics by assimilating the modern tools, something which other communities have opted out of doing in lieu of maintaining their traditional heritage.

The literature on İskenderpaşa community, although substantial compared to other communities, still lacks an analytical research on female identity formation and overall female presence in the community. In this analytical study, I aim to contribute to Sufi women typology in Turkey by analysing four different religious communities in comparison. This research will provide an in-depth information on community's influence on women's identity formation and reveal an "ideal women" typology in the İskenderpaşa community and compare to discover whether there are differences or similarities in communities based on their Sufi heritage.

1.3.3. The İsmailağa Community

Compared to other communities studied in this research, the literature on İsmailağa order is limited, relatively new and mostly consists of dissertations. The community for a long period maintained its reclusive attitude by sustaining its collective and traditional disposition. The İsmailağa community's distinctive worldview, mission, orthodox Islamic attitudes, and scepticism towards governmental institutions aided in creating a well-preserved community. Its strong devotion to Islamic law and determination to resist 'modern' characteristics will enrich this research in discovering the differences between identity formation in religious communities.

After careful deliberation, I have opted to study the literature section of this research based on three categories: descriptive, analytical, and ideological. However, there are currently no ideological sources written on the İsmailağa community; thus, the İsmailağa section of the literature review will solely focus on analytical and descriptive sources.

Overwhelming literature on the İsmailağa community is fairly descriptive. The sources were categorized as such based their brief description regarding the nature, structure, position, and/or the formation of the community. Based on the data collected by Consensus poll, the community accounts for 7.2% of the 4.5 million people who are associated with a religious community in Turkey (Pricky, 2012). Isolation is encouraged in the community, from both the society at an individual level to weaken the connection to the secular state and culture; and to maintain the spiritual and functional control over its members. Yavuz (2003), argues that communities ruralism and conservatism sets them apart from other communities (p. 140).

Furthermore, the community demands a strict and complete devotion from its disciples. The members refer to themselves as the Age of Bliss (Asr-i Saadet) and believe in the revival

or continuation of the lifestyle, traditional dress, and practices of the Prophet Muhammed. “Although the İsmailağa community is representative of the most traditionalist (*gelenekçi*), “authentic” and conservative (*muhafazakâr*) communities in Turkey, it is at the same time marginal, elders-dominated and one of the weakest (*en zayıf olanlardan biri*), as best characterized by following its own traditions, and remaining aloof from the power struggle” (Priciky, 2012, p. 64). There was very limited literature on the İsmailağa community due to its reclusive nature, wary attitude towards outsiders, and their less than favorable depiction in media. However, recent research indicates that this trend is changing. Piricky (2012), argues that the community is now more compliant, recent developments indicate such as allowing press, television, things that were not permissible before, are now very much a part of everyday life (p. 62). However, he argues that the community is apolitical, since any political association could mean a departure from Sufi principles (p. 66).

The community is mostly defined as an orthodox Islamic branch of the Nakşibendi order (Özyağlı, 2018). In fact, Çakır (1990) argues that the İsmailağa community is much more conscious in carrying out religious orders than any other community (p. 61). Günay and Ecer (1999) indicates that the most differentiating aspect of the community is their pure devotion to Hanafî *fiqh*. It is important to mention here that the community mostly consists of and appeals to the lower strata of society (Çakır, 1990; Günay and Ecer, 1999 & Weismann, 2007). Furthermore, Houston (2001) characterizes the community as an Islamist caste (p. 53-9). Genel and Karaosmanoğlu (2006), argue that the community’s ahistorical identity is “representative of a cultural rapture in Turkey. Whether through ignorance of their Ottoman heritage or determination to introduce a new orthodoxy, Islamists succeeded in inducing a historical rapture” (p. 457). Bulut (1995), on the other hand, indicates that the community’s ideas, practices and their isolation confirm the community’s “reactionary faction” status (p.438). In similar fashion, Çakır (1990) argues that this anti-modernist stance and the reactionary attitude is Islamic ghettoization (p. 62). Genel highlights the community’s isolated nature and argues that the community draws its roots from before the republican project. Its mythical nature and adherence to the traditions, she argues is evident of folkloric Islam. “The community, with a historical consciousness, continues the tradition of the Ottoman system, while at the same time giving priority to catching up with the changes in today’s “modern” Turkey” (p. 476).

There are several researches solely devoted to the İsmailağa community. Baynal and Yaman (2015) examines women’s inclination in joining and adhering to religious groups. Their research reveals İsmailağa community to be much more formalist (*şekilci*), compared to other religious communities. Furthermore, there is a strong emphasis on Murşid being ehl-i sünnet

(followers of the Sunnah). And similar to other communities such as Menzil and Suleymancilar, the community mostly benefit from authors and publisher that are affiliated with the community. Furthermore, Baynal and Yaman argue that although the *sohbets* differ in terms of sources and methods; they mostly resonate sensibility and are crucial in preserving loyalty in every community.

Taştan (2021) studies the effects of Ismailağa community on identity formation. His research reveals that the main aspect in collective identity formation within the Ismailağa community is (i) *medreses*. Current sheikh's (ii) charismatic influence is also another contributing factor in identity formation. His lifestyle and emphasis on following the (iii) Sunnah highlights his devotion and advocates for "proper" Islamic education. Members stress that following Sunnah aids in overcoming their daily hindrances. These teachings are reinforced within the community through *sohbets*. Weekly gatherings aid in producing and reproducing identity while encouraging socialization, unity and solidarity. Moreover, Taştan argues that much of identity building in the community is emphasized through symbols. *Sarık*, *cübbe*, *çarşaf*, etc. are indicative of these symbols, since they are widely visible and distinct. Finally, members of the community embrace affirmative role models, such as the Mürşid, to imitate in order to improve themselves.

Işık's (2021) research also reveals the strong emphasis on clothing in the community. She examines forms of women's religiosity in Ismailağa community under five main themes: (i) the connection process to their community, (ii) their psycho-social evolution, (iii) their view, perception and lifestyle, (iv) their attitudes towards modern life and popular culture, and (v) their attitudes towards the current discussions regarding women's place in Islam. The research reveals that female member of Ismailağa community place *çarşaf* at the center of their belief system. The significance of *çarşaf* transcends its community indicative nature as a decisive aspect that shapes everyday lives of these women. The emphasis placed on *çarşaf* is evident in *sohbets*, although almost all members of the community wear *çarşaf*, overwhelming subject of *sohbets* still consist of encouraging women to don "the only right form" of *tesettür*. *Çarşaf* also acts as a barrier to all the aspects of modern life and restricts most of their activities. Finally, Işık argues that *çarşaf* is also at the center of women's role and position. Women, based on their dress style can only attend medreses and their only employment opportunity is *hocalık*.

However, Kafadar's (2019) thesis reveals *çarşaf*'s relatively new history; in fact, the color and the shape became prominent with the current sheikh. Kafadar also argues that women's status in the community is based on three categories: *sohbet* goers, students, and *hocas*. Regular *sohbet* attendance is important as a member for the community. She also argues

the main motivation for women to become a member is socialization. Ege (2020), on the other hand, argues that that women usually position themselves within the community by identifying themselves as: “*talebe*”, “*hoca*”, “*dhikr*”, “*sohbet halkaları*”, “*Arapça hafızlık eğitimi*”, “*rabita*”, and “*çarşaf*”. The research revealed that the most valued title in the community is “*medrese hocalığı*”. The women within the community still preserve their cultural gender roles but emphasize *hocalık* as an indicative of an ideal Muslim women.

Özyağlı (2018) revealed similar findings in her thesis. The thirteen interviews with female members of the community revealed that women mostly identify themselves with the most valued profession in the community: *hocalık*. The research by employing Foucauldian discourse analysis established five discursive techniques – *hocalık*, *tasawwuf*, *self-sacrifice*, *storytelling*, and *Taqwa*- that form the İsmailağa women typology. As mentioned earlier, *hocalık*, however, was the single most used attribute to describe women in the İsmailağa community. *Hocalık* did not carry distinct male or female characteristics; women when defining *hocalık* never attributed any female or male adjectives that were used when describing an ideal female. However, interviewees argued that women were naturally inclined to be teachers, since mothers are children’s first educators. Furthermore, *hocalık* meant a devote life, thus a divine profession.

However, community’s values have since started eroding against modernization/secularization. Unlike other communities, the İsmailağa community has rejected, as long as it possible can, any aspects of modernization; thus, is unable to cater to the needs of modern Muslims. Efe (2012) argues that Ustaosmanoğlu’s fiqh teachings are imitations rather than inquisitions in search for modern problems. The sheikh has relatively very little to offer to the life of modern Muslims. He also constantly emphasizes “patience, tawakkul and contentment”, and the idea that this life is fleeting the salvation is acquired through worship. However, in recent year the community have parallel the modernization trend by partially adjusting their strong views on “bid’ah, waste and vanity” (Efe, p. 181). Efe also indicated that the main difference between İskenderpaşa and İsmailağa is the latter’s adherence to Hanafi fiqh rather than hadith and Sunnah.

Although, I would argue based on my research that İsmailağa’s devotion to Sunnah – as much as their devotion to Hanafi fiqh- is highly evident in their everyday life aspects including their clothing and rituals. Furthermore, Aviv also argues that, the “community members take their affiliation with Sunni Islam so passionately, they call themselves “ehli Sünnet ve cemaat” (people of tradition and community)” (p. 4).

Aviv argues that İsmailağa community, insisted on following their traditions rather than going through the process of modernization and closed itself off, unlike other *Nakşi* communities, during the first decades of Turkish republican era (Aviv, 2018, p.2). Aviv argues that 1997 coup and the AK Party's (Justice and Development Party) triumph in 2002 were the two main defining moments in İsmailağa's history. The former event, ended any support from the government towards community's medreses (and any other religious community's institutions) that did not officially operate under the Religious Affairs Ministry. AK Party, on the other hand, after their victory in 2002, tried to work with various religious groups and incorporate and benefit from their large social and political presence in the state. Aviv while defining the community, emphasizes their "friendly" approach towards the state. "In this context, the İsmailağa community seeks to synthesize Islam, Turkish nationalism, and Ottoman heritage in order to establish a strong new ruling elite in Turkey, based on Muslim moral values" (p.3). Aviv argues that AK Party's support of the religious communities also lies in this ideology.

Aviv also argues that İsmailağa community "strictly follows the writings of Sayyid Qutb". However, the community has always been and continues to only read and support very few selected sources that are mostly written by the members themselves and are fully in support of Sufi heritage and teachings. The community continues to emphasize its apolitical stance, and their devotion and objective is only "to explain religion to people" (p.7). However, on several occasions Ahmet Mehmet Ünlü has rallied for Welfare Party. Çakır (1990) emphasizes that İsmailağa's various support for different party's is due to financial opportunities they have to offer. Aviv argues that today the community is divided between AK Party and Felicity Party; although they mainly lean towards AK Party. Aviv lastly argues that "İsmailağa community can never become an acceptable replacement for the FGM, contrary to the suggestions of some scholars". This is due to FGM's size and influence both at a national and international level. The İsmailağa community lacks the necessary political and economic investment to have a vast impact on the political climate in Turkey. Finally, same as Aviv, Priciky argues that "one is tempted to conclude that the İsmailağa community can only be classified as a pseudo-threat to the secular order" (p. 66).

Finally, the İsmailağa community offers a great contrast to the Iskenderpaşa, but also carries similarities to the Süleymancılar community with its devotion to religious education, thus will enrich this research. The aim of this research is to broaden the modes of sufi and non-sufi women's identity in the city; I plan to extend and even transform the existing discourse by providing new identity formations and dismantling outdated categories. Instead of mere

assimilation and integration into one of the existing discourses, this new identity has the potential to transform the existing stereotypes and clichés of both Sufi and non-Sufi conservative women. The communities in Turkey make up a large portion of conservative identity in Turkey. However, there is still limited research regarding Sufi women in Turkey. Thus, this research will contribute to the gender studies and sociology of religion in Turkey by examining the conception of habitus and selves through the practices of the community and contribute to the typology of Sufi women through an in-depth analysis of the Ismailağa, Iskenderpaşa, and Meşveret communities. Therefore, with this research, my main concern is to detect individual and community-influenced perspectives and trends that shape women's identity.

1.3.4. The Meşveret-Nurcu Community

The Meşveret group is one of many sub-branches of the Nurcu community in Turkey. This section will provide a brief study of the relevant literature on *Nurcu* Community. The community founded by Nursi (1873-1960) has amassed a large following by offering a distinct approach to Islam. His conceptual framework provided a map to those that were challenged by the new modern practices, by reformulating Islamic concepts for the new secular society. Nursi's teachings offered an alternative, not only to the ongoing Kemalist modernization, but provided a rational course of action compared to other religious movement or communities, in terms of facing everyday-life challenges of Muslims, brought forth by new conditions of modernity. "By studying the Nur community, one can understand the dynamics of religious and state on the one hand and modernity and identity on the other" (Yavuz, 2003: 151). The movement, as mentioned earlier, seeks to provide a written religious culture rather than an oral-based one and operates on "textual reading circles"¹, which meet at least by-weekly in various apartments. Şentürk (2015), argues that there were over 1000 *medreses* with thousands of students (p. 241). "The text-based nature of the movement makes it unique; since Nursi's death in 1960, no one has succeeded him, and the movement remains very much centered around his writings. This focus has resulted in a new idiom of communication and a new message of moral and ethical renewal of the society" (Yavuz, p. 151). Furthermore, Zubeyir Nişancı (2015) in his doctoral thesis argues that secularization and revivalism should be examined through the lens of movement-counter-movement dynamics. He further goes on to study the progress and mobilization strategies of the secularist movement in Turkish history, alongside Said Nursi's

¹ "The word *dershane* in modern Turkish refers to a special apartment floor or one-floor building and a congregation of people who meet there to read and discuss the writing of Nursi" (Yavuz, 2003, p. 307)

counter-mobilization efforts against it. He primarily centers his study on understanding how both sides mobilized around issues related to the construction of reality, identity, and society.

Although there is an overwhelmingly large literature on Said Nursi's life, texts, teachings, and advocacy; there is, however, a very limited literature that solely focuses on the foundation and the development of the community itself. This movement is greatly understudied and the few available sources in the form of articles, dissertation and books provide little detail for anything other than its formation and make-up. There are however several articles and books written in various languages that mostly focus on the formation and development of the group. Some of these are written by sympathizers in appreciation of the movement, some criticize its divisive nature and grandiosity. I have opted to divide the literature based on two epistemic approaches: literature stemming from a theological perspective by emphasizing the clandestine nature of the message and those that opt for a more sociological approach.

The nature of the Nurcu movement have been long disputed since its formation. Tunaya classifies the movement as an "ekol". While Mardin identifies it as Islamic "revitalization movement" "to stop the inroads into Muslim culture of what he (Nursi) saw as the materialism of the West" (Mardin, 1989, p. 8). Furthermore, the movement partly owes its success to the failures of the Republican project (Isikli, 1998). Mardin adds that Kemalist intellectuals solely focused on responding to it as a threat to the secular republic ideology that they have entirely overlooked its social dynamic (Mardin, 1992, p.12).

Muzaffer Sencer in his book *Dinin Türk Toplumun Etkileri* (1999) briefly recounts the Nurcu community as effective as Naqshibandis and Tijanis "in aggression against the Turkish Revolution and especially against the secular state" (pg. 212). The community's strong anti-revolutionary attitude and immense prevalence due its overarching disposition that encompasses factions and sufi communities have encouraged its popularity. Deeming it "the most dangerous movement", he argued that Nurcu community had become a representative of anti-revolutionist movement by attracting different Islamist resistance groups.

Although it lacks a systematic doctrine, Nur movement operates on the principle of opposing revolution as a whole and aims to revert to a theoretical system that entirely rejects the secular state order. Since it does not base itself on a specific religious perspective, Nurcuism encompasses various sects and orders, making it the most dangerous of Islamic movements. (Sencer, 1999, p. 213)

Yavuz (1999), on the other hand, in his article titled *Towards an Islamic Liberalism?: The Nurcu Movement and Fetullah Gülen*, describes the movement as an identity-seeking.

“The Risale-i Nur movement (henceforth referred to as the Nur movement) has responded most effectively to the search of identity that has been a salient characteristic of Turkish politics since the collapse of the Ottoman Empire” (p. 307). Furthermore, Büyükkara (2015), defines Nur community as “cultural reformists”: as movements that aim to reform the society from bottom-up, and ultimately changing the whole structure. These movements by utilizing student organizations, associations, cultural functions, etc. try to penetrate society.

On the other hand, the phrase attributed to Nursi, *"I seek refuge in God from Satan and politics"* (*e'üzü billahi mineş şeytan ve ş-siyase*), indicates that he did not adopt a reform movement that utilized politics as a means, as "Old Said" had done. Instead, it shows his embrace of a cultural reformism that envisioned a long-term process of transformation through knowledge, morality, and spirituality at the grassroots level. (Büyükkara, 2015, p. 146)

Erkan claims that Nurcu movement can partially be categorized under New Social Movements; since it is a collective undertaking and contains the motivation to morally and spiritually influence\change society. There is also a strong sense of collective identity in Nur movement, which recounts as a defining aspect of any Social Movements; however, it refrains from establish a sense of “us” and “others”. Therefore, Erkan argues that it would be misleading to classify the movement as by-product of social tensions; and to approach it with a single theory and method; rather, multiple perspectives are needed to comprehensively understand the intention behind the foundation and the expansion of the movement (pg.36).

Nurcus however mostly argue that their main objective is to adhere to the needs of the public, which cannot be fulfilled by tariqas as they do not cater to the need of a twenty-first century Muslim. Thus, Nurcus mostly see themselves as a movement rather than a sect or an order; their perpetual goal is to actively defend the faith against the enemy that is secularization.

Mardin’s book *Religion and Social Change in Modern Turkey: The Case of Bediüzzaman Said Nursi* provides a great vantage point for this literature review, since it is one of the earliest accounts of research in this particular subject; and although Said Nursi has been vigorously studied, Mardin presents a distinctive sociological approach by utilizing social science methods and techniques to explain Nurcu movement as a social change. He criticizes intelligentsia for the lack of research in this area claiming that, although they have largely argued that the movement poses a great threat to Kemalist ideology, they nonetheless ignored its “sociological dynamic” (1989, p.41).

Mardin claims that Islam is more than a simple religious belief but rather a relevant social practice, “that it structures the social life of Islamic societies, that it provides the

foundation for political obligation and that, in short, it penetrates the smallest interstices of daily life and of social and political organization” (p.3). Furthermore, the reproduction of these societies is linked to common usage of Islamic idiom by its members. He defines “idiom” as a root paradigm, acting as a cultural guide for the individual as well as a reference point for an ideal society. Thus, in this sense religion is the idiom and the discourse becomes the *Nurcu* rhetoric, providing the necessary tools in examining the social change. Thus, Mardin describes discourse as “the way in which the idiom is used depends on the social position of the user (in this case a cleric trained in Naksibendi seminaries) the selection made from a large inventory of possible themes, the particular slant of the message and the way in which the meanings carries by themes selected are transformed to suit current purposes”. (p. 7)

Nursi’s success is based on several strategies (1) his efficient usage of religious idioms that were still prominent and prevalent across localities that were highly used in everyday Ottoman life by modifying them to cater to the modern world; thus, the modern society. However, the success of Said Nursi was due to his understanding of the necessity to “enrich” and modify these idioms to combat the process of modernization. Nursi understood the disruptive effects of modernity; In fact, Mardin indicates that “Nursi appeals to a large number of persons for whom ‘customs and rules’ are either deficient or have been impoverished or have been proclaimed to be illegitimate” (Mardin, 1989: pg. 3). Said Nursi aided in the transition “from an earlier normative to a later cognitive phase. Thus Nursi provided the necessary paradigm drawn from the Qur’an and already evident and embedded in the everyday life of the Ottoman man but rearticulated to accommodate to the struggles of the new society that was not build on “emotional bonding with person, or with myths or religion but one that was based on cognitive skills (Mardi, 1989, p. 218). Furthermore, the Islamic idioms also had internal effects on both Said and his followers; it provided an “unconscious process of identity-building and accommodation with the ambient world” (p.16). Nursi argues that the popularity of movement was partly due to the its democratic nature that allowed for the laymen to construct their own versions of the religious message (p 221). Said discarded the practice that only the few elite was sufficiently capable and intellectual enough to understand, interpret and spread the contents of the Qur’an (p. 221).

Hakan Yavuz, much like Mardin, identifies the movement as identity seeking. His book *Islamic Political Identity in Turkey* (2003) focuses on several religious communities in Turkey to study rethinking of religious movement in new political and cultural environment. The top-down state imposed reforms of Kemalism, failed to penetrate in constituting and regulating everyday life of the layman. Yavuz, argues that Islam served and still serve as “a site of

counterstatist discourse” in providing a basic framework for the majority in dealing with the stress and inconsistency – caused by the clash of the alternative life styles and practices- of modernization (p. 31). Although, the earlier modernization in Turkey intended to reduce\eliminate religious aspects, it instead led to religious revivalism (p. 4). Yavuz argues that the Nur movement had three main impact in Turkish society based on Nursi’s idea of self, God and community. Nursi’s teachings undermined the hegemony of the *ulema*. Traditionally *ulema* had acted as an informal but vital bridge between state and society, concerned by interpreting and implementing Islamic knowledge and ensuring state’s legitimacy. The power and authority of the *ulema* shifted with the print based discourse. With access to print and communications technology the new Islamic intelligentsia emerged, ending *ulema*’s hegemony. The mass communication also ended state control of the *ulema*. Thus Islamic knowledge was democratized by the formation of competing interpretations (p. 106). “Nursi realized that in the modern era, dominated by the empiricism of the Enlightenment, faith could be sustained only if believers actively attempted to understand and interpret Islam” (p. 158). Second, Nur movements “print based discourse challenged hegemonic voices and opened up public spaces for dissent and emancipation” (p. 178). The *ulema* previously had hegemonic control over the text, with the dissemination of knowledge the text could amass large readership, allowing people to rely only on themselves to interpret religious text. Finally, Islam once again gained prominence in the public sphere. Nursi had created a new interpretation that catered to the needs of the modern day problems. Thus, a new moral discourse people –Muslims- could identify with had emerged. Thus Nursi “brought textual or print-based discourse to the forefront and laid out the framework for others to follow, stressing the importance of interpretation, tolerance, and open discussion” (p.178).Yavuz argues that Nursi understood the deep rooted impact of Islam in Anatolia. Therefore, employed this “spiritual potential” (which Mardin discussed as the idiom that was still relevant and persistent as a legitimization tool for the majority of the population) in his writings to bring forth a sense of identity that was based on both Islamic ethics and science.

Nursi argues that religion may still carry the necessary tools to reassess modernity. It also provides a sense of motivation and optimism necessary for personal and societal transformation. The pessimist climate based on the uncertainty induced by modernity, can only be combated with the utilizing old but familiar concepts to conform and obtain recognition within the changing society. Thus, Nursi revives the old religious ethos - “the old motivation source of Turkish society”- in order to promote a new meaning and a proactive culture (Yavuz, 2003, p.306).

Furthermore, in his article *Nur Study Circles (Dershanes) and the Formation of New Religious Consciousness in Turkey*, he examines “the intersection of public sphere, public space, morality, and social practice in the formation of Nur Community” (Yavuz, 2003, p.297). He emphasizes that the structure of *dershanes* allow for Nurcus to be both “modern and Muslim at the same time”. The main objective of these gatherings is to vernacularize modern attitudes such as self, time, space, society and politics by addressing these issues in their new public spaces: *dershanes*. Thus, “*Dershanes* are central to Nur identity and facilitate the formation of multifaceted close networks of relationships among followers, who are able to form a bond of trust and civility among themselves” (p. 307). These institutions through *sohbets* and prayers break down the modern attitudes by creating an ascetic environment.

Yavuz (2003) extensively writes about *dershanes*, as an identity building reading circles for Nur community “through religiously rooted and socially shaped networks, the Nurcus have sought to establish a sense of community within a secular state” (p. 307). He argues that the Nur movements aim is not to revive an old Islamic state but rather to redefine and Islamicize the modern state, he believes that this is only possible through a shared language and text with the RNK. “Nursi helped to create and nurture an oppositional and insurgent consciousness within the limited public sphere under the domination of the Kemalist state” (Yavuz, 2003, p. 208). *Dershanes* have encouraged the ‘evolution and pluralization of Islamic movements’ in Turkey by creating counter elites and an Islamic bourgeoisie. They are the heart of the movement, since they not only act as reading circles but center for economic and social activity for the community. *Dershanes* construct and preserve the collective Nurcu identity. In following with the teachings of Nursi, *dershanes* still maintain the intimacy of everyday life and religion, by providing Islamic idioms (reference, practices and modified teachings) to cope with and offer solutions to modern-day problems of Muslims: “a peaceful regulation of social issues” (p. 308).

Much like Yavuz, Efe argues that *dershanes* played a crucial role in building a community consciousness. Karabasoglu suggest that in order to understand the importance of *dershane* culture within the community; we first need to examine the vital importance of “reading” –RNK- in Nurcu Community. He equates “reading” to that of *dhikr* in *tariqas*. Reading RNK constitutes a certain attachment and the organized, regulated and more importantly scheduled readings institutionalizes the act. The members are encouraged to read both individually and within small groups to provide a collective interpretation. However, individuals mostly read to find solutions to their everyday problems as they believe that each reading provides a new meaning and that RNK holds answers to all contemporary social

problems. Furthermore, the print-based discourse allows the individual to interpret their own meaning and is specifically geared towards overcoming the contemporary challenges. Karabasoglu also argues that, Nur community established a new alternative public sphere through *dershanes*. These *dershanes* become a communication network since they are open to all regardless of socio-economic background. They become “socio-economic, cultural and political interaction and communication networks” (pg. 283). Eickelman (2003) also argues that *Risale* is a prime evidence of “emerging public sphere in Muslim societies”; since it encourages creative environment which individuals are able to “take part in discussions and debate on civic and religious values and responsibilities, and on the role of religious intellectuals in contemporary societies in general” (p. 52). Readers are encouraged, up to a certain point, to delve in and draw their own conclusions. The Nurcu community constantly emphasize that there is no final reading of the texts, rather each reading provides the individual with a new sense of self and offers new perspectives.

Mermer’s thesis titled “Aspects of Religious Identity: The Nurcu Movement in Turkey Today” is the first study to have portrayed in detail the Nurcu movement in its –than- current form. The research still carries much significance in terms of understanding the formation, structure, and motivation of the movement. Mermer places the movement in a religious revivalist camp, and argues its reactionary approach to secularism, and to an extent accepts its limited success, by emphasizing that they have not been able to make a meaningful contribution “to enrich the faith of ordinary people” (p.420). Furthermore, Mermer argues that the movement is passive in its nature as it seeks to transform society through “peaceful persuasion” (p. 421). She emphasizes that Nurcus view themselves not as a threat to the overall stability of the country, but rather a boulder standing against both outside –communism- and inside –anarchy- threats and still maintain a keen formation against the secularist vision of Kemalism. Mermer, in similar fashion, criticizes the movement’s devotion to the writings of Said Nursi. The communities attempt to legitimize RNK by arguing that its referenced in Quran further acts as a source of tension within religious movements, since it denotes any other equal counterpart to RNK and places the community in a chauvinistic light.

Furthermore, Nurcus have refrained from making any substantial changes to the main principles of the religion, rather fought to resolve the issues between religion and science. Nursi’s teaching have attracted students from technical and scientific subject, it has yet to influence theology students.

Our study has shown that Nurculuk, the movement inspired by Said Nursi and his writings, came into being as a defensive response among certain groups in Turkish

society who felt alienated by the secularist policies adopted by the government of the Republic and were therefore sympathetic to Said Nursi's stance even though their understanding of his actual teachings may have been hazy. (Mermer, 1984, p. 416)

Mermer (1984) argues that this is due to movements refusal to provide any substantial changes to "mainstream Islamic theology or practice" (p. 419). "Nurculuk is essentially a movement not of professionals in religion but of enthusiastic amateurs", she argues that the writings would lose their appeal if they were to be studied alongside other Islamic sources. Bora (2017), on the other hand, although brief, provides a different sociological perspective that views the community as a source of alternative accumulation of social power placing it outside the scope of any direct political influence. He discusses the life of Said Nursi, Nurcu Community, and the Gulen movement in *Cereyanlar: Türkiye'de Siyasi İdeolojiler* (2017). In his approach, he argues that Nursi's teachings have exceeded the conventional Islamic discourse and evolved into a new religious source and a movement that advanced well beyond a simple subject of Islamic religion in modern Turkish history. The community created an alternative public space and abstained from any form of competition against the state during its earlier composition, as to refrain from contributing to states legitimacy (p. 228). Bora also emphasizes that although Said Nursi stresses his followers to "serve their faith" (imana hizmet) it is actually synonymous with "serving the Nurcus" (Nurlara hizmet). Furthermore, he emphasizes that the "anti-communist" stance of the community allowed for it to gain legitimacy by aligning themselves with the "anti-communist and nationalist-conservatists" (Bora, 2017, p. 430). Furthermore, he emphasizes community's peaceful nature and its success in amassing a large fallower base mostly consisting of rural middle class.

Albayrak, on the other hand, argues that compared to Cemaladdin Efgani and Muhammed Abduh, Nursi was able to appeal to all segments of society. In his book titled *Sosyal Değişim Sürecinde Risale-i Nur Hareketi*, he examines the Nur community within the context of Turkish modernization; and places the movement in a revivalist camp arguing that the community was formed as a reaction to the threat of a Kemalist top-down modernization enforced by the state. Nursi recognized the modernization process as a threat to Islamic core values, and in order to combat, he tried to modernize and reform Islamic thought by advocating that Islamic sciences are compatible with positivist method.

Furthermore, Albayrak argues that we cannot simply approach the movement from a purely "Islamist political perspective", but need to examine it from a religious standpoint; since Nursi's message was intended to save peoples faiths through peaceful social advocacy rather than through political means. Finally, he argues that the Nurcu community is still unaware of

the real “social, economic, political, cultural” issues produced by modernity and is hindering Islamic movements. Finally, the community, according to Albayrak (2002) ceased generating theories to enrich Islamic life –the very foundation of the movement and the goal of Said Nursi (p. 154).

Karabaşoğlu (2003) criticizes the reductionist approach in dealing with the movement and provides a different perspective based on three main aspects of the movement: ontological aspects of Risale-i Nursi, the social implications of the written text and finally the development of Nur movement after the death of Said Nursi. His approach, unlike his counterparts is not solely focused on examining the movement in modernity axis, rather he emphasizes that this reductionist view will often depreciate “Islam to an `ideology` or `condition` opposed to modernity” (p. 263). This reductionist view according to him overlooks the idea that Muslims simply act based on permitted manners and thoughts stemming from their devotion to their faith and God’s approval. Thus, Karabasoglu argues that, Mardin and others implement a secularist approach in terms of defining the movement a stemming from the modernization process rather than as it is: acting on religious pertinence. This secularist view identifies the movement as the by-product of “modern Islamic thought and practice and Kemalism”, but Nursi’s main concern was the spiritual lives of Muslims (Karabaşoğlu, 2003, p.264). Instead, he insists Kemalist ideology as the antithesis –rather than Islam- in Anatolia. He basis this idea on what he calls chronological reasoning. He also disregards the idea that highlights Nursi as a mere activist.

Erkan’s work *Nur Hareketi: Sosyolojik Bir Çözümleme* (2015) provides an in-depth study of the formation of the community from a theological perspective. He studies the formation and evolution of the Nur movement, the motivation for its formation, thematic keywords in understanding the nature of the movement, its relation to the state, and why it resonated with the population, and why is it still resonates today. Erkan’s approach is befitting of the Islamic studies camp, since it supports the premise that although the movement was effected by the circumstances; it was not, however, a simple product of modernization process, but rather a revivalist campaign with its origins deep rooted in the transcendental and divine. Thus, it is not a local but a global message that was modified to provide answers and meaning to new issues born out of Turkish modernity. The main argument emphasized in the book is the charismatic character of Nursi which was one of the main determinant in the movements success. Erkan argues that Nursi benefited from the Mahdi ideology in his legitimacy and motivation. Although, Nursi explicitly refuted the idea that he was Mahdi, it is still a popular and widespread belief among his followers (Erkan, 2015, p.78; Efe, 2015, p.54). Erkan thus

argues that the success of the Nur movement was partially embedded in the claim that Nursi could have been a part of this traditional and sacred lineage that was highly recognized and prominent in Turkish culture. Finally, Nursi's message provided motivation and hope for the future for conservative Muslims during a time of conflict and tension. Thus, Erkan (2015) argues that it is this sense of hope for the future that motivated to community and still does today (p. 79).

Furthermore, Efe in *Dini Gruplar Sosyolojisi*, argues that it is not the charismatic character of the leader that ensured its success but the idea that the Risales were miraculous composed. Nursi also emphasizes this by assigning charismatic characteristics to his writings rather than himself. This according to Efe, aided in the success and the continuation of the movement. In fact, Nursi constantly advocated his follower to become Nur Talebesi; rather than pledging allegiance to the leader (as Murids in Tarikas would to Murshids), the followers of Said intended to become the students of Risales.

Furthermore, Efe (2015) classifies the movement as a community that stems from a Sufi heritage but does not necessary maintain Sufi traditions; such as rituals and concepts (murid, murshid, etc.) but still benefit from certain Sufi aspects (Tarikat Formunu Kaybetmiş Cemaatler). These "communities" have opted to embrace modern tools to ensure their survival and progress. These groups, whether Sufi or non-Sufi pertain both unique components of their community such as communal reading of Risale-i Nur but at the same time are involved in several social functions. They have evolved from traditional groups and tariqas to modern configurations. The Nurcu community is categorized as a non-sufi community based on their hierarchical formation, easy membership (sans ritual), and extravert character (Efe, 2013, p.196-7).

In this section, I have briefly provided an overview of the prominent research conducted in this particular field. The current literature on this topic mostly focuses on the formation and the structure of the community, with an overwhelming collection on the life and ideologies of Said Nursi. Although, the subject of the research is the Nurcu Community, it is not my objective to discuss Said Nursi's ideologies, but the community as whole. This indicates that, the interpretation of the Risales after the death of Nursi along with *dersahanes* as identity building spaces have produce and reproduced identity discourse to mold it into its current form. Thus, my objective is to unearth the components of an "ideal female Nur talebesi"; since there is lack of research in female members of the community. Because this thesis focuses on Sufi women's identity formation, it might be useful to briefly review the gender literature in Turkey as well.

1.3.5. Gender in Turkey

There are two prominent female typologies in Turkey that also varies within itself: modern/secular and religious/conservative. Although the typology of the 'modern woman' emerged earlier, the establishment of the Republic in 1923 brought new policies regarding education and women's status, leading to significant changes that ultimately paved the way for further change. In fact, Ağduk (2016) emphasizes this by stating: During the reform movements spanning the late 19th and early 20th centuries, women who would later be referred to as "Republican girls" were assigned significant roles as carriers of Westernization and modernization" (p. 299). The new "Kemalist Feminism", according to Kandiyoti, witnessed the incorporation of feminist movement into the new state policy. The idea with this new women typology was to create a modern woman with reference to the "westernist" ideology. This "state feminism" (Tekeli, 1993; Berktaş, 1996) established the "modern Turkish women", but the modern women's main role hadn't changed much, as their main responsibility was to their family; woman was still first and foremost a mother and now she was also a loyal subject. The feminist movement in Ottoman environment had turned into a national feminism movement, that was geared towards Turkish women. The national feminism opted for a "national fashion" against the traditional *carsaf* (Bora, 2018, p. 751). Bora also argues that Anatolian women's image was created as a control mechanism to maintain the patriarchal discourse that emphasized women's identity based on motherhood and a housewife (Bora, 2018, pg. 759).

The village woman, with her self-sacrificing, hardworking, dignified character, and devotion to motherhood, was the essence of the 'correct'—ideal Turkish femininity. Republican women, while teaching the village women literacy and providing education that imparted modern skills, were also expected to draw inspiration from them. (Bora, 2018, p. 759).

This new typology was not inclusive, it rejected the conservative women. These changes were not necessarily made due to an over whelming increase in gender equality; there were top-down changes enacted by the government in reference to the Turkish modernization project. Tekeli (1993) argues that these changes were to put a distance between the Ottoman ideology and political views to move forward with the Europeanization of Turkey. During this process, women were the most visible tool of modernity, thus they "became the bearers of Westernization and carriers of secularism, and actresses gave testimony to the dramatic shift of civilization" (Göle, 1996, p.14). Thus, the new regime gave women the role of symbolizing the secular, Turkish-type modernity.

Islam had become obsolete in the national discourse of the new Turkish state. Ideal citizen/women was no longer religious rather secular and modern. Women's body was the most visual depiction of modern, since they were the most visible change in the Turkish society. This change was achieved, during the early years, by restricting religion to private sphere. Göle (2001) argues that, Turkish reformation promoted a genderless women image to incorporate women in to the workforce (p. 109). This genderless trend continued in the 1970's; women were encouraged to abandon their femininity and dress as men would (Caha, 2001). This was to promote women to enter into the workforce for the solidarity of the country. Durakbaşı (1998), also, argues that women were expected to develop a professional identity; they were mostly depicted as modest and respectful in a way that it would not threaten the established patriarchal structure (p. 148)

In opposition to this, some conservative women intellectuals defended the "old women" image (e.g. Munevver Ayasli and Semiha Ayverdi). This ideology called for women to return to their rightful place: their home. During the 1970s, new educated and employed conservative women class began to appear. On the other hand, in the 1980s there was also a "radical Islamist" group emerging. Magazines geared towards conservative women began publishing. In fact, in 1985, the Iskenderpaşa community began publishing *Kadın ve Aile* (Women and Family, 1985-1998) magazine that highlighted women's traditional role stating: "In our view, you are either the pious mother or aunt, with a white prayer veil, a prayer bead in hand, and a mouth full of prayers, or the serious, compassionate, and self-sacrificing housewives, loyal to your husbands and homes; or you are the sweet, tidy, cheerful, and skilled little sisters". However, conservative women became much more active through Milli Gorus platforms during the late 1980s. The headscarf became a symbol of the now visible, modern Muslim women. The headscarf ban following the 1997 military memorandum disheartened the conservative women.

The emergence of the new conservative middle class in early 2000s paralleled a change in the image of conservative women. The AKP government initially approached the women issue in Turkey in a positive light by improving legal rights, encouraging societal empowerment, increasing the quality of education, and employment. The headscarf ban was also lifted in 2008. Nevertheless, the primary "role" of women which was being a housewife and mother did not change during this time as well (Çapcıoğlu, 20016, p.288). However, the conservative secular women divide that emerged during the Republican period is no longer able to address the current environment. There is a new, "hybrid" formation and diversity that began in late 2000s, where secularism and conservatism are intermingled. Thus, we can argue that there are those that identify as religious but not conservative, but there are also conservative

secular women. These new typologies will be further discussed in detail in later chapters of the thesis. Let us now turn to the theoretical concepts and perspectives that will inform my empirical analyses.

1.4. Theoretical Framework

This thesis adopts Pierre Bourdieu's theoretical concepts of habitus and capital, alongside other notable concepts, and integrates Symbolic Interactionist theory as a framework to investigate the construction of religious identities among women in diverse religious communities. The application of Bourdieu's concept of habitus, which refers to the set of dispositions inscribed in the individual's mind and body, is useful for examining how women in diverse religious communities shape their identities over time through socialization and accumulation of experience. This is because habitus proposes that an individual's understanding and interpretation of the world, along with their actions and practices, stem from an ongoing process of socialization, which commences in early childhood and persists throughout their lifetime. Specifically, habitus can reveal how the accumulation of experience over time leads to the internalization of unconscious behaviours that are manifested in every action, gesture, and mimic.

In contrast, Symbolic Interactionist theory will facilitate in uncovering the daily routine and interactions among the members and their contextualized experiences within their religious communities. Moreover, it aids in understanding and interpretation of symbols and meanings and how these attributed aspects aid in shaping religious identity. Additionally, this theory will be useful in understanding how individuals navigate their identity in relation to others within their community, as well as how their identity is influenced by broader cultural and social factors. The flexibility offered by the Symbolic interactionist theory, which allows useful in studying day-to-day interactions of the community members, complements the more structured concept habitus, elucidating the ways in which cultural, social, and historical facts contribute to the formation of individuals' dispositions and practices.

The integration of Symbolic Interactionism and habitus theory provides a promising avenue for exploring the discursive strategies utilized by Muslim Turkish women to construct their self-representations and navigate modes of subjection. The combination of Symbolic Interactionism and Bourdieu's concepts act as a foundation for comprehensive analysis of the discursive strategies employed by the female members of each community to establish their self-representation modes of subjection.

1.4.1. Pierre Bourdieu: Habitus, Capital, and Field

The concept of habitus, introduced by Bourdieu, and its influence on identity formation specifies the significance of social and cultural contexts in shaping individual behaviour. The complex interplay of structure and agency is further highlighted to emphasize the fact that identity formation is not solely based on individual choices and preferences, but also influenced by social structures and cultural values. Thus, the concept will aid in understanding the intricate and multi-faceted process of identity formation by exploring how the disciples or members of each community navigate, negotiate, and internalize social structures, cultural norms, and religious practices in religious communities. Furthermore, the notion of habitus not only allows for a valuable perspective in understanding the complex overlay of culture, social structure, and individual agency, but it can also aid in understanding how certain social inequalities persist across generations and how we can further promote change and diversity.

Bourdieu builds upon the Aristotelian notion of *hexis* – “the incorporated and quasi postural disposition” – to develop his concept of habitus (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 2014, p.111). It is important to acknowledge that habitus has a rich intellectual lineage, originating from the works of Hegel, Weber, Mauss, and Durkheim. The earliest mentions of this concept can be traced back to Durkheim’s “Pedagogical Evolution in France” course in the 1900s. In particular, Mauss, in his 1934 essay “techniques of the Body” employs the concept of habitus to explain the intricate relationship between the individual and the broader social environment. Bourdieu similarly utilizes habitus as a powerful instrument to navigate and transcend the challenges posed by subjectivism and objectivism in understanding social phenomenon. As such habitus “calls for moving to a conception of action and structure that breaks with and transcend the traditional dichotomies of subjectivism and objectivism” (Swartz, 1998, p. 35). Furthermore, the concept can be viewed as an analytical tool to understand the human behaviour and how it is influenced by discourse. Thus, within this research, the concept of habitus reveals the amalgamation of inherited, environmentally, and educationally acquired dispositions within religious communities. The focus is to investigate how habitus influences the process of identity formation in women by examining their dispositions that shape their behaviours, attitudes, and choices.

Bourdieu’s primary objective revolves around transcending structure and agency dichotomy. In contrast to classical dualism, Bourdieu states that social reality is not confined solely to external structures but also resides within individuals. Rejecting the notion of a rigid separation between the internal and the external domains, he emphasizes the active role of individuals in shaping the social world through action. Although structures are prominent,

actors often move through these structures not by understanding their formal and rational functions but rather through “habits” and experiences accumulated over time. He suggests that agents employ their “cognitive construction” and “embodied instruments” to actively construct their understanding of social reality. However, it is important to mention that Bourdieu emphasizes that these cognitive constructions themselves are not purely autonomous but are products of the socialization process. In other words, the very tools individuals utilize to construct the social world are the products of the social relations embedded within that world. Thus, “the socialized body (which one calls the individual or person) does not stand in opposition to society; it is one of its forms of existence” (Bourdieu 1980c, p.29).

This perspective acknowledges the process through which individuals internalize their surrounding environment, resulting in the formation of dispositions that shape their actions and behaviours in particular ways (Wacquant, 2005, p.316); thus, building upon the premise that habitus is a “system of circular relations that unite structure and practices; objective structures tend to produce structured subjective dispositions that produce structured actions which, in turn tend to produce objective structure” (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977, p. 203). By recognizing the reciprocal relationship between objective structures and subjective experiences, it becomes evident that individuals and society are intricately intertwined and mutually dependent, existing in a relational framework.

Therefore, Bourdieu conceives of habitus as a “mediating construct”, arguing that socio-symbolic structures of society are internalized forming enduring disposition, ways of thinking, behaving, and feeling, which Bourdieu famously expresses as the “internalization of externality and the externalization of internality” (Bourdieu, 1988, p. 72). These internalized patterns of behaviour then act as a reference for individuals to creatively respond to the social environment based on its opportunities and limitation (Wacquant, 2018, p. 2). Furthermore, Bourdieu portrays “the social agent as a physical, embodied actor, subject to developmental, cognitive, and emotive constraints and affected by the very real physical and institutional configurations of the field” (Lizardo, 2004). In this regard, he defines habitus as the “correspondence between social structures and mental structures, between the objective divisions of the social world...and the principles of vision and division that agents apply to them” (Bourdieu, 1996b [1989], p. 1).

Building upon this understanding, *Bourdieu* believes that individuals rely on practical assessments in their everyday activities, utilizing the structures as instrumental resources to navigate and comprehend social realities. The structures at play serve as instrumental resources for individuals to negotiate and make sense of social realities, rather than solely determining

the entirety of their experiences. As a result, habitus emerges as a dual phenomenon, encompassing both socialization and individuation. Through socialization, individuals internalize shared categories of judgment, conduct, and sensibility that are shaped by the environment to which they are exposed. Individuation, on the other hand, emphasizes the unique perspectives that individuals develop based on their specific circumstances and positionalities within the social field. As such, individuals become a combination of "structuring structures," wherein they internalize structured meanings from their past social milieus, which subsequently influence their perceptions, emotions, and actions. Individuals do maintain agency in exercising their own actions and choices as they actively engage in constructing their subjective realities. However, once again it is important to acknowledge that these actions are guided by the internalized dispositions that individuals have accumulated over time. In regard to this, Bourdieu's last and seemingly most definitive statement regarding habitus, defines it as,

A system of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles which generate and organize practices and representations that can be objectively adapted to their outcomes without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary in order to attain them. Objectively "regulated" and "regular" without being in any way the product of obedience to rules, they can be collectively orchestrated without being the product of the organizing action of a conductor (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 53).

Furthermore, individual behaviours can also be understood from the perspective of pursuing interests rather than mere compliance. However, actors' everyday practices can be viewed as attempts to navigate the social structure characterized by constraints and opportunities, drawing upon their accumulated experiences over time. Thus, it is important to recognize that actions should not solely be interpreted as navigating the social order for the purpose of compliance, but rather as intention driven. This does not imply that agents' actions based on their interests defy normative constraints, but rather that they introduce an element of uncertainty. Furthermore, the strategic actions taken by actors are not necessarily "conscious" actions in the traditional sense, as these behaviours also stem from internalized dispositions that are deemed appropriate in certain situations. "Actors are not rule followers or norm obeyers but strategic improvisers who respond dispositionally to the opportunities and constraints offered by various situations" (Swartz, 1998, p. 100). Wacquant makes the comparison between Chomsky's "generative behaviour" suggesting that, habitus is similar to

language produced unconsciously, based on shared rules and proper speech patterns, “in inventive yet predictable ways” (2018, p.3).

Bourdieu argues that there is a class-based socialization as well. The unconscious internalization of socio-economic position brings forth particular characteristics that are common to members of certain status groups and social classes. Thus, it ensures the internalization of expectations and opportunities and individuals limits based on the place they occupy in society. Thus, habitus allows individuals to develop internalized dispositions that shape their understanding of the broad parameters and boundaries of what is deemed possible or unlikely within a particular social group in a given context. These dispositions emerge through the process of socialization, whereby individuals acquire and internalize the prevailing norms, values, and beliefs within their social milieu. This phenomenon is particularly pronounced in Sufi Islamic communities (as status groups), which involve immersive practices that, in the words of William Connolly, "embodiment in repetitive practices that help to consolidate the dispositions, sensibilities, and ethos through which meaning is lived, intellectual beliefs are settled, and relations between constituencies are negotiated" (2005, 56). Habitus serves as a lens through which individuals perceive and navigate their social reality, influencing their thoughts, behaviours, and choices within the constraints and possibilities shaped by their socialization experiences (Bourdieu, 2002, p.27). Thus, it encourages or discourages individuals to pursue behaviours actions that are appropriate within their social conditions of existence.

Bourdieu suggests that school serves as the institutionalized environment in which the intellectual habitus of a culture is cultivated (Swartz, 1998, p. 102). Although less formally structured, meaning that these particular organizations may not adhere to a government-prescribed curriculum, within the context of this thesis, we can extend this notion to include *kurs'/medreses* that are highly operational and play a significant role within the İsmailağa and the Süleymancılar community. We can even further extend this to *söhbets*, gatherings, and, in the case of Nurcu Community, *okumalar*. Since 'habitus faithfully reflects, by definition, the objective conditions under which it was initially formed' (Swartz, 1998, p.110), the internalized knowledge derived from accumulated experiences manifests as unconscious behaviour, providing insights into the codes and norms prevalent in these communities. These codes and norms are transmitted to individuals through a process of socialization, which is established and enforced by agents such as family, school, and media. In the case of this study, the *söhbets/okumalar* serve as enforcers, facilitating the acquisition of new dispositions through constant exposure to a combination of familiar and novel experiences. As a result, these norms

and behaviours are often reproduced across generations, creating a continuous cycle where individuals actively contribute to the very environment that has shaped them.

As suggested in the methodology section of this thesis, the construction of subjectivities is inherently relational, and this holds significant implications within the context of religious communities. Particularly, subjectivities within these communities are constituted in relation to a diverse range of other subjectivities. For instance, the conceptualization of a "woman" is always contingent upon its relationship with additional subjectivities such as gender, class, and race. As a result, women within each community, whether they are disciples or members, exhibit unconscious and internalized behaviours and cues. These behaviours, such as their dress code, speech patterns, and mannerisms, serve as reflections of their respective communities. Through these manifestations, women establish and maintain a profound connection to the communal fabric in which they are deeply integrated, embodying the enduring essence of their communities. Bourdieu emphasizes that “the possibility of collective existence depends on both shared life chances and their symbolic representation” (Swartz, p.186). Furthermore, female members of each community possess preconceived notions or *schemas* regarding female members of “other” communities. These “schemas” are often reinforced and perpetuated during social gatherings or *sohbets*, further accentuating the distinction between each community while simultaneously (re)producing and consolidating “us” and the “other” perspective. This distinction is also extended to include secular and conservative women who are not affiliated with any community. For instance, in almost every interview, it has been observed that the interviewee (belonging to one of the communities studied in this research) often accuses other communities of imposing rigid but distinct dress codes and exerting peer pressure, which subsequently enforces an implicit normative expectation regarding the attire adopted by individuals in each community. This dynamic of "us" versus "them" is further reinforced by the pursuit of embodying the ideal female *kul* within a modern context, a pursuit largely shaped by the ideologies cherished by each group. Consequently, it can be argued that each community promotes an ideology grounded in the belief that their interpretation of the Qur'an and hadith represents the most accurate and valid perspective, rendering alternative interpretations and meanings void. This collective habitus, formed against the backdrop of “other” – including secular, conservative, and community women – is due to a collective socialization experienced by the members. Furthermore, the collective basis of habitus ensures that individuals in similar environments experience and share the same habitus. This is in fact more prominent in religious communities.

Moreover, examining power dynamics and the role of cultural capital provides insights into how individuals navigate their relationships with authority figures such as hoca, sheikh, book, and abla, as well as the division of labour between genders within these communities. It also sheds light on how individuals position themselves within these communities, influencing the development of their identities. Furthermore, individuals are subjected to power relations and forms of knowledge that shape their identities. The dissemination of "truth" within these groups establishes norms and procedures, creating a sanctioned discourse that validates specific behaviours. This phenomenon extends to religious communities as well. Therefore, this study not only highlights the intricate interplay between gender and these communities but also emphasizes the reciprocal influence between them. It is argued that the habitus becomes evident through the influence of activities such as sohbet and ders, which play a significant role in shaping one's sense of self and laying the groundwork for identity construction. These practices also contribute to the process of "cultural" reproduction within the community.

The utilization of habitus as a framework offers valuable insights into the intricate and multifaceted nature of identity formation. By examining how individuals within religious communities navigate, negotiate, and internalize social structures, cultural norms, and religious practices, this approach illuminates the complexities inherent in the process. With its emphasis on the internalized dispositions and socialization of individuals, habitus is closely intertwined with the notions of capital and field, which further illuminate the dynamics of power, resources, and social interactions within a given context.

Field and Capital

Bourdieu contends that society consists of many social spaces, or "fields" (e.g., fields of culture, art, religion, education), which he conceptualizes as a hierarchical and structured arena where individuals and groups engage in competition for resources such as wealth, prestige, and power (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 2014, p. 81). Within the field, struggles for dominance occur due to disparities in the distribution of power, leading to a constant pursuit of control over specific forms of capital (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 2014, p. 81). This struggle for capital within the field shapes its limitations, boundaries, and historical trajectory. Hierarchies exist in every field, as capital are not equally distributed, including symbolic forms of capital, which are unevenly shared among members (Swartz, 1996, p. 79).

Emirbayer and Johnson (2008) argue that the field can be viewed as an ongoing struggle for domination, with power relations constantly in flux (p. 6). Each field operates relatively autonomously and is organized around its specific form of capital, with either economic or cultural capital often being the most prominent. When considering religion within the

framework of the field, various perspectives emerge. One perspective views religion as a dominant institution, where power is concentrated in the hands of sanctioned individuals who have the authority to define roles and behaviours within the community (Diantielli, 2003). Another perspective emphasizes shared power between religious professionals and the laity (Dillon, 2001). A third perspective portrays the religious field as a marketplace, where different religiously oriented fields compete for the allegiance of the laity (Bourdieu, 1991; Emirbayer & Johnson, 2008; Verter, 2003).

Bourdieu's concept of the "field" encompasses a range of power dynamics that are encapsulated by the notion of "capital," which refers to the accumulation of resources in either materialized or embodied forms. Bourdieu (1997) identifies three fundamental forms of capital: symbolic, economic, social, and cultural, with several other forms such as religious and bureaucratic ones. These forms of capital become significant when they are desired or valued by individuals, leading to struggles for their acquisition. In this pursuit, individuals aim to secure finite resources that establish or reinforce their positions within the social order.

By acknowledging the existence of multiple forms of capital, Bourdieu challenges the primacy of economic capital as the sole determinant of social status. He highlights the contextual nature of capitals, recognizing that their significance can vary depending on the specific social environment. Additionally, Bourdieu emphasizes the interchangeability of capitals, as they can manifest in diverse ways within different fields of social activity. Resources transition into capital when they become objects of desire and subject to struggles for acquisition.

Bourdieu's conceptualization of capital allows for an analysis of the various hierarchies and power structures within social orders. By examining the accumulation and distribution of capital, we can gain insights into the structures of social hierarchies and how they are influenced by the dynamics of capital. Bourdieu asserts, "It is in fact impossible to account for the structure and functioning of the social world unless one reintroduces capital in all its forms and not solely in the one form recognized by economy" (p. 15). Thus, a focus on the different forms of capital enables us to explore how the accumulation and distribution of capital shape social hierarchies.

Cultural capital, "which is convertible, in certain conditions, into economic capital and may be institutionalized in the form of educational qualifications", includes tastes, manners, skills and credentials. This suggests that individuals who can accumulate cultural capital by virtue of their upbringing and environment have a greater likelihood of acquiring more esteemed skills and capabilities. These acquired attributes can subsequently be exchanged or

leveraged to secure higher economic positions, perpetuating social disparities and stratification based on the possession and utilization of cultural capital. Thus, cultural capital in some specific concrete situations may be of immense value to perpetuate social differences and hierarchies.

In addition, cultural capital has three distinct forms. Firstly, it exists in the embodied state, which refers to the internalization and incorporation of cultural norms, values, and practices within an individual's manners and body. "Most of the properties of cultural capital can be deduced from the fact that, in its fundamental state, it is linked to the body and presupposes embodiment". In other words, it refers to external wealth which becomes a crucial part of a person's habitus as it is deeply intertwined with the developmental process of the individual. This form of capital cannot be instantaneously transmitted such as money, titles, and rights since it is uniquely formed based on person's history and socialization.

Secondly, cultural capital can manifest in an objectified state, which encompasses tangible cultural goods that pertain cultural value and contribute to one's symbolic repertoire. Cultural capital in an objectified state can only be defined in relationship to embodied form, such as art, books, jewellery, diplomas, and other artifacts that bear symbolic meaning and relay status within a particular culture. Thus, objectified cultural capital serves as an emblematic representation of educational or professional achievements and is frequently linked to elevate social standing.

Thirdly, cultural capital, also assumes an institutionalized form that encompasses culturally specific qualifications, including titles and degrees (1986, p.47). These qualifications serve as markers of social recognition and privilege within society. The institutionalized state of cultural capital is established upon a framework of rules and regulations, which can grant individuals access to specific privileges and social networks. Institutionalized cultural capital assumes a distinct role in conferring a sense of respect and legitimacy upon individuals. University degrees, licenses, and other forms of recognition possess the capacity to bestow upon individuals a certain level of social standing that cannot be attained solely through objectified cultural capital. The exclusivity and privilege associated with institutionalized cultural capital stem from the fact that such credentials cannot be readily acquired or transferred. This form of cultural capital is characterized by its selective nature, granting individuals unique access to resources, opportunities, and social networks that contribute to their perceived status and recognition within society. Moreover, cultural capital serves as a foundation for the development of social capital, which involves the networks, relationships,

and social connections that individuals cultivate to enhance their social and economic opportunities.

Social capital indicates individuals' social position and status that enables person to exert power over the group or individual. It is the:

...aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition – or in other words, to membership in a group – which provides each of its members with the backing of the collectively owned capital, a “credential” which entitles them to credit, in the various sense of the word (Bourdieu 1986, p. 241–58).

The concept of social capital indicates that the networks and relationships are not necessarily coincidental but are formed through intentional and strategic investments by individuals or groups. These strategies formed through dispositions can be conscious or unconsciously aimed at forming social connections that provide either immediate or long-term benefits as well as recognition and status. Bourdieu emphasizes that these associations or meaningful connections need to be turned into durable ties through obligations – based on gratitude, respect, and friendship – or institutional guarantees. Therefore, social capital suggests cultivating chosen relationships that benefit individuals with access, resources, and opportunities within their social environment.

Economic capital (Bourdieu 1986, p.242) encompasses possessions with an immediate and direct potential to be converted into monetary value. These assets can be institutionalized in the form of property rights. They include various forms of financial resources and assets that hold economic value and have the capacity to generate wealth, income, or other monetary advantages. This capital plays a pivotal role in an individual's ability to accumulate wealth and seize economic opportunities. Moreover, it grants individuals' access to goods and resources that were previously unattainable, thus contributing to social differentiation and distinctions. Bourdieu further suggested that the acquisition of economic capital is facilitated by the possession of social and cultural capital, which can be utilized as leverage in economic endeavours.

Symbolic capital, on the other hand, pertains to the recognition of the value attributed to capital in social context. A “degree of accumulated prestige, celebrity or honour and is founded on a dialectic of knowledge (*connaissance*) and recognition (*reconnaissance*)” (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 7). In his work “*Distinction*” (1984), Bourdieu describes symbolic capital as: “the acquisition of a reputation for competence and an image of respectability and honourability...” (1984, p. 291). Furthermore, symbolic capital might be acquired with the help

of knowledge capital (cultural capital) by way of prestigious education. Thus, it could be argued that symbolic capital is the overarching and most coveted form of capital—it is a form of “metacapital” (Swartz, 2013, p. 112). In other words, this suggests that all other forms of capital can also function or feed into the volume of symbolic capital agent possess.

1.4.2. The Theory of Symbolic Interaction

Although the concept of habitus allows a framework for analysing the agent-structure dichotomy within social system, Symbolic Interactionism (SI) provides a micro perspective by focusing on the everyday interactions of individuals. SI studies how individuals use symbols to construct meaning in their daily interactions, and how societies are constructed and sustained through these recurring actions and interactions (Carter and Fuller, 2015). It is dynamic in nature, as participants constantly negotiate the meanings and definitions of their positions. This negotiation implies interpreting and evaluating behaviours to align with societal expectations.

Symbolic Interactionism incorporates both symbolic and interactional dimensions, which includes verbal and non-verbal communication. It posits that meanings are created and assigned via language and symbols, which allows individuals to make sense of their social environment. Rather than merely reacting to events, individuals actively interpret and assign meaning in an ongoing process. This constant negotiation and interpretation of meanings offers a deeper understanding of the complexities of social life, specifically how people navigate their social world and construct their realities. Since SI focuses on subjective viewpoints and meaning making through interaction, it offers valuable information regarding how individuals, such as disciples or members of religious communities, create meaning and identity through their social exchanges within their own settings.

Herbert Blumer outlines three key elements of the theory: individuals attribute meaning to things and engage with them based on these meanings, the meanings are shaped through interactions with others, and these meanings are interpreted within specific contexts (Blumer, 1969). He finalizes by stating that this is a dynamic process which ensures that these meanings are continuously shaped and reshaped through ongoing interactions and interpretations. Thus, Blumer argues that all studies of human behaviour should begin by examining how individuals interact with one another, rather than viewing the individual and society as entirely separate entities (Maltzer and Petras, 1970; Carter and Fuller 2015). Furthermore, the theory suggests that by observing others and empathizing with their experiences, individuals gain a better understanding of both themselves and others. Therefore, individuals continually shape and express themselves in response to the reactions and interpretations of others (Blumer, 1986). Based on this understanding, society is ever evolving; it's an on-going process of debating and

reinventing meaning through interaction. Actions can widely vary and mean something different from one interaction to another. Blumer also argues that every interaction an individual has with an object is prone to change depending on the situation and the interaction. Thus, members assign meaning to social interactions and continuously navigate the social order. In religious communities, feedback is continuous. In the İsmailağa community, for example, women have frequently noted that outsiders often comment on specific aspects of their appearance, such as wearing sheer socks or not covering their faces. Symbols, in this case clothing and appearance play a key role in social communication within the community.

The members of each community, guided by the shared meanings attributed to symbols within that community, act in accordance with these collective understandings in order to elicit favourable reactions from others. This dynamic reflects a deeper social contract, wherein individuals align their behaviours with the symbolic codes that are valued and recognized within their social group. For example, the *çarşaf* acquires specific connotations within certain communities. Rather than being perceived merely as a piece of clothing or a modesty garment, the *çarşaf* becomes imbued with symbolic significance, representing status, piety, and devotion to religious principles. In this context, the *çarşaf* serves not only as a marker of personal modesty but also as a visible symbol of adherence to community values, signalling the person's commitment to faith and moral integrity. Thus, the act of wearing the *çarşaf* is not solely an individual choice but a communal expression of identity, reinforcing the wearer's place within the social fabric of the group. The individual either consciously accepts or unconsciously forms a self-image based on society's perspectives and approval (Yeung & Martin, 2003). Charles H. Cooley (1902) highlights that this social mechanism leads to a kind of "selective reinforcement" that influences our "developing selves". He further explains the impact of social processes on these "developing selves" by stating:

In imagination we perceive in another's mind some thought of our appearance, manners, aims, deeds, characters, friends, and so on, and are variously affected by it seeing ourselves as we imagine others see us." ([1902] 1998).

The theory also suggests that personal identity and identity salience are also shaped and reshaped through these interactions. Therefore, Cooley, for example, asserts that an individual's self-awareness and sense of identity develop through interactions with others. His theory of the "looking-glass self" (1902) outlines this developmental process in three stages: 1) individuals perceive how others respond to them; 2) they interpret these responses; and 3) they form a sense of self based on these interpretations of others' reactions. Other people serve as a mirror or looking glass, allowing us to evaluate ourselves by reflecting on their perceptions or looking

in the mirror. Individuals can react to others' opinions about them and internalize these views and emotions. Therefore, self-concept is not built in isolation but rather through socialization. However, not all interactions carry the same weight, individuals may take those in authority or people they trust more seriously than others or strangers.

The process ultimately revolves around alignment, where individuals constantly try to either create or preserve their internal and external world in equilibrium. Thus, we can posit that members of the chosen communities shape their self-concept through interactions both with fellow community members and with individuals they identify as "others," including members of other religious communities or secular women. They interpret these interactions to understand how their behaviours and beliefs are perceived by their group. The symbols and practices within the religious community, such as specific clothing or rituals, play a central role in shaping this identity. For instance, women dress in certain ways in order for them to be perceived as modest, Mead for instance contends that individuals are part of a community before developing their own sense of individual consciousness (Joas, 1985). The degree of individual consciousness can influence how strongly a person identifies with their community.

Furthermore, self is closely associated with social interactions and the influence of others on our identity. In the context of religious communities, this framework of "us" and "others" is highly valuable in understanding how women in each community draw boundaries and position themselves in reference to other groups and how they in turn define and differentiate themselves against those groups. The collective identity formed in these groups are often done in reference to others. Such as the İsmailağa associating themselves as having the most authentic fiqh and the İskenderpaşa community associating itself as the most educated religious group amongst others. This is in reference to the field in which these religious communities operate. The competitive nature of the religious field is often reflected in the perspectives of the members of the community thus while describing themselves in reference to other communities they tend to include views that deems other communities as not as authentic as themselves.

Dramaturgical Analysis developed by Ervin Goffman on the other hand, argues that people's interactions show patterns of cultural "scripts" (1959). Thus, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* details the analysis of the processes and meanings in everyday interactions. His work explores individual identity and impact of the environment. He underscores that we occupy several different roles in any given day which can encompass student, daughter, mother, employee, etc. and one has to act according to that role and also improvise as the situation unfolds. Self-presentation motives involve attempting to achieve personal goals, portray a

consistent and positive image of ourselves to others, and adhere to social norms. Through this aim we perform much like an actor in a play where individuals (actors) perform and present themselves to others/audiences to create a particular impression. Goffman furthers the theatre analogy by establishing concepts such as front and backstage. He argues that the front stage is where the performances occur when we interact with others in public settings and perform according to societal expectations. And most backstage behaviours occur in a private environment, often at home, where no one is watching, and people can often act in socially unacceptable manners without worrying about impression management. “Here the performer can relax; he can drop his front, forgo speaking his lines, and step out of character” (Goffman, 1954, p.112). Thus, the front stage is where we perform for the public while the backstage indicates a more private and less controlled environment. The individual develops a persona through the interaction with others. Thus, identity is closely associated with the “front stage”. The interaction with others ensures the standardization of behaviour thus allowing others to understand the individual’s behaviour on the basis of normative meanings. Thus, Goffman argues that the props we use provide clues as to how we want people to perceive us. Appearance and attire can also act as props to indicate the values the communities adhere to. Specifically in the case of the İsmailağa community attires are associated with *taqwa*, such as wearing *çarşaf*, or wide clothes that does not show any silhouette is considered higher *taqwa* thus is associated with status.

For this research, symbolic interactionism (SI) will provide a framework for examining how individuals shape their identities through the feedback they receive from interacting with their community, as well as through comparisons with other religious women and, by extension, men. Both looking-glass self and Goffman’s theories are heavily used in this thesis. This approach examines the symbolic meanings associated with religious practices, roles, and symbols within the community, offering insights into how individuals interpret and internalize these social cues to shape and reinforce their self-concept in a religious context. Now, let us examine these communities in greater detail.

CHAPTER II
MODES OF SUBJECTION:
DISCURSIVE STRATEGIES AND TECHNIQUES IN FORMING AN IDEAL
COMMUNITY

The process of subjectivation, integral to the formation of individuals as subjects, encompasses the adoption of specific beliefs, ideals, and practices that adhere to the regulatory norms prevailing in their immediate milieu. In this sense, there is a close connection between ideals (or idealizations) and identity. Thus, a comprehensive understanding of the archetypal subject within religious communities necessitates a profound exploration of the communal structures to which these subjects conform since, it is within these communities that individuals acquire and embody specific practices, thereby actively participating in the construction of their subjectivity. Notably, Silverstein (2011) posits that these communal practices, such as gatherings like sohbet, play a pivotal role in nurturing an ethical self. The discourse used during these gatherings subtly enforces certain ideologies that constitute the way of thinking within the community. These communal practices perform a dual purpose within religious communities: they not only contribute to the formation of ideal subjects but also offer a blueprint for what constitutes as an ideal religious community. By engaging in the discourses, rituals, sohbet, and discussions, individuals internalize the communal ethos and strive to embody the ideals upheld by the community and become ethical subjects. In other words, the ideals of community (and its members) inform members' identities and their selves as subjects – of discipline, ethics, knowledge as well as of their bodies and experiences.

The comprehension of these idealized communities is imperative, given their significant impact on individuals. Members of these communities exhibit a commitment to preserving what they perceive as the authentic elements of an ideal community. This underscores the impact of shared beliefs, values, and cultural markers on shaping the dispositions and practices of community members. The conscious effort to align with perceived ideals highlights the dynamic relationship between individual agency and the constructed ideals within these communities. By examining what participants consider an ideal community and its practices, this study aims to uncover the relationship between discourse, practice, and modes of subjectivation, reflecting the environment that produced them. This analytical framework will elucidate the complex interplay between individual agency, communal structures, and the perpetuation of ethical and religious ideals.

2.1. Outline of the chapter: Reimagining the ideal community

As explained in the methodology section above, this thesis covers two overarching themes: community and gender formation; and four categories that correspond to each individual chapter: attributes of an ideal community, ideal women and ideal men. Identified through the content analysis of interview transcripts and the texts examined, these themes denote distinct areas of inquiry pursued within this dissertation based on the research questions that aim to understand women's self-perceptions vis-à-vis their communities, thereby elucidating their perceptions of the community itself. Codes in this instance act as building blocks of single concepts facilitating the systematic organization of data to extract pertinent information. Through hierarchical structuring, codes establish relationships between distinct elements. Additionally, they facilitate the identification of patterns and correlations, thereby yielding valuable insights. These codes of content analysis are further reinforced by discursive strategies and techniques consistent with discourse analysis. As previously mentioned, the research is conducted in this manner to underscore the notion that subjects or identities are produced within and through discourse and are socially and historically situated. Therefore, to explore what these women deem to be an ideal religious community, it is imperative to examine the techniques and strategies they employ to identify such community. These strategies will subsequently unveil a discourse on the ideal community, revealing the ways in which women's identity—comprising both their worldviews and their approaches to gender and community—is constructed within and reflective of the communities to which they belong.

The discursive strategies my interviewees used are listed in Tables 1, 2 and 3 in which they are arranged in the order of their frequency of occurrence during the interviews. This ranking reflects the sequence in which they were emphasized, with the most frequently mentioned strategies appearing first and those mentioned less frequently following thereafter. Discourse not only establishes its own parameters and subjects but also defines itself through its relationship with other discourses – a condition called “interdiscursivity” (Fairclough 1992). Thus, discursive practices are articulated either by referencing or contrasting with other discourses, a phenomenon observed in this research as well. Consequently, participants frequently highlighted positive aspects of their communities by pointing out deficiencies in other communities. With this in mind, the chapter was crafted in a comparative nature, intending to present the discursive strategies in relation to each other rather than adhering to a strict ranking based solely on frequency of mention. This relational approach enables a more nuanced analysis of the interactions between different strategies and their implications within the context of the study.

The strategies and techniques that contribute to the formation of an ideal community are reflective of the perceptions of the interviewees regarding what constitutes an ideal community. This thematic focus, and consequently the overarching chapter, emerged during the interviews when participants were asked to describe what they consider an ideal community. Responses frequently involved comparisons with their own community as the epitome of such an ideal or simply described their own community as the ideal. Therefore, the strategies and techniques identified for the discursive construction of an ideal community in this research are indicative of the communities to which the interviewees belong.

Considering that two of the communities under study are Sufi communities and one is a derivative or offshoot of Sufism, it is notable that the coding and strategies employed in the analysis often exhibit overlap. This overlap can be attributed to the shared heritage and ideological underpinnings of these communities, rooted in Sufi tradition. As a result, some of the discursive formations across these communities reflect common themes, practices, and values that maybe inherent to Sufism and its branches. However, it is observed that there are only a few overlapping categories, and the instances of overlap predominantly occur between the İskenderpaşa and Meşveret communities. This observation underscores the distinctiveness of the İsmailağa community, which appears to be relatively isolated in terms of discursive formations. Nevertheless, this interconnectedness underscores the complex interplay between the discursive strategies employed within these religious contexts, contributing to a nuanced understanding of the construction of ideal communities within the Sufi tradition and its variants.

Based on the comparative analysis conducted in this chapter, it was deemed more appropriate to divide the chapter into three main subheadings, each accompanied by smaller sections. Upon close examination of the data presented in the tables, it became evident that the composition of the communities could be categorized into three distinct groups: the foundation of the community, which encompasses the core essence of the community, including coding such as sharia and sunnah, progression, and the text (RNK); the mission of the community, whether it is tasawwuf or faith-oriented; and the structure of the community, which exhibited significant variation across each community.

Through the analysis of sohbet in the Meşveret and İsmailağa communities, combined with engagement with community members and semi-structured in-depth interviews, six different strategies were identified within the İsmailağa and İskenderpaşa communities, and seven strategies within the Meşveret community, each accompanied by multiple techniques. These discursive strategies and techniques reflect the inherent qualities attributed to an ideal

community, mirroring the pre-existing characteristics and values of the respective communities to which they belong. Thus, building upon the comparative analysis outlined previously, the subsequent section delves deeper into the essence of an ideal community, traversing the realms of tradition, modernity, and textual foundation. Below are the tables outlining the discourse analysis for each community in this chapter. The tables also provide an overview of the chapter's structure.

Table 1: Main themes, discursive strategies (S's) and techniques (T's) of the ideal community by *İsmailağa* disciples.

İSMAİLAĞA COMMUNITY		
THEME	DISCURSIVE STRATEGIES	DISCURSIVE TECHNIQUES
MEDRESE	S1: Affirming unyielding commitment to <i>medreses</i> as the bedrock of the community.	T1: Emphasizing the authenticity of education offered within the community when compared to both other communities and official schools. T2: Highlighting the importance of following the traditional curriculum set by the community for the <i>medreses</i> . T3: Disapproving other communities for their lack of emphasis placed on medrese education. T4: Claiming distinction based on authentic <i>fiqh</i> (<i>Islamic Jurisprudence</i>) education.
SHARIA AND SUNNAH	S2: Upholding an orthodox and traditionalist perspective.	T1: Highlighting the significance of appropriate attire. T2: Claiming distinction based on based on proper Islamic dress code. T3: Maintaining gender segregation (<i>Haremlik-Selamlık</i>) as mandated by the Sharia. T4: Criticizing other communities for their lack of gender segregation and their shortcomings in religious practice (<i>amelde eksiklik</i>). T5: Stressing the <i>sunnah</i> based details of everyday life.
TASAWWUF	S3: Positioning the <i>Tasawwuf</i> as the foundational pillar of the community.	T1: Highlighting the importance of tasawwuf for "taqwa" and spirituality (<i>maneviyat</i>). T2: Stressing the importance of Tasawwuf in Islamic education. T3: Establishing tasawwuf as the best means of self-care. T4: Distinguishing their community with reference to their sufi lineage.
HARD-HAT	S4: Praising the community for staying true to its roots.	T1: Expressing the persistence of the community's worldview. T2: Criticizing other communities for their concessions to modernity.
MISSION	S6: Claiming distinction based on missionary work.	T1: Highlighting the principle of commanding the right, forbidding the wrong

Table 2: Main themes, discursive strategies (S's) and techniques (T's) of the ideal community by *İskenderpaşa* disciples.

İSKENDERPAŞA COMMUNITY		
THEME	DISCURSIVE STRATEGIES	DISCURSIVE TECHNIQUES
ADAPTIBILITY	S1: Adaptability to contemporary life—"a hallmark of a true 21st century community."	T1: Utilizing technological tools to embrace contemporary methods of communication. T2: Pursuing dual forces of economic and political power. T3: Wrapping the modern organization with traditional guise.
EDUCATION	S2: Prioritizing modern education	T1: Identifying education as a compulsory requirement for a modern community. T2: Constructing a hierarchy amongst communities based on education.
CIVIC RESPONSIBILITY	S3: Emphasizing the dual nature of the modern community as both "tekke" and "waqf"	T1: Positioning Tasawwuf as the foundational pillar of the community. T2: Highlighting the community's integral role in fostering and supporting community-oriented projects and aid initiatives. T3: Deemphasizing traditional Sufi Practices.
HIERARCHY/ EGALITARIANISM	S4: Downplaying the significance of internal hierarchy within the community	T1: Promoting self-directed learning over passive adherence. T2: Criticizing the significance of hierarchical framework in other communities. T3: Rejecting the gender-based hierarchy.
TASAWWUF	S5: Positioning Tasawwuf as the foundational pillar of the community.	T1: Emphasizing the role of tasawwuf in shaping the spiritual dimensions of the community.
INCLUSIVENESS	S6: Promoting inclusiveness and openness as a fundamental principle.	T1: Advocating for non-uniformity concerning attire and religious behaviour. T2: Criticizing other communities for their inflexible attitudes.

Table 3: Main themes, discursive strategies (S's) and techniques (T's) of the ideal community by Meşveret members.

MEŞVERET COMMUNITY		
THEME	DISCURSIVE STRATEGIES	DISCURSIVE TECHNIQUES
TEXT (RNK²)	S1: Affirming unyielding commitment to text-centeredness as the bedrock of the community.	T1: Assuming RNK as the ultimate moral authority T2: Reading of RNK as a daily ritual T3: Incorporating RNK to their daily language in three ways -- intonation, terminology, and direct quotes.
HIERARCHY/ EGALITARIANISM	S2: Absence of hierarchy; presenting their community as a non-hierarchical structure	T1: Acknowledging RNK's Exemplary Role as an Educator Extraordinaire T2: Minimizing the Significance of Abilik/Ablalık Status T3: Downplaying the significance of hierarchical framework in other communities
TRUST BUILDING	S3: Prioritizing the absence of financial motives	T1: Positioning a lack of financial motives as the basis of communal trust and solidarity. T2: Distinguishing their community from others with reference to the financial burdens.

² Risale-i Nur Külliyyatı, the foundational text of the Nurcu communities in Turkey.

2.2. Unveiling the Essence of an Ideal Community: Tradition, Modernity, and Textual Foundation

Influenced by their historical roots, contemporary challenges, and guiding principles that are sometimes derived from textual foundations each community selected for this research presents a unique understanding of what constitutes as the core of an ideal community. Thus, this chapter delves into the essence of various communities by examining their distinct approaches. Whether they focus on preserving tradition while navigating the demands of modernity or embracing Sharia, the analysis aims to provide insight into the diverse pathways through which these communities strive to embody their ideals.

Characteristics of an ideal community vary depending on the specific community under consideration which can also be affected by whether the community ascertains its roots to a Sufi lineage. Thus, the interview questions were designed to include a series of inquiries aimed at uncovering the participants' conceptualization of an ideal community, that not only ensures the thriving of individuals as they deem suitable, but also the sustenance of authentic and genuine religious perspectives and, by extension, practices. Within this concept, it is crucial to emphasise that, in response to the interview question, "Considering today's conditions, how do you think the ideal community should be?" individuals within each community uniformly asserted that the ideal Muslim community is synonymous with the community to which they themselves belong. One such response can be seen as follows: "I think an ideal community is like ours. It follows the Sunnah, adheres to Sharia law, and lives Islam fully and genuinely" (Merve, 27).

This underscores that "what we take to be the truth about the world importantly depends on the social relationships of which we are a part" (Gregen, 2015). It is important to mention that this response ensured little to no self-criticism towards the respondents' affiliated community accentuating the subjective nature of perceptions regarding the ideal Muslim community, wherein individuals inherently associate the authenticity of their religious views and practices with their own communal affiliations. Thus, the strategies and techniques discussed in this chapter reflect bits and pieces of their view of what constitutes an ideal community. The findings show that the characteristics of an ideal community closely overlapped with the descriptions provided by members of their own community. Consequently, each community described their own community as the ideal, offering only minor suggestions for improvements that do not involve any significant structural or attitudinal changes regarding the community itself.

The objective of this chapter is to uncover the most crucial aspects of community in relation to contemporary conditions. This includes examining mixed-gender education, the financial aspects of the current system, and the comparison between Islamic education and conventional school education. As mentioned above, each community responded to the aforementioned question by emphasizing the distinct characteristics of their own community or what they perceived to be the primary aspects of an ideal community which are intertwined. Members of the İskenderpaşa community, for instance, prioritized the “progression” of the community in the contemporary world as paramount. In comparison, the İsmailağa community emphasized dedication to upholding “Sharia and Sunnah” alongside “hard-hat” ideology promoting preservation rather than change, ensuring the continuity of what they perceived as the authentic lifestyle of the *sahabah* (the companions of the prophet Muhammad) and later the Ottoman Empire. In comparison, the Meşveret community revealed their dedication to upholding the teachings of Said Nursi and the *Risale-i Nur Külliyyatı* (RNK) as the true essence of an ideal community. These three distinct and opposing views are further presented in each community's practical approach and its structure which will be examined in detail in the last section of this chapter. Both the İsmailağa and Meşveret communities possess relatively orthodox views compared to the İskenderpaşa community. However, the İsmailağa community, with its traditionalist approach, maintains the most stringent orthodox views among these communities.

İsmailağa: (S2) Upholding an orthodox and traditionalist perspective

In analysing the İsmailağa Community, one of the primary discursive strategies identified is the emphasis on (S2) “Upholding an orthodox and traditionalist perspective”, particularly in relation to the "Sharia and Sunnah" theme. As outlined in the methodology section of this research, coding involves identifying and marking specific themes, categories, or concepts in the data. This allows a systematic organization of the research by extracting relevant information from the data and in this case revealing complex relationships and formation in each community through identifying the patterns in the data. The coding mentioned here is generated from the interviews and my observation and interpretations, derived from the strategies and techniques as broader thematic title to reference the most mentioned topics throughout the research.

When participants from İsmailağa were asked to assess their community, a unanimous consensus emerged regarding their perceived advantage in belonging to their particular community, which they regarded as unique in upholding sharia and sunnah, a distinction they

believed was unparalleled by any other community. Consider, for example, the following quotes from members of İsmailağa:

We are a community that adheres to the creed of Ahl al-Sunnah. We base our principles on what Allah and His Messenger have said, and consequently, we practice by emulating the actions of the Prophet (peace be upon him) and by following his example. We strive to fulfil Allah's commands and avoid His prohibitions as He has decreed. (Merve, 27)

There is no other community like this. Of course, we have our faults, but you will not find another community as committed to Sharia and Sunnah as ours. (Hale, 33)

We are a community that adheres to the creed of Ahl al-Sunnah. We base our principles on what Allah and His Messenger have said, and consequently, we practice by emulating the actions of the Prophet (peace be upon him). By fulfilling Allah's commands and avoiding His prohibitions as He has decreed, we strive to live by Sharia in its fullest sense. That's what it is. (Kader, 41)

They often emphasized that the İsmailağa community is the “fortress of Sharia” (*Şeriatin kalesi*) indicating that it is the last remaining community that follows the true essence of Islam in all its details. Consequently, both individuals born into the community and those who have joined later argue that the İsmailağa community is unique in its uncompromising devotion to Islamic laws, particularly in areas such as gender segregation. For them, this strict adherence to Sharia and Sunnah stems from Mahmut Ustaosmanoğlu’s emphasis on maintaining these laws.

The majority of interviewees, particularly those who joined the community later in life, expressed a strong sense of having found the right path (*hidayete ermek*).³ The interviewees often referred to their initiation into the community as a mercy from God indicating that they have been chosen. This ideology is an important constituent of İsmailağa identity and a sense of uniqueness they emphasize regarding their insistence on strict following of sharia and sunnah has led to the feeling of superiority. Members often express that it is the community's

³"Hidayete ermek" is a Turkish phrase that translates to "attaining guidance" or "finding the right path." In an Islamic context, it refers to someone receiving divine guidance from Allah and being led to the path of righteousness, truth, and faith. The phrase is often used for those who have accepted the Islamic religion, but it can also signify a spiritual awakening or enlightenment where an individual recognizes and follows the principles of Islam more closely than before. In the context of the İsmailağa community, the phrase is often used to indicate the period of initiation for those who joined the community later in life.

unwavering commitment to Islamic laws that attracted them to it. In contrast, interviews with individuals who joined the İskenderpaşa community later in life consistently highlight the community's emphasis on education and rationality as significant factors, alongside spiritual influences, in their decision to join. On the other hand, members of the Meşveret community strongly suggested that it was the relevance of the texts to the conditions of today's Muslims that drew them to the community.

Although members of the communities selected for this research typically possess a sense of pride in their membership, the emphasis on this belief is especially pronounced within the İsmailağa community. The importance on adherence to Islamic principles but also the doctrines of the community is particularly evident in the discourses of sohbet. During these discussions, it is frequently asserted that those who forsake the community will likewise be forsaken by God.

Talebes (students, disciples) are often told, mostly through cautionary tales, that by even with a simple defiance of the principles they could face divine retribution. The stories are powerful tools in not only as a caution but can also provide aid in shaping both personal and communal identities. For instance, Boje (1991) describes storytelling as a collective system where the act of telling stories plays a crucial role in how members make sense of their experiences, supplementing individual memories with those of the institution. This concept suggests that identity can be understood through the narratives we create about ourselves and others. Giddens (1991) contends that self and reflexivity are interconnected, meaning identity is not just a collection of traits but the ability to construct an ongoing narrative of the self. Identity is shaped by the relationship between the individual and institutions, often reflecting routines and habits accumulated over time. Bourdieu refers to this as "habitus," while Foucault calls it "archive," a concealed discursive system.

Within communities, people tend to tell stories that portray them as valued members, highlighting the ideal characteristics of the community. But the İsmailağa community uses this strategy extensively to (re)establish status quo as it can act as to reflect and legitimize certain behaviours and attitudes while delegitimizing others. The sohbet often include stories of the prophet, companions, Naqsh-Khalidi sheikhs, stories regarding sheikh Mahmut Ustaosmanoğlu, self-stories and negative or exemplary stories. However, one can often hear the prominence of cautionary tales about members who have strayed off the path. One story that I have come across was about four Qur'an students (or hafiz or hafidh: a person who memorized the entire Qur'an) that had gone to the movies and woke up having forgotten all the pages that they had memorized. By providing stories about the prophets and the sheiks but

also including cautionary tales, they forge a sense of belonging to a wider culture of Muslim and Sufi tradition. They provide a continuation of the tradition and a shared heritage by acknowledging that the community strives to revitalize the traditions of the prophets, companions, and the sheikhs. Humphreys (2002) argues that focusing on nostalgia allows for a deeper understanding and acknowledgment of the temporal aspects of organizational identity (p. 143). Nostalgia, according to Humphreys, offers access to a collective heritage of identity-relevant beliefs and values, serves as emotional support during times of change, and contributes to the identification between individuals and groups (p. 156). These nostalgic narratives foster a sense of unity and provide role models for the community. These are shared frames of references that connect the separated historical community with each other. Through this nostalgia, the community connects past intentions with future destiny and legitimize their position and draw boundaries to maintain their identity.

There is frequent exposure to negative stories about the "outside" world, which fosters a sense of unity within the community and serves to delineate boundaries. A pronounced distinction between in-group and out-group is evident in the stories shared during various gatherings. Nearly all *sobhets* include a negative portrayal of non-members. The in-group refers to the community with which individuals strongly identify, while the out-group represents those with whom they do not identify. This distinction is crucial as groups establish their identity through unique speech styles, dress codes, rituals, and other practices that serve as boundary-making mechanisms. Members of the *İsmailağa* community strongly identify with their distinctive dress codes, rituals, and educational styles. The ideological basis for this distinction is rooted in the religious commitment to strict adherence to religious attitudes deemed essential for their faith. During *sobhets* and other gatherings, the *hoca* often provides examples of deviant individuals or out-group members. Interviewees cited examples of children who transferred from secular schools to *kurs*, noting that these transfer students lacked the morals instilled in those who had only received *kurs* education. Such distinctions are highlighted in *sobhets* and gatherings to emphasize the community's security in adhering to religious teachings and internalizing the correct religious views, which they believe the broader society lacks (Özyağlı, 2018). This allows the community to withstand the "disruptive" forces of modernity by upholding notions of self-identification which are rooted in their chosenness notion as the only community to uphold the Sharia.

The orthodox Islamic view of *İsmailağa* is based on the tradition of following the lifestyle of the prophet and his companions. The view that the "old lifestyle" was devoid of modernity and therefore sins is a great motivation to maintain the current lifestyles. This once

again draws back to the Ustaosmanoğlu's discourse in regards to praising the old lifestyle "Ben öyle bir şey istiyorum ki bin dört yüz yıl önceki gibi şariat istiyorum" (Ustaosmanoğlu, Sohbetler p. 329).

Transitioning from the orthodox and traditional perspective discussed earlier, it is imperative to delve into the accompanying techniques that bolster this approach. This strategy is further enhanced by several complementary techniques. These techniques include: (T1) highlighting the significance of appropriate attire; (T2) asserting distinction based on adherence to proper Islamic dress code; (T3) upholding gender segregation (*Haremlik-Selamlık*) as mandated by Sharia; (T4) criticizing other communities for their absence of gender segregation and perceived deficiencies in practice (*amelde eksiklik*); and (T5) emphasizing the adherence to sunnah-based details in everyday life. These techniques collectively contribute to the preservation and reinforcement of the orthodox and traditional values within the community, shaping its identity and interactions. In the subsequent sections, each technique will be examined in detail to elucidate its role in community dynamics and ideal community formation.

The predominant aspect frequently cited as integral to an ideal community, particularly from the orthodox traditional perspective advocated by İsmailağa, is the significance placed on appropriate attire. This primarily includes the utilization of "*çarşaf*," a full black veiled apparel, for women, and occasionally "*şalvar*" for men. This main distinction between İsmailağa and other religious communities, specifically those that belong to Naqshi sufi lineage, is the emphasis or even a requirement placed on men to keep their beards long, to wear *şalvar* (baggy pants) and turbans, and for women to wear *çarşaf* as stated by both the previous Sheikh Mahmut Ustaosmanoğlu as well as the current leaders in the community (Işık, 2020). The particular emphasis placed on the *çarşaf*, to the extent of exclusion on other forms of covering, originates from the narration attributed to Aisha, the wife of Prophet Muhammad, who stated, "When the verse about the jilbab was revealed, it was as if flocks of black crows had descended upon Medina." This hadith, along with the Quranic verse from Surah Al-Ahzab (33:59), "O Prophet! Say to your wives and your daughters and the women of the believers that they let down upon them their over-garments; this will be more proper, that they may be known, and thus they will not be given trouble; and Allah is Forgiving, Merciful," has been frequently cited in interviews when inquiring about the appropriate dress code for Muslim women. Additionally, the alterations made to the attire during the Ottoman period, that act as the norm today, serve as a source of pride for the community as the continuation of the past adding a nostalgic pride to it. In fact, any modification that could alter the form of the *çarşaf*, such as elongating the cuffs or introducing colour variations other than black, or enhancing its

aesthetics, is prohibited within the community. During winter, women are also encouraged to wear something inside the "*çarşaf*" rather than outside, so as not to conceal or alter it. This association stems first from Ustaosmanoğlu's emphasis on *çarşaf* not only as an ideal attire but the most authentic form of dress code for women.

You, by the grace of Allah, are wearing the *çarşaf*. Allah has bestowed upon you its value and pleasure. It is evident that those who wear the *çarşaf* are esteemed individuals from noble families. Where else can such a symbol be found?... If you repent and start wearing the *çarşaf*, Allah will forgive you for not knowing its importance and not wearing it until now. You will better understand the significance of the *çarşaf* in the afterlife when you receive great rewards. By wearing the *çarşaf*, you distinguish yourself from the entire world, proving your high value. We should be thankful for all that Allah has granted us, such as the *çarşaf*, robe, baggy trousers, and turban... By wearing the *çarşaf*, you are demonstrating great bravery and inspiring others to adopt this form of modesty. It is not an easy task that anyone can do, but Allah has granted it to you. Let us continue this until our death. These will bring honor to us. For those wearing pants, when they die, it will be said, 'Whose community were you a part of, and what is this state?' They will be reprimanded. The world is filled with ignorance. Allah has helped you, showering you with light. The stones thrown by people do not hit you. Allah favors you in this world and will favor you even more in the afterlife, rewarding you greatly (Ustaosmanoğlu, 2015, pp. 49-50).

In all interviews conducted within the İsmailağa community, participants uniformly asserted that the only proper and acceptable dress code for Muslim women, as an outer garment, is the *çarşaf*. When asked, "How do you think a Muslim woman should dress?" all respondents unequivocally stated that any attire other than the *çarşaf* is not Islamic and considered it a religious obligation (*fardh*). This consensus within the İsmailağa community highlights their stringent adherence to traditional dress codes as an essential aspect of their religious identity, labeling it as crucial in an ideal community. The *çarşaf* is seen as an obligatory expression of Islamic modesty. The insistence on the *çarşaf* underscores the community's commitment to maintaining what they perceive as the authentic practice of Islam, reflecting their broader emphasis on preserving traditional values and customs in the face of modern societal changes.

Merve (27) emphasized this point by stating:

It is already clear as an Islamic rule that one should dress in a way that does not reveal the body contours, with loose-fitting clothing. Of course, this is definitely the *çarşaf*,

and this is also made clear in the verse. Wearing the *çarşaf* is the most appropriate. The highest level is the *çarşaf* anyway.

Yani nasıl diyeyim. Çarşaftan bahsediyor ayette zaten. En ideali, en güzeli o. Bizim cemaatimizin en çok önem verdiği. (Yeliz, 34)

This dedication to keeping its originality also stems from *çarşaf*'s association with *taqwa* (piety, modesty, and the fear of God). Although *taqwa* entails both internal and external compliance with God's mandates. However, the İsmailağa community frequently emphasizes external depictions of *taqwa* associated with modest attire due to visibility and measurability. This emphasis is particularly pronounced for women, whose level of *taqwa* is often assessed based on their modest dress and behaviour as mentioned above. Women in the community identify various forms of modest attire that reflect both their individual identity and the collective identity of the community. The focus on modesty and "tessettür" (covering) serves as a measure of *taqwa*, which in turn underpins the hierarchical structure within the community.

To understand the community's daily practices concerning clothing and appearance, Symbolic Interactionism, particularly Goffman's dramaturgical framework, is insightful. Goffman uses theatrical metaphors such as stage (front/back stage), actor, performance, character, prop, and masks to analyze micro-level social interactions. He argues that the front stage encompasses aspects like "clothing; sex, age, and racial characteristics; size and looks; posture; speech patterns; facial expressions; bodily gestures; and the like" (p. 24). Thus, an actor is judged based on both appearance and manner. One of Goffman's insightful concepts, which has been discussed in chapter 1, is impression management, whereby individuals try to maintain control over their image in the eyes of the others with whom they are interacting. The sufi dress code also functions, among others, to manage the impressions given by the members in their social interactions.

In this context, the width of the hijab, the modest outfits, and additional coverings such as the second hijab, thick socks, and wide dresses, are all significant markers of status within the community. These items are not merely practical garments but symbolize a deeper adherence to modesty and *taqwa*. This is exemplified by statements from community members expressing a desire for their daughters to embody these values by wearing a *çarşaf* since it protects from transgressions. This emphasis on modesty is not only a reflection of individual piety but also serves to reinforce the hierarchical structure of the community, where adherence to these sartorial norms is a visible indicator of one's spiritual status and commitment to the community's values.

The persistent emphasis in sohbet on condemning other dresses that are not "*çarşaf*" underscores the *çarşaf's* close association with taqwa and its evolution into a component of women's identity, which will be explored further in the subsequent chapter. As a crucial tool of impression management, this garment has also become a symbol of the community itself, representing a distinctive behavioural pattern and norm unique to İsmailağa. Thus, Reyhan (50) argues that the *çarşaf* is the only proper outer garment that has been consistently worn since the time of Prophet Mohammed and suggests that İsmailağa is the only community that emphasizes the proper dress code.

Let's take the issue of modesty in religious communities, for example. While everyone agrees on wearing a large headscarf, a black headscarf, or a ferace (a loose outer garment), Eefendi Hazretleri (Mahmut Ustaosmanoğlu) never accepted these as true forms of modesty. He would say that while they are covered, they do not represent the modesty described in the Quranic verses. He would argue that true modesty is not what is being practiced. The only form of covering described in the verse is the *çarşaf*, he would say. Of course, it varies depending on the region, country, and climate. I'm speaking in terms of form, but Eefendi Hazretleri would explain it as a general principle. When the verse about the *çarşaf* was revealed, it was as if Mecca had been overrun by black crows. This cannot change, it has always been the same. However, İskenderpaşa does not follow it in that way. For example, in İskenderpaşa, it is not absolutely necessary to wear the *çarşaf*. Or take my father's community as an example. The Erenköy community, for instance, has a different approach to the separation of men and women (the haremlık selamlık concept). For us, it is very strict, but for them, there is no such thing. When I say there is no such thing, I mean they don't have such strict practices in their daily lives, not in terms of belief, but in practical matters, they are not as rigid.

As the quoted discourse particle indicates, the İsmailağa members perceive the *çarşaf* as the distinguishing (and superior) quality of their own community from others. In fact, it is the first thing that they suggest when it comes to their distinctiveness – hence a critical marker of their (female) identity. As is well known in sociology, norms and symbols signify different aspects of group identity, facilitating the preservation and differentiation of the group. Clothing, dialects, and other factors enable the establishment to form boundaries that separate or highlight a particular group. For the İsmailağa community, *çarşaf* and other appropriate attire

serve as symbols of group identity. By ensuring dedication to the authentic form of modesty, the community prides itself on upholding genuine views and distinguishes itself from other communities as adhering to the true interpretation. As Paden (2009, p.37) suggests, religious groups have several “markers” and “stereotypical signatures” they use to define themselves. Although these maybe non-discursive markers of identity, they certainly have meaning for the groups in which they are viewed or practiced. The symbolic attachments to clothing as well as others “sacred objects” have also added on to the symbolic identification of the collective. The İsmailağa Mosque, for instance, where the Mahmut Ustaosmanoğlu served as an imam for 42 years and where the conception of the community began also carries great significance for the community. However, it is clothing (both men’s and women’s) that carries out most significance within the community.⁴

This quote, along with the interviews, indicates the persistent ideology that anything other than the "*çarşaf*" should not be worn. Although Mahmut Ustaosmanoğlu emphasized devotion to *şalvar*, *sarık*, and *cübbe* as well, it is not as greatly emphasized as *çarşaf* in the current environment. But it still emphasized in the community and most men opt in favour of wearing it. This emphasis once again begun with Ustaosmanoğlu.

The jubba, shalwar, and turbans we men wear are in the form of [dressing of] Rasulullah (Sallallahu Aleyhi ve Sellem). Would one leave his form and adopt that of foreigners? You wear tight trousers; don't you feel ashamed? Women are also curious about [wearing] trousers. They wear trousers and walk around with high-heeled shoes, making 'shak-shuk' [tapping] sounds. It's a pity. God has honoured you, why do you trample on it? If you preserve your honour, God will preserve you, and He will not waste your goodness. (Ustaosmanoğlu, 2015, p. 104)

The male members of the community are expected to remain modest by wearing baggy clothing and lowering their gaze. However, given their role as primary breadwinners, men are often encouraged to engage in employment outside the community, exposing them to secular and contemporary societal norms. As they are required to dress according to such environments, opting out of wearing *şalvar*, *cübbe*, and *sarık* is not considered a transgression for men, unlike for women. When asked whether it was equally crucial for men to wear *şalvar*, *sarık*, and *cübbe* as it is for women to wear *çarşaf*, the interviewees argued that since men are

⁴ The male members of the İsmailağa community also have a distinct dress code, where it is almost compulsory to wear traditional-style *cübbe* and *sarık* (head gear), which is supposedly inherited from early Islam as well.

required to serve as the breadwinners, they must adhere to workplace dress codes even if it means not wearing traditional attire. In contrast, women are not obliged to work and are often encouraged to remain at home or limit their excursions outside the community by venturing out only for essential tasks such as visiting family, hospital visits, and grocery shopping, hence the expectation for them to wear *çarşaf*.

There is a pronounced emphasis on wearing appropriate attire both indoors and outdoors for women. The community perceives any attire that deviates from loose-fitting dresses (robalı elbise) as "kafir giysisi", indicating signs of disbelief. These include jeans, shorts, t-shirts, and even for a while underwear. This emphasis remains prevalent in medreses. Interviews also recount instances of inspections by the *hocas* to ensure compliance with clothing standards. The insistence on adhering solely to community-approved garments stem from two considerations: firstly, the belief that wearing such clothing can lead to engaging in other prohibited actions, known as "kafire meyletmek", which may result in spiritual darkness and a reluctance to perform righteous deeds. Secondly, dressing in loose-fitting dresses and abstaining from wearing thin, see-through socks, heels, etc., is regarded as a manifestation of *taqwa* (piety).

This emphasis placed on appropriate and authentic clothing attire is closely related to upkeeping the *sharia* and the *sunnah*, stems from Mahmut Ustaosmanoğlu's attitude towards maintaining the most original and authentic form of Islam practiced during the life of the prophet and later by his companions. In fact, the overwhelming discourse on sharia outweighs all other aspects in his *sohbets*. "Temel öğreti şeriatı muhafaza etmek, Sünnet-i Seniyye'ye uymak küfür aletmelerinden kaçınmak" (Ustaosmanoğlu, -Hitmekli Sözler) p.334). According to Öğüt (2023), the İsmailağa community operates under the premise that the existence and vitality of Islam are directly tied to the implementation of Sharia. Consequently, any alterations to the rules are perceived as blasphemous and signify a departure from the "true path." While the implementation of Sharia is notably associated with practices such as dhikr and rabıta, as mentioned by Öğüt, adherence to authentic attire—particularly the *çarşaf* mentioned earlier—and visibly enforced gender segregation (*haremlık-selamlık*) are also deemed essential for upholding the fundamentals of sharia.

In this context, one of the most-frequently mentioned topics during *sohbets* is refraining from bride's interaction with her brother-in-law and vice versa. Ustaosmanoğlu's emphasis on gender segregation starts at home as his pronouncements, articulated by him, "The man who marries shall not show his wife to his own brother. Likewise, he shall not show his brother to his wife. In this matter, they should not be offended by each other," are frequently echoed and

reiterated in today's *sohbets*. This is also extended to refraining from hearing or talking to others that are not either related by blood or same gender - *namahrem*⁵. This sentiment is further emphasized in Ustaosmanoğlu's quote: "If I could, I would have tunnels dug underground and make women pass through them so that they wouldn't be seen by men)", which was echoed by the majority of the interviews (pg. 307-308). This segregation is enforced from a very young age, in fact, my interviews reveal that the separation starts as young as five years of age.

This segregation can further be viewed in public spaces as well. In the community, there exists a symbolic delineation of space predicated on gender. Women are granted autonomy within their designated sphere, impervious to external interference, whereas men occupy a higher social standing as the authoritative decision-makers within the community. The stringent regulations governing gender segregation within the community leave minimal opportunity for dialogue between men and women. Thus, despite sharing physical proximity, their social spheres remain distinct. This symbolic boundary is widely acknowledged within the İsmailağa community, shaping women's perceptions of acceptable conduct by reinforcing both the gender roles they embody and the community's corresponding valuation thereof.

In the İsmailağa community, gender segregation is systematically upheld through separate educational systems for boys and girls, beginning as early as the age of five. The gender-specific nature of the Medrese education ensures that despite men and women occupying the same physical space, they are rarely required to interact socially. In fact, a stroll through the narrow streets of Çarşamba, reveals a noticeable tendency among individuals to actively avoid encountering members of the opposite gender. The perceived boundaries are evident throughout the community. Moreover, there is still an ongoing lively discussion on the permissibility of women's voice to be heard by the opposite gender (those that are not related by blood or marriage). This perspective is deeply rooted and frequently emphasized through *sohbets* by drawing upon hadith and the Quranic verses (Nur 30-31; Ahzab 32-33; Ahzab 53) to advocate for women to refrain from interacting with opposite gender. The most referenced source on this issue is Muhammad Ali al-Sabuni's Qur'an commentary, wherein he not only argues for women's voices to be considered private (*avret*) but also suggests that even the sound of their heels could fall into the same category, as they may provoke temptation in men (pg. 178-180). Consequently, even routine activities such as shopping, including the purchase of

⁵ "Namahrem" is a Turkish word that refers to individuals who are not considered as part of one's close or trusted circle, typically pertaining to members of the opposite gender who are not related by blood or marriage. In Islamic context, it often denotes individuals who are not part of one's family or immediate social circle and with whom certain degrees of modesty and separation are observed. The term is used to establish boundaries and maintain propriety in social interactions, particularly between men and women who are not closely related.

essential items like textbooks, entail minimal interaction between men and women and women are often dissuaded from engaging in shopping activities altogether due to the inevitable need to communicate with unrelated men.

Consequently, the executive leadership of the community comprises exclusively of male members, with female members generally expected to support and execute their decisions. Instances of concern or issues arising within the female community are typically conveyed to the executive committee through the wives. The İsmailağa community prides itself on its ability to maintain such distinct gender boundaries, asserting that other communities have faltered in upholding Sharia in this regard.

The community not only prides itself in keeping with what they deem to be proper understanding of the sharia they also distinguish and identify themselves by criticizing other communities for their lack in appropriate dress code and their approach to gender segregation. For instance, members frequently emphasize that other communities often engage in conversations with the opposite gender.

So, for example, men and women sit together, which is very wrong. In our community, men do not know women, and women do not know men. That's how it should be. So, men and women should not mix. He says (Mahmut Ustaosmanoğlu), "I looked at four books, and I couldn't find a single book that approves of this. (Nurcan, 51)

These “shortcomings in practice” (amelde eksiklik) in other communities according to İsmailağa is due to their accession to modernity and thus compromises made towards İslamic jurisprudence. This results in the view their community as the most authentic and pure form of Islam that was observed by the *sahabah* and later the Ottoman empire.

These shortcomings in practice also precipitates calamities perceived as manifestations of divine retribution within the community. For instance, a citation from page 189 posits: "If you hear that Mahmut is ill, it's because a woman took off her veil", underscoring the notion that any deviation from strict adherence may invoke divine punishment. Additionally, a frequently cited reference is drawn from a comparison between Bosnia and Turkey: “If the Bosnians were as interested in the Quran and their wives wore veils like yours, they wouldn't be in this situation. Praise doesn't go to the face, but you are the fortresses of Turkey”⁶, as documented on page 269. During engagements with the community in the aftermath of the

⁶ Note that these words were uttered during a sohbet around the time of the Bosnian genocide in 1993, when tens of thousands of Bosnian muslims were slaughtered by Serbian and Croatian nationalists.

February 6 earthquakes, several members expressed the belief that Turkey's recent adversities stem from escalating transgressions within the nation. This view is further reinforced within the community, emphasizing that the decline of the Ottoman Empire was attributed to its concessions to modernity, which resulted in a departure from Sharia law. Therefore, by emphasizing their adherence to Sharia and Sunnah, the community considers itself to be the authentic representation of Islam and criticizes others for deviating from these principles in practice.

Finally, the community prides itself on distinguishing from other communities by placing emphasis on upholding the sunnah (Sünnet-i Seniyye'ye ittiba). While the sunnah is predominantly represented through the emphasis on clothing within the community, it is also evident in the everyday lives of the members. During interviews, members suggested that by following the sunnah, they primarily aim to incorporate rituals into their daily lives, such as saying "bismillah" before starting a meal, beginning a meal with salt, and concluding with a meal prayer. I would argue that based on the emphasis placed on these rituals; sunnah in this context can even be viewed as an extension of sharia. This is particularly apparent in their approach to matters that are not directly derived from the sunnah, such as performing supererogatory prayers, such as tahajjud (midnight prayer), kuşluk (mid-morning prayer), evvabin (prayer performed after the evening prayer or at dawn), and other prayers, along with engaging in dhikr (remembrance of God), are significant aspects of religious practice within the community. For instance, while tahajjud prayer traditionally allows for flexibility in timing, with the option to perform it after sleeping for a while between the night prayer and dawn prayer, the community has established a specific time frame, limiting tahajjud prayer to 3 a.m. Similarly, kuşluk prayer is restricted to noon (12 p.m.) within the community's practice.

Our community pays great attention to the Sunnah practices and always tries to implement them. For example, we make an effort not to miss the Tahajjud prayer and the Duha prayer. Additionally, we are very diligent about fasting on Mondays and Thursdays. Our clothing also reflects this commitment. (Sevda, 30)

Furthermore, there is an emphasis placed on the sunnah potentially becoming *Fard* (an obligatory religious duty) through consistent repetition, highlighting the evolving nature of religious practice and interpretation within the community. Additionally, many more practices can be added to this list, including wearing white socks and a white hijab, keeping the beard long for men, fasting on Mondays and Thursdays, and praying a certain number of rakat on

special days such as Laylat al-Mi'raj and Laylat al-Bara'at. The majority of interviewees mentioned that they strive to observe as many sunnah practices as possible. Several individuals noted that while they were expected to adhere to most of these practices in medreses, they now prioritize observing as many as they can manage after leaving. For instance, a married member of the community mentions that although they do a lot of the *sunnahs* in *medreses*, once they graduate and take on other responsibilities, they often neglect certain areas.

When we are at the course, we do all of these, for example, we perform all the voluntary prayers. We teach the children about things like the Night of Qadr and try to make them practice it. Of course, once we become mothers and leave the course, responsibilities increase, but we still try to pay attention to voluntary fasting, for instance. (Yeşim, 37)

This dedication placed on sunnah has become a standard measurement for the community in accepting both internal and external sources and acting as *Ehli Sünnet Müdafisi* (Defender of the Sunnah). For instance, community leaders emphasize adherence to sunnah and sharia when engaging with outside sources, employing two distinct approaches. Firstly, the community accords significance only to the opinions of those who adhere strictly to the sunnah. They, for instance, seek guidance from "ehli sünnet hocalar" (scholars of the Sunnah) and read "ehli sünnet kitaplar" (books of the Sunnah). It is noteworthy that these books and individuals primarily comprise members of the community, with only a handful of external sources. Importantly, individuals who violate these codes of conduct or the sunnah within the community are marginalized, as highlighted by community leaders. This tradition, which has persisted since the community's inception, involves publicly mentioning the names of those deemed objectionable in *sohbets*, subsequently disseminated throughout the community via word of mouth. Thus, the community heavily relies on sources produced within its own ranks and seldom engages with material from outside its boundaries.

Additionally, a newly accepted tradition by the community leaders is the practice of refutation (*reddiye*) directed towards external sources in fight against the rise of non-ehli sünnet actors. While refutation has traditionally been directed primarily at community members, it has now extended to encompass external sources as well, particularly following the influence of Ahmet Mahmut Ünlü, commonly known as "Cübbeli Ahmet Hoca." Ünlü emphasizes the importance of warning people about the dangers posed by those who do not adhere to the path of the Sunnah:

Today, what did this man speak about? Did he speak in accordance with the Sunnah, or did he speak outside of the Sunnah? Did he speak in accordance with Islam, or did he deviate from Islam? I must inform you of these matters.

This emphasis on raising awareness regarding individuals who are not "ehli sünnet" (followers of the Sunnah) is rooted in the community's endeavour to combat and mitigate misinformation. Fighting against the perceived threat of the proliferation of Sunnah-denial, manifested in the rise of Shia, Wahhabi, and Salafi beliefs, is considered the primary mission of the community. In keeping with this tradition, the community have now deemed Yaşar Nuri Öztürk, Caner Taslaman, Mustafa Öztürk, Mustafa İslamoğlu, Numan Ali Khan, Hayrettin Karaman as "non-ehli sünnet" actors.

The İsmailağa community places significant emphasis on adhering to the Sunnah, which serves as a multifaceted tool for the community. It functions not only to restrict exposure to external influences but also offers an alternative narrative to modernity while exerting a form of control over its members. By prioritizing internal sources and fostering an environment of mistrust, wherein any "transgression" from the established norms is portrayed as a potential path to deviation, the community effectively maintains control over the flow of information ensures the members' loyalty. Consequently, there is a strong discouragement within the community against engaging with sources that may challenge the prevailing beliefs, as such encounters are perceived to sow doubt and scepticism, a phenomenon labelled as the "darkening of the heart." Members argue that exposure to non-ehli sünnet sources can diminish divine inspiration (feyz), resulting in a weakening of faith and devotion. Furthermore, discussions within the community highlight the vulnerability of the human heart, suggesting that these external sources can subtly influence individuals without their conscious awareness.

The leaders of the İsmailağa community, through the imposition of taboos associated with non-ehli sünnet, re/produce religious discourse and thereby consolidate power and reinforce community norms. These taboos in this case towards non-ehli sünnet encompass certain topics and individuals deemed inappropriate or forbidden; and therefore, serve as mechanisms to regulate acceptable discourse, effectively delineating the boundaries of community values and norms. This control system shapes individual and group identity by establishing enduring rules and norms that govern discourse. The imposition of exclusive knowledge, or a monopoly of knowledge, by authority figures or groups (e.g. İsmailağa Vakfi) within the community further solidifies their power to dictate what is considered valid or acceptable within religious discourse. This form of power enables them to shape and control

the narrative within the community, shaping communal identity and beliefs. Thus, the community manages to establish the acceptable boundaries of discourse, through marginalizing perspectives and experiences deemed outside the realm of authentic and pure Islam. These restrictions, enforced by community leaders, illuminate power dynamics within the community, drawing parallels to the distinction between reason and madness.

The impact of modernization has unquestionably influenced traditional perspectives on the order, albeit often without overt acknowledgment. Practices that were once frowned upon, such as women wearing heels, oversized watches, attending gyms, and driving, have become increasingly common. Additionally, interviewed members revealed that they engage with various forms of social media, predominantly Instagram, although they refrain from posting images of their faces online. Furthermore, in the aftermath of the pandemic, women have initiated online sohbet, signifying a significant departure from established community norms. Notably, these sohbet are accessible to anyone, a departure from the previous exclusivity, although listeners are consistently cautioned about the importance of ensuring privacy, as the hocas (religious leaders) prefer that men do not partake in these discussions. The emphasis placed by the İsmailağa community on devotion to Sunnah and Sharia practices, coupled with their commitment to preserving their traditional beliefs in the face of a rapidly changing modern world, presents a marked contrast to the İskenderpaşa community.

İskenderpaşa: (S1) Adaptability to contemporary life—"a hallmark of a true 21st century community"

The İskenderpaşa community takes pride in its progressive nature, which enables Muslims to confront the new modern challenges of contemporary society. Among the communities studied within this research, the İskenderpaşa community asserts that it has successfully integrated traditional practices with modern values. It takes pride in its progressive nature, considering this attribute as a hallmark of a truly 21st-century community.

Under the “progressive” theme (S1) Adaptability to contemporary life—"a hallmark of a true 21st century community” strategy revealed the following techniques which will further be discussed in this chapter: (T1) Utilizing technological tools to embrace contemporary methods of communication; (T2) Pursuing dual forces of economic and political power; and (T3) Wrapping the modern organization with traditional guise. Additionally, it is important to note the significance of education within the İskenderpaşa community. In fact, this community boasts the highest number of undergraduate and postgraduate women among the communities mentioned in this research. While prioritizing modern education strategy under the education coding will be further examined in the final section of this chapter, the first technique of this

strategy – Identifying education as a compulsory requirement for a modern community – is briefly addressed here due to its prominence within the community.

When posed with the question regarding the characteristics of an ideal community, responses were nearly unanimous in emphasizing the importance of keeping pace with the modern world. The İskenderpaşa community, in particular, takes pride in its commitment to a progressive vision, demonstrated through its embrace of advancements introduced by the contemporary era. For instance, Fahriye (37) suggest that: “The ideal community. I mean, there needs to be technological advancements because the world is now progressing based on this system. It needs to be innovative and forward-thinking. We cannot be left behind. We need to constantly improve ourselves.” The community perceives mass communication tools, economic and political influence, and the transformation of the community into a hybrid entity combining elements of both non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and traditional tekkes as integral to aligning with the modern world. In addition to this, there is a strong emphasis placed on education as a pathway to progression.

Although the İsmailağa community has been adamant about not using any media or communication tools and has only recently begun to have a social media presence albeit very minimal, İskenderpaşa has long supported utilizing tools that would enable their message to be carried out. They even launched their private radio channel as early as 1992 and have since embraced other forms of media and communication tools. The radio station has allowed the community to increase in its followers by providing everyday content and sohbetes of the sheik. The interviews remained consistent in mentioning that the ideal community must adapt to the modern world by utilizing technological tools and embracing contemporary methods of communication. This notion to modernize the community stems from the ideology propagated by the sheikh and reflects the educational background of the community. Throughout his life, Esad Coşan consistently advocated for scientific and technological advancements, while also encouraging members to pursue lifelong education. Therefore, the community embraces and promotes continuous progression through a synthesis of Western technological advancements with Islamic morals as proposed by Esad Coşan.

In our era, the world is undergoing rapid change and progress. As Muslims, we must keep up with these developments and take necessary measures to adapt to new advancements. It is imperative for us to live with honour and to ascend. However, many individuals are not at this level. Not only our people, but also those who are responsible for educating and guiding them, are in need of assistance and support in this regard. Because this task requires qualified personnel, resources, financial strength, good

transportation, modern materials, and ample time. Our publication aims to undertake these challenges; to follow innovations and developments in the world on behalf of the readers and to inform them. Therefore, its content, God willing, will always be serious, scholarly, labour-intensive, original, and fulfilling. (Mahmud Esad Coşan, 1983)

The Islamic communities in Turkey mostly regard the technological advancement specifically in media as a means for liberal and secular ideologies to spread. The iskenderpaşa community, on the other hand, adapts the view that it is a means to provide a message to the ever-growing members of the community. In the same text he reveals that reason for the publication of journals is this very reason.

The education of Muslims is, in our opinion, the most crucial issue. We have observed that the various activities we have conducted in this field so far, such as lessons, sermons, discussions, conferences, seminars, courses, etc., are not sufficient; they do not fully meet the desires and needs; we cannot reach and reach every place we desire, every community that invites us. We have decided to publish our journal to achieve this.

The community has been among the first to embrace the digital sphere (Efe, 2013, p. 174). It boasts numerous websites dedicated to broadcasting Naqshi culture, rituals, discussions (sohbets), and conferences of earlier sheikhs. Modernization theories seek to elucidate the modernization process through reference to the onset of structural differentiation driven by changes in technology and values. In this context, the community's willingness to adopt technological tools and prioritize education has played a role in shaping them into a more modernized society. Interviews conducted with the community members have revealed an emphasis on the importance of adapting to the changing global landscape rather than holding onto outdated traditions. For instance, members take pride in establishing the first radio station dedicated to the community. Ayla (45) emphasizes this point by stating: "I believe the ideal community should be open to technology. For example, it was our community that first broadcasted sohbet on the radio. Because everything is evolving, and we must adapt to it as well." This perspective acknowledges that the challenges faced by modern Muslims today are significantly different from those encountered by earlier generations. Interestingly, the İsmailağa community takes a contrasting view, emphasizing the preservation of their traditional way of life. This divergence in approaches underscores the ongoing debate within Muslim communities about how best to navigate the complexities of modernity while staying true to their cultural and religious heritage.

In addition to the aforementioned technological adaptation to align with the demands of the 21st century, there is also a significant dependence on economic and political influence to sustain a modern Islamic society. When posed with the question "Do you believe it is right to serve Islam through politics?" the majority of the interviewees expressed agreement with the idea of members and the community engaging in politics for various reasons. The community presently hosts a political party founded by (the community's current sheikh) Muharrem Nureddin Coşan. Established in 2002, the Sağduyu (Righteousness) Party currently lacks official members and abstains from participating in elections. Its only notable political presence was during the March 1st, 2003, memorandum regarding the resolution of U.S. use of Turkish soil for its war against Saddam Hussein in Iraq, which the party strongly opposed. Nureddin Coşan also made a statement regarding the Presidential System referendum on April 16, 2017, which has brought the current governmental structure under Tayyip Erdoğan's leadership, expressing his support for it and signing his name as the leader of the party. It is noteworthy that while the party remains inactive, abstaining from declaring any stance on political matters, sheikh Nureddin Coşan is acknowledged as the founder of the party during his occasional Eid speeches throughout the year. Therefore, when asked about the reason for the party's formation, the majority of the interviewees stated that the community sought to establish a sense of security and prestige through the party. The party aimed to provide a secure platform for the community to engage in political and legal battles if there were to be another ban on the public display of religious symbols, similar to the one imposed previously with the February 28 coup d'état in 1998.

Now, it's less about the community and more about the political party. The message is being conveyed through the party. The structure has actually shifted more toward politics, since the party was just recently established. It was founded while I was studying for my degree. There was something related to Güteryüz. It was founded very long ago, around 15-16 years ago. It seemed like certain things were being anticipated. The community could no longer speak out as a religious group or engage in religious discourse. To provide assurance, a party was established, and now the leader speaks to his community through this party. The speech on the radio even includes, "Our president of the Common Sense Party." In this environment, that's actually necessary. When you say, "I'm from this community," people tend to be more hesitant. But now, when you approach people this way, you can explain things more comfortably. (Ayla, 45)

Moreover, it serves as a source of prestige for the community, affording them the opportunity to engage in political activities should they wish to do so. It is also important to note that the community perceives the party as providing legal security for its activities. However, when asked, "Would you like your community to play a more active role in politics?" most interviewees expressed that while the party serves as a symbol, it would be more beneficial for community members to advocate for their interests and represent the general conservative population through a well-established conservative party, primarily the AK Party.

The community also prides itself on establishing its own schools and vakıfs, made possible through various economic ventures under the Server Holding Group. This economic self-reliance within the community signifies the freedom to establish schools, recreational centres, and NGOs. Financial independence is viewed as a requirement for a modern community. It is important to mention here that these technological tools, as well as Vakıfs and NGOs, all serve to spread the message. When asked, "What do you think other communities lack?" the participants all responded with a need for modern tools that would aid in spreading the message effectively. The community advocates for an educated Muslim population that contributes not only to their families and neighbours but also to society as a whole. This advocacy extends to supporting NGOs and other initiatives aimed at benefiting society in various areas, including agriculture, education, and environmental projects and economic freedom provides the means.

For example, we have schools, and we do many projects such as the hadith project and scouting projects. We have had tree planting projects for years, including with burned trees. I think we are doing very well in İznik. Currently, there is a great initiative in the book reading competition, Ufka Yolculuk, where I am also a volunteer. There is effort, serious work, and I think it's progressing well. İskenderpaşa is excellent; everything is well-planned and organized. I can say there are no mistakes, both legally and spiritually, as far as I know. For a period, we prepared such great projects, particularly in the education sector, focusing on young girls and children. We created programs for spiritual education, study groups, etc. At that time, the men and women were working separately, but the women were working on their own projects, and the men had their own as well. We try to be beneficial to everyone. (Lale, 34)

The second technique highlighted under the theme of progressiveness, which the community considers of utmost importance in shaping an ideal community, is the adoption of a hybrid approach. This involves integrating modern organizational structures while retaining and even promoting traditional practices, such as those observed in *tekkes* (Sufi lodges).

This hybrid approach enables the community to not only adapt to the demands of the 21st century through initiatives such as vakıfs, radio stations, periodicals, and environmental projects, but also to preserve the traditional aspects of a Naqshi community. This preservation is evident in practices such as collective dhikr sessions, known as *hatm-i hâcegân* or *hatme* (collective dhikr), which are attended by those who practice *rabita*⁷. Hatme programs, rooted in Sufi history, are documented in works such as Abdullah Salâhî Uşşâkî's "İzhâr-ı Esrâr-ı Nihân ez Envâr-ı Hatm-i Hâcegân." Many members express regular participation in hatme programs, along with engaging in rabita as a regular practice. Furthermore, community members still participate in listening to the sohbet of previous sheikhs on the radio and gathering for sohbet in each other's homes to continue the tradition that is still practiced in almost every community. Sözlür (2019) mentions Nureddin Coşan is said to have expressed the need to redefine the concepts of Sufism and tariqa even while his father was alive (p. 244). Additionally, he emphasized the requirement to establish rabita without visualizing the sheikh – i.e., dropping the "sheikh rabita." However, most interviews have indicated that they perform rabita either to Nureddin Coşan or to Esad Coşan (for those who received rabita during his lifetime). It is noteworthy that this idea of redefining the concepts has not been mentioned by Nureddin Coşan elsewhere.

Both İsmailağa and İskenderpaşa communities share a Sufi heritage, and as such, they continue to uphold and value Sufi requirements and traditions. These practices are considered fundamental aspects of both communities. Consequently, rabita remains a significant practice within the community. The Meşveret community, on the other hand, does not practice *rabita*, however. This is because it is not a typical sufi group as it does not fully embrace the Sufi heritage. The majority of İskenderpaşa interviewees have affirmed that they still engage in *rabita* and perceive their community as an integral part of the broader Naqshbandi heritage. Though reluctantly, the younger generation still perform rabita as well. That being said, the community have adopted modern aspects to cater to the needs of the contemporary Muslim. A significant portion of the followers assert that the evolution, spearheaded by the last two sheikhs, aimed to "modernize" the community through civic engagement, technology, and

⁷ Rabita is meditational/contemplative practice. During Rabita Disciple establishes a spiritual connection with a Sheikh by concentration and visualization of the sheikh's *mur* which represents the light of Gods presence or guidance or divine inspiration.

education. This transformation was deemed necessary not only for adaptation and survival but also to expand its reach and accommodate followers worldwide. Members reiterated that the ultimate goal was to impact 8 billion people. In fact, Nesrin (47) argues that “maybe in our campaigns or efforts, we could start with the idea of "on behalf of the 8 billion ummah." We could set bigger goals. Perhaps it could also be with his vision. I look at many of the projects we have done.” The media serves as a crucial instrument in ensuring that a message resonates across a global populace of '8 billion.' The magnitude of the mission necessitates a correspondingly vast audience, achievable solely through contemporary communication methods. Ayla (45) mentions this by stating “Nurettin hocamız reportedly said, "I am not just a leader of a community. I am responsible for all people in the world. I am responsible for 8 billion people." The entire world population.” Thus, the community since its current formation that started with Zahid Kotku who opened the first NGO and later its first branch in 1987 and continued to increase its presence in other areas. Now the community has multiple firms in manufacturing, tourism and education under the Server Holding. Furthermore, under Hak-Sağ the community has several healthcare institutions. It is also important to mention Akra radio station is listened by Esad Coşan has also started periodicals such as *İslam Dergisi*, *Kadın ve Aile*, *İlim ve Sanat* and *Gül Çocuk* that have been well received within and outside the community and continued on for a long while. The community published the only periodical (*Kadın ve Aile*) catered to Muslim women during its time. the Server Publication still continues produce books and periodicals Under the Server Media Foundation.

The “progressive” nature of the community is also evident in the members’ approach to the sheikh/leader dichotomy. During the interviews, answers to the questions regarding the status of the sheik indicated that the community was overall satisfied with the current situation, where the leader does not like to be in public, nor does he regularly meet or talk to his followers. The following questions were asked in order. What are your thoughts regarding Nureddin Coşan refraining from giving sohbet and avoiding giving tarikat lessons (not declaring himself as the sheikh)? How do you interpret Nureddin Coşan’s "I am a natural leader" statement? What is your opinion on moving away from traditional tekke activities? How do you view his adoption of a different approach to sohbet, and guidance compared to previous sheikhs? The interviewees have all mentioned that the current climate and the contemporary world dictates for a leader a stronger inclination towards establishing NGOs and other civic initiatives rather than relying on traditional practices such as sohbet and lectures. Nureddin Coşan has been recognized for offering the community a modern perspective on leadership, responsive to the demands of the contemporary world. Most participants of the research from İskenderpaşa

reiterated Nureddin Coşan's statement “my grandfather and father have said everything that needed to be said,” regarding his reluctance to behave in a traditional sheikh manner in regards to *sohbets* and *rabita* on multiple occasions. Thus, in relation to the community leaning towards becoming civic organization rather than a tekke, community members state that the requirement today leans towards this formation. For example, Fahriye (37) insists that this is necessary in today’s context.

I think this is necessary in the current environment. To keep up with the times, many things are changing, such as how children use social media, and we need to adapt as well. (Nureddin Cışan) This too must be transformed. Without drifting away from religion, it is necessary to adapt religion to these changes. For example, during the pandemic, Zoom was used. The morning prayers were read via Zoom, and everyone from the community joined in and listened from there.

On the question “What kinds of shortcomings do you generally think exist in other communities?” community members have a critical attitude. The consensus among the İskenderpaşa community seems to be that there is a significant dependence on sheikhs within other communities, unnecessarily extending beyond decision-making for the community to encompass mystical aspects as well. This reliance is exemplified by the perception of the sheikh as a blessing, as evidenced by the prevalent use of phrases such as “the path of the esteemed master” (efendi hazretlerinin yolu) and “the benevolence of esteemed master” (efendi hazretlerinin himmeti) within the İsmailağa community, a trend observed in nearly all interviews with its members. This mystical reliance observed in all Sufi communities is also present in the İskenderpaşa community to a smaller extent; however it is much more prevalent in the İsmailağa community. Ayla (45) from İskenderpaşa highlights this notion as follows:

Did you know, people in other communities have a certain attitude. Like they elevate their sheikh to a higher status. Our community is far removed from that. We don't have songs like 'my sheikh, my sultan'. It never happens. Yes, we are part of a Sufi tradition, but we always refrain from narratives that could lead us away from our main purpose. We don't engage in things that would elevate our sheikh, like saying 'my sheikh, my guide'. We have such high sensitivity about these matters.

Female members of the İskenderpaşa community are actively engaged in various facets, including executive roles, reflecting a commitment to gender inclusivity within the community.

Participants highlighted that women are encouraged to assume leadership roles and are provided with equal opportunities across most domains. This emphasis on gender equality was notably stressed by the former sheikh, M. Esad Coşan, during his sohbet. This discourse is still circulated within the community to promote women's education, evident in the high levels of educational attainment among female members. (As mentioned before, the İskenderpaşa community has the highest level of education, for both male and female members, among the groups studied here.) Additionally, women are encouraged to fulfil their responsibilities towards society and the community through various roles. Unlike in the İsmailağa community, where women are often directed towards specific roles such as becoming a *hoca*, members of the İskenderpaşa community are not confined to a singular option. Instead, they are encouraged to pursue public and private roles that align with their individual inclinations, thereby promoting individuality.

Meşveret: (S1) Affirming unyielding commitment to text-centeredness as the bedrock of the community.

The Meşveret community, similar to the İskenderpaşa and İsmailağa communities, does place emphasis on sharia and sunnah. However, unlike the other two communities, the prominent recurring theme throughout the interviews was the expressed unwavering devotion to the Risale-i Nur Külliyatı (RNK), also known as the "Epistles of Light." As mentioned earlier, as a branch of the larger Nurcu Community, Meşveret is the only text-based community examined in this research. The community's dedication to the RNK fosters a distinct identity, setting it apart from the others discussed.

Based on the interviews and participant observation, the main strategy for the Meşveret community is revealed as (S1) "affirming unyielding commitment to text-centeredness as the bedrock of the community" as the essence of an ideal community. Their commitment to the texts positions the RNK as the cornerstone of their community, reinforcing its role as a source of moral, ethical, and spiritual guidance. This centrality ensures that the community's practices, beliefs, and values are deeply rooted in the teachings of the RNK, making it an integral part of their collective identity and daily existence. Consequently, the RNK shapes not only their religious outlook but also their social interactions, educational priorities, and overall way of life.⁸

⁸ The RNK effectively functions like a sufi sheikh for the Meşveret community, corresponding to the role of a community leader in others. I plan to comparatively analyze the attitudes and discourses of the members of the three communities on leadership and the ideal sheikh in a separate study.

There are countless studies on the Risale-i Nur Külliyyatı (RNK) and the life of its author, Said Nursi. This research, however, solely focuses on the perception of women in the Meşveret community. While it is necessary to discuss the nature of the RNK to establish its authoritative role within the community, this will be done briefly to maintain focus on the primary subject matter. The intention is to provide a contextual understanding without delving into extensive details or deviating from the core topic.

To comprehend the significance of the text, it is essential to first mention the author. Similar to Mahmut Ustaosmanoğlu for the İsmailağa community, Said Nursi is widely regarded by Meşveret members as the Mujaddid (renewer) of the century. Unlike Ustaosmanoğlu, who sought to maintain adherence to traditional Islamic principles, Nursi's contributions focused on revitalization and reform efforts to ensure Islam's relevance and vitality in the face of modern challenges (Nişancı, 2015). His works, particularly the Risale-i Nur Külliyyatı (RNK), have been instrumental in shaping the spiritual and intellectual landscape of contemporary Turkish Islam. According to a well-known prophetic tradition, renewers are sent at the beginning of every century to revitalize Islam and interpret the tenets of the Quran in line with the understanding and demands of the contemporary era. Hence, as his honorific *Bediüzzaman* (wonder of the age) suggests, was considered the saviour of Islam in Turkey during the rise of Kemalist nationalism and laicism.

The RNK was written during a socially and economically tumultuous period. Said Nursi had witnessed two world wars, the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the formation of the Turkish republic. Thus, his writings reflect the socio-political conditions of his time (Turner-Horkuç, 2013). Mardin (1989) argues that the most important factor contributing to the success of Nursi's mobilization of the Nurcu community is his conscious efforts to centering his movement around his writings, rather than himself – as a traditional sheikh would have done. Yılmaz also argues that the texts aimed to provide original ideas to these issues and the community still is centred around Nursi's writings (2003). Mermer argues that “The Nur movement, inspired by the writings of Said Nursi, is a defensive reaction among certain groups within Turkish society who felt alienated by the secular policies implemented by the Republican government” (1985, p. 416). Nişancı (2015) argues that Nursi's was an attempt to revitalize an Islamic view of self and society against the onslaught by the Kemalist laicism. The text is regarded by the community as highly relevant to the contemporary conditions faced by Muslims, and it is believed to maintain its relevancy until the end of time. Consequently, the community upholds the writings in the Risale-i Nur Külliyyatı (RNK) as their guiding creed, which they are committed to living by, upholding, and disseminating. The aim of Said Nursi

was to reconcile faith and reason as he believed that “The future will be decided by reason and science. The Qur’anic interpretation, which addresses problems in the light of reason and science, will shape the future.” After his death, several of his students known as *abiler* formed what Yavuz describes as “textual communities” or later *dershanes*. These organizational structures facilitated the dissemination of the *Risale-i Nur Külliyyatı* (RNK) and provided the necessary dynamism for the movement's expansion. Nursi's primary target group was the urban, literate, or educated population. His objective was to shield the Muslim populace from the detrimental effects of state nationalism and positivism by creating an internal space for self-development and guidance to navigate external events and pressures. Nursi garnered a substantial following due to his appeal to a broad segment of Turkish society that remained conservative, thus bridging the transition from a traditional to a modern society, from oral to print culture, and from a rural to an urban environment (Yılmaz, 2003, pp. 159-162).

This emphasis placed on *dershanes* in spreading the movement also shaped the Nurcu consciousness. *Dershanes* function as a melting pot of diverse socio-economic groups who convene to read and discuss the texts. This collective process facilitates the internalization of the messages among participants, making RNK reading a communal and interactive experience. By engaging in group readings, members cultivate a shared vocabulary, interpret the texts collectively, and acquire a new normative framework that shapes their worldview and informs their behaviour. One can even view these readings as rituals that increase sense of belonging and remind the group over and over again about the principles. These gatherings re/shape identity by fostering connections through repeated exposure. These readings educate individuals about the world and delineate notions of good and bad actions, fostering specific cognitive and ethical attitudes toward oneself, others, the community, and the external world.

In my research, this text-centeredness was highlighted by every interviewee without exception. They conceive RNK as a “shortcut” that contains all the essential information required for a contemporary Muslim to maintain faith during this tumultuous period. Thus, an ideal community is drawn from the RNK and formed around these texts. This means, I argue, that the emphasis placed on reading, interpreting and implementing the text is the essence of the community. There is also a strong consensus among the followers that the RNK is divinely influenced, elevating Nursi's writings, especially the RNK, to the status of a holy text. This perception fosters a deep reverence for the RNK and underscores its pivotal role in guiding the community's moral, ethical, and spiritual values. İrem 27, argues this point.

In the Qur'an, they particularly claim that 33 verses directly refer to the *Risale-i Nur* as evidence. If you had read these 33 verses, you would have found a very clear answer to your question. At the outset, Bediüzzaman Said Nursi states, "We are not saying that this is the direct commentary of the verse." Rather, he explains that the verses are comprehensive, and a particular aspect of their universality aligns with the *Risale-i Nur*. It is written that this alignment, through the method of *abjad* (a numerological system), points to the *Risale-i Nur*. The *abjad* system, which has been utilized by many scholars, including Jewish and Christian theologians, involves calculating numerical values of letters and deriving meanings. The calculations of the verses using this method align remarkably with events related to the *Risale-i Nur* during that period—whether referring to its widespread reading or calamities surrounding it. Bediüzzaman Said Nursi emphasized that a particular part of the universal meaning of these verses corresponds to the *Risale-i Nur*. I also accept this because I have personally seen much evidence supporting it. Having studied and worked on the *abjad* method, I have recalculated it myself, and the results are consistent every time. Therefore, it is not merely an opinion or interpretation; it is based on tangible evidence and proof. The alignment is so precise that even if a Christian scholar were to apply the same *abjad* method, they would reach the same result. This has moved beyond personal belief to something verifiable and widely accepted.

Turner (2013) proposes that the *Risale*, depicted as "rays," "gleams," and "flashes", presents itself as a hermeneutical prism. According to Turner, the author perceives it as capturing divine light from the Qur'an and refracting it into colours discernible and comprehensible by the human heart. Thus, it is clear why most of the members refer to it as "hakikat," meaning truth, implying that it is a reflection of the Qur'an.

The strategy of affirming an unyielding commitment to text-centeredness as the bedrock of the Meşveret community has profound implications for its members' identity and cohesion. By anchoring their beliefs, practices, and values in the teachings of the RNK, the community preserves a distinct ideological framework and fosters a sense of unity and purpose. This approach ensures members' constant references to a shared source of moral and spiritual guidance, reinforcing collective norms and ethical standards. The RNK serves as a foundation for individual and communal growth, offering a lens through which the world is constructed, interpreted and navigated. Consequently, the Meşveret community's unwavering dedication to the RNK cultivates a resilient and cohesive identity, enabling its members to sustain their

beliefs and practices amid external challenges and evolving societal contexts. This commitment underscores the central role of the RNK in shaping the community's distinctiveness and continuity, establishing it as an indispensable element of their collective existence. Based on observations and interviews in the community, this strategy becomes evident through three techniques: (T1) assuming RNK as the ultimate authority, (T2) reading RNK as a daily ritual and (T3) incorporating RNK to their daily language in three ways: intonation, terminology, and direct quotes.

To start with the first technique, members of the Meşveret community regard the *Risale-i Nur Külliyyatı* (RNK) as the cornerstone of their collective existence, viewing it as the ultimate form of epistemological and moral authority. It is important to note that there is a strong consensus among the community's followers that the RNK was divinely inspired, thereby considering Nursi's writings, particularly the RNK, as a holy text. Most believe that Nursi himself was the Mahdi. Mardin (2006) explains this notion as the lack of a charismatic leader and the representation of the need to for a charismatic leader within Islam. Although Nursi often rejected the claim that he was the Mahdi, he did acknowledge a connection between the concept of the Mahdi and the RNK due to the nature of the texts. One of his letters emphasizes this point:

Now, while this is the truth of the matter, if the primary duty and highest profession is to save faith and to teach faith in an investigative manner to the public, even making the faith of the common people verified, since this duty fully expresses the meaning of being a spiritual guide and enlightening in a spiritual and real sense, the followers of Nur, seeing this duty fully in the *Risale-i Nur*, regard the second and third duties as secondary and tertiary in comparison. Therefore, they rightfully consider the spiritual personality of the *Risale-i Nur* as a kind of Mahdi. (Emirdağ Lahikası, 232)

Despite Nursi's consistent rejection of being identified as the Mahdi, there remains an overwhelming consensus within the community supporting this belief. Bulaç argues that the notion of linking Nursi to the Mahdi has fortified the community's legitimacy and provided a powerful source of motivation for its members (2008, p. 332). This perception has significantly bolstered the community's sense of purpose and cohesion, enhancing their collective motivation and commitment. Erkan (2015) suggests that Nursi's decision to distance himself from the composition of the *Risale-i Nur* and instead link it directly to the Quran serves to validate the *Risale-i Nur* within religious circles and fosters the development of an influential

framework among its adherents (p. 95). This notion is also supported by the members of the community whom I interviewed:

I believe the most important characteristic is that Risale is our sheikh, because even the Master (Said Nursi) calls it a sheikh. He says, "I left it to you, and I also learned from it." The fact that it presents a work and that we can converge on a common point. Of course, in the light of the Quran and Sunnah. We do not evaluate Risale as a separate book [from the Qur'an]. Everything I read explains a verse or a hadith. That's why we also consider reading the Quran and hadiths very important. When combined with them, Risale becomes much more valuable. (Ayşe, 27)

The RNK empowers its readers by offering a comprehensive worldview and a moral system for action, serving as a repository of deeper meanings that respond to the human quest for understanding. Each gathering to read the RNK unveils new horizons for many of them, emphasizing that the discovery of meaning within religious texts is an ongoing process without a definitive end. I would argue that as a textual community, members' life, thought, sense of identity and relations with outsiders are organized around an authoritative text. The text acts as the medium that shapes the community. In these reading rituals, the person who reads the text out loud (the "reader") ensures that everyone understands the text through providing translation for words. The reader often rereads phrases to understand or to let it sink in after discussing the paragraph ensuring that the meaning is agreed upon. This reading and interpreting of the text ensures an oral development of character.

We can adapt Max Weber's (1978) theory of charismatic authority to the RNK. Although traditionally associated with an individual who possesses certain leadership qualities, a sacred text in this context becomes the focal point of reverence and devotion. This is done through transferring of the charisma from an individual leader to the text in a way that Weber calls the "routinization of charisma." The divinely inspired notion that is emphasized throughout the community ensures that the text embody the ultimate source of guidance and legitimacy. Thus, the authority of the text, similar to the authority of the charismatic leader, commands respects and adherence from the community members. This of course, as mentioned earlier relies on the community's belief in the sanctity and divine origin of the text. Furthermore, the text not only provides moral and ethical direction but also legitimizes the social and religious practices within the community. This shift from individual to textual charisma enables the community to maintain a coherent and unified identity centred around the

text, which serves as the cornerstone of their beliefs and actions. Thus, the sacred text becomes the embodiment of the community's values and the ultimate authority guiding their collective existence.

The collective identity concept suggests that in its essence it requires a sense of “one-ness” or “we-ness” derived from shared attributes and experiences among a certain group by itself or in relation or contrast to one or more actual or imagined sets of “others”. This collective identity can act in pursuit of common interests. A “textual community” can be understood as a group that emerges at the intersection of the introduction of written texts and the development of a specific form of social organization. It functions as both an interpretive community and a social entity.

Unlike the İsmailağa and İskenderpaşa communities, The Meşveret community lacks a leadership position following the passing of its founder, Hüsni Bayramoğlu, in 2021. This branch of the Nurcu community operates on a basis of consultation, as indicated by its name, which translates literally to "consultancy." Members form small groups in various cities or locales, which typically make decisions or implement and discuss decisions made by larger conferences convened periodically. The community does not openly disclose its hierarchy, with most members asserting that there is no fixed hierarchical structure. However, they also suggest that individuals referred to as "abi" (elder brother) and "abla" (elder sister) may be appointed by the larger consultancy group. The absence of a visibly defined hierarchical structure within the community will be further explored in the subsequent chapter; however, in terms of the essence of the community, the lack of need for a designated leader underscores the community's perception of the texts themselves as the guiding force and authority within the community. RNK carries with it the traditional charisma that is mostly attributed to a leader. The members of the community argue the texts to be the ultimate authority within the community. There is a strong belief within the community that the books have been written to promote the modern issues of Muslims, thus the text is relevant and will preserve its relevance until the end of time.

When asked about the most significant characteristics that set their community apart from others, members emphasize their distinctiveness in not adhering to a single leader or sheikh. According to interview responses, such concepts, prevalent in other communities, are considered outdated as they do not align with the contemporary demands of the era. This notion greatly indicates that the ultimate authorities remain with the texts.

In the Nur community, there isn't a hierarchical system or a higher rank above others. This is one of the aspects I appreciate about the *Risale-i Nur* movement—there's no

notion of superiority. Of course, respect is shown to those who are older or more experienced in the *Risale-i Nur*, but it's a respect that comes naturally, not one tied to a title like "teacher" or "sheikh." Everyone is seen as equals. For instance, at a gathering, seating arrangements don't reflect rank; someone with a physical disability or an elder may sit at a more convenient spot, but this is out of respect for their condition or age, not due to hierarchical distinction. (Aysun, 45)

We view the *Risale-i Nur* as our guide. If a statement from any elder doesn't align with the *Risale-i Nur*, it is not highly regarded. Our approach is entirely based on the teachings of the text. In fact, Bediüzzaman Said Nursi himself stated, "*Weigh my works with reason; take what is gold and leave what is copper.*" Even for his own writings, he emphasized critical engagement. When looking from the outside, even if a prominent figure like Kırkinci Hoca or Bayramoğlu Hoca says something contrary to the *Risale-i Nur*, we evaluate it based on whether it aligns with the truth and the principles of the *Risale-i Nur*, rather than simply accepting it because an elder said it. (Fatma, 32)

The daily reading of the *Risale-i Nur Külliyatı* (RNK) functions as a deeply entrenched ritual within the Meşveret community, fostering a continuous connection to and reminder of its teachings. Members have established specific goals to ensure they read ten pages daily, reflecting the importance they place on this practice, comparable to the reading of the Qur'an.

When asked about their reading habits, most members reported that they read the RNK and the Qur'an almost equally, treating them as inseparable texts. Fifteen interviews consistently indicated that individuals set personal reading goals, which they generally achieve in addition to attending at least one collective reading a week. This practice of daily reading is a vital component of the community's routine, with members encouraging one another to engage in both private study and collective readings for discussion and interpretation. For instance, Elif (45) emphasized the importance of reading at least ten pages a day: "The best is to read at least ten pages a day. The master has a saying. He says that those who read 10 pages a day are the students of this age. So, we pay attention to this. I can't always read, but I try to be careful." This demonstrates a disciplined approach to daily reading, aiming to align with the guidance provided by Nursi. Another member Hafsa (33) mentioned, "Recently, I decided to read from the original Ottoman Turkish script (hatt-ı Kur'an) instead of Latin script for my personal study. While reading in Latin script, I used to read up to 30 pages daily. However, since I have just started reading in Ottoman Turkish, I can currently read about 100 pages

weekly. Before this, I was reading 210 pages weekly." This underscores the commitment to deepening their engagement with the text and adapting their practices to enhance understanding.

However, there is also a significant emphasis on the quality rather than the quantity of reading. Aylin (33) articulated this perspective:

Some people count how much they have read. They say things like I finished it 7 or 10 times. I don't think it's right to count. It should be read as much as possible. Sometimes reading one sentence can be more meaningful than reading a whole book. Therefore, we need to make a distinction between quantity and quality. The goal should not be to finish but to go deeper.

This viewpoint underscores the importance of deep engagement with the text, suggesting that the aim should be to delve into the meanings and insights of the RNK rather than merely completing a set number of pages. Such an approach ensures that the readings are meaningful and impactful, facilitating a deeper understanding and integration of the text's teachings into daily life. This dual emphasis on regular reading and qualitative engagement highlights the central role of the RNK in shaping the community's spiritual practice and collective identity.

In fact, most interviews revealed that members experience a sense of guilt when they miss a reading, accompanied by evident emotional and physical changes, such as not enjoying prayer as much. Kevser (43) suggests that her family notices a change when she misses a reading:

When I didn't go initially, even my parents would say, 'go and get your medicine,' as we went through very difficult times. I saw Risale-i Nur and the advice I received from the community as strength, a perspective on life, and truly as medicine and therapy during very tough times.

Hafsa (33) also mentions changes in herself when she does not attend readings:

When I don't attend, I experience spiritual distress, which affects my readings, causing me to read less. My spiritual strength decreases, and I turn more towards worldly matters. Even when making decisions, if I have attended less that week, I can't make judgments properly. I can't make decisions in the name of truth or Allah. My feelings get mixed up, or I receive a metaphorical slap from the unseen. For instance, this week, my husband was feeling slightly unwell, but we had a discussion session. He was

actually feeling better that day, but afterward, he became more unwell. We see this as a slap for not attending. He couldn't get out of bed for two days. These are the kinds of thoughts we have.

This illustrates how deeply integrated the reading of the RNK is in their daily lives and its significant impact on their emotional and spiritual well-being. This practice is not merely a routine but a profound act of devotion that permeates the daily lives of the community members. By engaging in regular readings, members continuously reinforce their connection to the text, ensuring that its teachings remain at the forefront of their consciousness. This ritualistic engagement with the RNK provides a consistent source of direction, guiding their thoughts and actions in alignment with the text's moral and ethical framework.

Private reading of the text has a distinct meaning for individuals, as it allows them to interpret the teachings personally and apply them to their everyday practices. Merve (31) emphasizes this:

Everything is already expressed very clearly in the Risale-i Nur. If I add my own opinion to it, that would become Yeşil's opinion. I would be converting the perspective that the general public should take into something else. But when one reads it, everyone receives their own spiritual inspiration. Since it is written spiritually, each person gets their share, it does not remain with Büşra. Büşra would be obscuring the Risale-i Nur in any case. However, the Risale reveals itself through the Risale. For instance, if we read a sentence, its meaning or explanation might be found in another part of the Risale. When you are engaged with the Risale, you know to read it in context. You can say, 'Look, this part is very beautiful, but its explanation is here.

Additionally, what a person might need at a particular moment can be provided through these readings. Fatma (32) encourages this practice, noting:

Firstly, the language is much more poetic. Secondly, when discussing the truth, a person doesn't get bored after a while. Just as when you read the Qur'an, you do not get bored. Or sometimes, the same happens with other sources; you can read them multiple times. Its truthfulness and the aesthetic quality of its language make it special. You can find most of your needs there, and this often aligns with your current needs. It happens coincidentally. At a time when I needed contemplation greatly, I found it. I don't know of another book that makes contemplation so beautiful. It broadens a person's mind

wonderfully. A person who can contemplate reads the world in a much more functional way.

In the Meşveret community, there is a notable preference among members to prioritize the reading of RNK over other texts, viewing it as not only necessary but also comprehensive enough and sufficient for their needs. This perspective underscores the belief that RNK contains all essential information required by Muslims, thereby serving as a sufficient guide. This sentiment is further reinforced by the perception that contemporary life is fast-paced and demanding, necessitating a "shortcut" approach that aligns with current lifestyles, with RNK fulfilling this role. Fatma (32) elaborates on this point:

Honestly, I am not reading many books other than Risale-i Nur right now, mostly due to time constraints. I read quite a lot of books during university. When I got to know Risale-i Nur, along with it came other books. But now, with school courses and Risale-i Nur lessons on top, I don't have much time or inclination for those kinds of books. It's not that I would never read them, but I can't. Perhaps you have somewhat engaged with the language of Risale-i Nur, but it's a bit different from other books. For example, in one paragraph there, I find more detail. We focus intensely on meaning there, but in those other books, long sentences expressing only one meaning tire me.

Hafsa (33) adds another dimension:

All these groups I mentioned have a spiritual aspect, but the scholarly aspect was more dominant. There is a scholarly aspect in Risale too, but my soul wasn't satisfied there. Okay, the words influenced me. There is no teacher around me tomorrow. While washing dishes, I was listening to Nureddin Hoca. But after a while, Nureddin Hoca addresses a specific audience, uses certain sentences, and touches on specific subjects. After a while, I started to want more. Due to my profession, I focused a lot on knowing myself. First of all, I started to think about myself, then I noticed this spiritual hunger, and I could only satisfy this hunger in Risale. It's also in other sources. For example, when I read Elmalılı Hamdi Yazır, I also enjoy it a lot, or when I read İhya, but in Risale, there is such a pleasure that no matter how much you read, you don't get tired. It feels like reading it for the first time to you.

When questioned about the enduring relevance of Risale-i Nur Külliyyatı (RNK), members of the community unanimously affirm its perpetual significance, asserting that it will remain relevant until the end of time. They support this assertion by highlighting the text's capacity for individual interpretation, suggesting that the meanings drawn from it in the future

will continue to resonate and provide answers to the questions of their respective eras. This belief underscores the members' confidence in RNK's timeless wisdom and adaptability to address evolving societal challenges and spiritual inquiries which also elevates its status. Meryem (25) iterates this point by suggesting the following.

In some respects, I think that what we currently interpret may be interpreted differently in the future due or sometimes the Almighty allows us to interpret it in that way so that it will be compatible with that time. It will also facilitate changes in others' understandings in the future, like the understanding of the Qur'an is constantly changing? Of course, we can't compare the two. Over time, due to changes in people's perceptions, different perspectives will look at things differently and draw different meanings. Therefore, a different perception may be revealed in the future. Also, we are aware that we are nearing the end. We are aware of the fact that there is very little time left at this point. Qur'an verses also approve this point. Maybe each community interpreted the verses in a different way. But all agree at this point. This is something that we need to take from the Qur'an verses. Because the Almighty already directly shows it to us. He directly shows this in a constructive way, and what we really need at this point is a service that appeals completely to the soul and provides satisfaction at the point of faith and the Qur'an. Did we find these in the Risale-i Nur? Apparently, we have found this and all the interviews you have done suggest that too, which is why they preferred it, and they think that others will continue to prefer it in this way. We all know that we are in end of times. So what do they think? Of course, I think so too. The last, until the end of time, we will go like this, but so, imitating the statement of our master. It does not mean that it will definitely be like this. When we logically think about it, if this century's system is like this and this century's last century is the last time, then really, if Risale-i Nur goes with this system until the end of this century, it will continue forever, but changes in perception will not harm its nature. It will increase the diversity in its nature.

Another significant finding of this research is the members' perception of RNK as a complete and flawless text. When queried about any aspects of the text with which they disagreed, participants unanimously indicated their complete agreement and expressed no desire for any changes. Their consensus stems from the belief that the text is divinely inspired, implying its intrinsic perfection and authoritative status. This unwavering commitment underscores the profound impact of Risale-i Nur Külliyyatı on individual spiritual and intellectual experiences within the Meşveret community. The collective daily readings and

personal interpretations of the text serve not only as a ritualistic practice but also as a means of fostering communal cohesion and shared understanding. By engaging with the RNK both collectively and personally, members cultivate a shared vocabulary, interpretative framework, and ethical norms. These practices not only strengthen their spiritual identities but also provide a cohesive structure through which they navigate the complexities of contemporary life. Thus, the RNK's influence extends beyond individual belief systems to shape communal practices and sociocultural dynamics, reinforcing its role as a cornerstone of identity and collective consciousness within the community. Moreover, incorporating RNK into their daily language in three distinct ways—intonation, terminology, and direct quotes—further solidifies its integral role within both individual reflections and communal discussions within the Meşveret community.

In the interviews presented, the community consistently references either the RNK or the narratives of Said Nursi to substantiate their perspectives. For instance, when queried about the relevance of Sufi orders in contemporary times, they frequently cite Nursi's statement: "An unbeliever cannot enter Paradise, but many can enter Paradise without Sufism. A person cannot live without bread, but they can live without fruit. Sufism is the fruit; the truths of Islamic realities are the sustenance." Additionally, in response to similar inquiries, Hatice (28) invokes the assertion: "If Mevlana Halidi Baghdadi were alive today, he would still be writing the *Risale-i Nur*. Because the need is such."

The community's frequent references to Nursi's writings and stories not only serve to validate their beliefs but also reinforces their collective identity and practices. These practices are most evident in their vocabulary and their intonation. Members often incorporate words that they are constantly reading in the RNK. Most sentences, as seen above, draw words or stories directly from the texts or express themselves in RNK "speech," constantly using words that are repeated in the text such as "tefekkür" (contemplation), "iman" (faith), "mana" (meaning), "hakikat" (truth), "cihet" (aspect), and "esma" (names). Thus, community's habitual use of language and vocabulary inspired by RNK exemplifies how the habitus operates as an embodied system of practices.

This distinctive linguistic pattern is largely absent in interviews conducted with other communities. The sentences used by the Meşveret community members also reflect similar structural patterns to those found in the RNK. They are often long, and the structure of the sentences mirrors the syntax found in the texts. This linguistic mimicry underscores the deep integration of the RNK into the daily lives and thought processes of the community members,

highlighting the text's role in shaping not only their religious and ethical outlook but also their everyday language and communication styles. In this sense, the RNK is deeply inscribed in the members' habituses. Thus, speech serves not only as a medium for expression but also shapes an individual's way of thinking. The moral and ethical frameworks, along with the value and ideological perspectives within a society, are organized and conveyed through language.

The community's reliance on quotations from the RNK and Nursi's narratives serves to validate their viewpoints. This practice aligns with Max Weber's concept of charismatic authority adapted to textual leadership, where the text itself holds charismatic authority due to perceived divine inspiration. The community views the RNK not just as a religious text but as a comprehensive source that addresses contemporary spiritual and intellectual needs, akin to a "shortcut" suited to modern lifestyles. Thus, frequent references to and quotations from the RNK in everyday life on almost any topic imaginable is part of the habitus of the Meşveret disciple. (This is mostly true for the members of other Nurcu communities as well.)

This chapter has focused on what these communities considered to be the essence of an ideal community. The İsmailağa's emphasis on Shaira and Sunnah and the İskenderpaşa's emphasis on education and progress have come forth while the Meşveret communities' reliance on the RNK drew a contrast. A key to the understanding of these changes in the direction of greater puritanism has been given by Ernest Gellner, who claimed that traditional Sufism, the basis of traditional, popular Islam, is doomed to disappear under the spell of modernization. As the modern nation-states are formed and the rate of urbanization grows, tribalism, the most important social foundation of traditional Islamic mysticism, was withering away, he believed. By referring to the distinction between orthodox (elite) and Sufi (popular) Islam, Gellner contends that scripturalism will have a much greater chance of surviving in a modern context than Sufism.

This section has explored the different foundations these communities consider crucial in an ideal community. The İsmailağa's emphasis on Sharia and Sunnah, İskenderpaşa's focus on education and progressive outlook, and Meşveret's reliance on the RNK as the cornerstone of the community creates prominent contrasts. However, in thoroughlyder to throughly understand the contrasts and the dynamics within these communities, particularly in relation to their mission and identity, it is essential to examine the role Tasawwuf plays—or does not play—in shaping the ideal community. This leads us to the next section off this chapter.

2.3. Deciphering the Community Mission: Tasawwuf's Influence or Its Absence?

A central theme in shaping these communities is the emphasis on their Sufi lineage and tasawwuf as a foundational element of their identity. As observed throughout the research, Sufism profoundly affects both the collective mission of the community and the processes of communal and individual identity formation. However, each community's approach to Sufism differs significantly, reflecting varying levels of emphasis on its importance. For instance, the Meşveret community largely overlooks the significance of tasawwuf, focusing instead on more text-centred practices discussed above. In contrast, tasawwuf plays a much more influential role in the identities and missions of the İsmailağa and İskenderpaşa communities, where Sufi traditions and teachings are more deeply integrated into their social and spiritual frameworks.

Therefore, this section will focus on the central aspects of each community, with tasawwuf playing a pivotal role in both the İskenderpaşa and İsmailağa communities, and missionary work being particularly prominent in İsmailağa and Meşveret with some variances. While the İsmailağa community places a strong emphasis on both its missionary work and its established Sufi background, İskenderpaşa focuses almost exclusively on tasawwuf as the foundation of its spiritual and communal identity. In contrast, the Meşveret community prioritizes missionary work within itself, mainly distancing itself from Sufi traditions. This stresses the distinctive approaches each community takes, with differing emphases on tasawwuf and missionary efforts shaping their missions and identities, as demonstrated through their discursive strategies and techniques below.

İsmailağa and İskenderpaşa: (S) Positioning tasawwuf as the foundational pillar of the community.

In considering the organizational structures and heritage of these religious communities, the following questions were asked: Should every religious community adopt the framework of a Sufi order? Furthermore, what distinct characteristics differentiate Sufi communities from their non-Sufi counterparts? Both the İskenderpaşa (S5) and İsmailağa (S3) communities have firmly positioned tasawwuf as the foundational pillar of their community, emphasizing a strong "golden chain" of their own leaders, representing the succession of spiritual authority from one sheikh to the next, traced back to the Prophet Muhammad. This lineage serves to distinguish these Sufi communities from other religious communities based on both their spiritual lineage and their historical heritage, especially as they evolved into institutional forms over time. In contrast, the Meşveret community questions the relevance of tasawwuf in the modern world, considering it largely obsolete.

The İsmailağa community stressed the importance of tasawwuf by deploying four different techniques that establish the third main strategy for the tasawwuf theme. The reference to tasawwuf and *rabita* or *tariqa* is often associated with “taqwa” (modesty) and spirituality in the İsmailağa community. Thus, the first technique that has been mentioned for this strategy is: (T1) Highlighting the importance of tasawwuf for piety (taqwa) and spirituality (*maneviyat*). Therefore, the primary influence of *rabita* as seen in the community pertains to the repletion and renewal of the soul through spirituality. As Yeşim (37) suggests, tasawwuf is viewed as a prerequisite for spiritual development, with the İsmailağa community emphasizing its importance for achieving taqwa (piety) and deepening spirituality.

The soul exists just like the body. The evolution of the soul is crucial here. I have always felt the impact of Sufism in my life. Without Sufism, it seems somewhat impossible to me for the soul to be guided and to evolve. In other words, it could still be done up to a certain level without Sufism, but Sufism elevates a person to the pinnacle, that cannot be done through anything else.

In both communities, the significance of tasawwuf in guiding a spiritually enriched life is emphasized. The İskenderpaşa community (T1) emphasizes the role of tasawwuf in shaping the spiritual dimensions of the community. This refers both to the structural aspect of the community that follows a sheikh and disciples as well as the communal effect that ensures a close bond that is formed not only with sheikh and disciple but the bond between the members as well. The role of the sheikh is also very important, indicating that the bond ensures that they are in the presence of a teacher or a mentor at all times. Esad Coşan, the highly revered former sheikh, gives a firm instruction on this:

It is necessary for a person to be with their teacher, to listen to their sermons, to heed their advice, and to learn their religion from them. However, this is not always possible. People live in different places, sometimes faraway lands. Additionally, part of the day needs to be spent resting. It is not easy for a person to be in service at every hour of the day. For this reason, *rabita* (spiritual connection) is practiced. When *rabita* is practiced, the disciple feels as if they are in the presence of their shaykh. They can also think of the shaykh as a supervisor, imagining them in front of them as a beloved figure, as their teacher, and envision performing the *dhikr* (remembrance of God) together with them (Coşan, 1995a, p.653).

This process entails experiencing divine mercy and the continual presence of God through the grace of the sheikh. Additionally, in the İsmailağa community, the constant

presence of the sheikh provides psychological support, and the practice of *rabita*, according to the members, holds educational and tasawwuf-related benefits. As Yeşim suggests,

it is like having someone look out for you, at all times. It is a very peaceful feeling. When I feel down or if I am struggling with something, it always makes me feel better. And I always feel like I am being helped through all my struggles (*imtihan*). It makes you feel a holy presence and also pushes you to always make good decisions.

Merve (27) also suggests that “tasawwuf also provides all you need to know. Once you complete all *ders*⁹ you can understand anything. That is how you reach the ultimate truth (*hakikat*). It is the power of maneviyat that allows you to comprehend knowledge”. This suggests that the members view (T2) Tasawwuf as essential in Islamic education, as it offers both moral guidance and practical knowledge. Both communities' Sheiks employ similar if not identical discourse regarding *rabita*. Esad Coşan and Mahmut Ustaosmanoğlu both regard tasawwuf as a means of learning the religion and acquiring general knowledge. For instance, Esad Coşan emphasizes the importance of tasawwuf in general and in religious education. Coşan closely associates Tasawwuf with *taqwa*, though this was not explicitly mentioned by the members of the community.

My dear brothers and sisters! As you know, we send our children to elementary school, middle school, high school, and university. We sell our fields, we sell our homes, and we do our best to educate our children. Education is important; an educated person becomes good, while an uneducated person turns bad. The best form of education is Sufi education. When a person receives the training of a *tekke* (Sufi lodge), when they receive *taqwa* (God-consciousness) training, according to the testimony of the Quranic verse, that person will find success. But when one does not receive *taqwa* training, they fall into disaster and end up regretful and miserable. Therefore, everyone must receive *taqwa* training; without it, a person becomes the plaything of the devil. When one does not submit to a scholar, the devil deceives them, puts a ring through their nose, and leads them wherever it wishes. (Coşan, 1995a, p.589)

Thus, for the İskenderpaşa community, there is an emphasis placed on tasawwuf as a means of support and learning as well as its function as a regulatory mechanism, ensuring that

⁹ On the one hand, *ders* can denote the daily *dhikr* or prayers that a person must accomplish as part of their spiritual discipline. However, it can also refer to the stages of *rabita* in İsmailağa community. These stages are built progressively, with each one deepening the individual's spiritual awareness, with each lesson building upon the previous one.

all actions are undertaken for the sake of devotion to God. As suggested by Sözer and corroborated by my interviewees, members strongly assert that the community remains inherently Sufi in nature. When asked about the differences between Sufi and non-Sufi communities, there was a consensus that Sufi communities are characterized by compassion and possess a greater degree of divine enlightenment (*feyz*).

In both communities (T2 and T3) *tasawwuf* is also viewed as the best means of self-care. Members often mentioned *dhikr* as the most peaceful part of their day. For both members it ensures inward reflection of themselves as a subject of God. Hava (2017) in her thesis on the İskenderpaşa community argues that *rabita* is a form of self-care, since it helps individuals by purifying their hearts, cultivating ethical subjectivity, and strengthen connection to God. It encourages self-discipline, self-reflection and spiritual growth. Thus, *rabita* functions as a tool for spiritual and emotional well-being, transforming it into a practice of self-care within the Sufi framework. The interviews highlighted that *rabita* fosters a continuous awareness of intentions. Maintaining a state of *rabita* or engaging in it daily in stills a sense of identity, belonging, and helps in reassessing life priorities. Being mindful of God through *dhikr* and *rabita* prompts disciples to remain vigilant about their intentions and deeds, serving as a perpetual reminder to seek God's approval in all endeavours. This is also evident in the İsmailağa community as well as Hafsa (33) mentions this by stating the following:

In other words, I believe that I have been disciplined through the *ders*, specifically through spiritual discipline. I think I have undergone spiritual refinement. For instance, I used to be more short-tempered, but now I'm not. Of course, this must be understood as something that happens through closeness to Allah. *Rabita* brings you closer to Allah, and when you think that you are in His presence, you naturally begin to pay more attention to your behaviour. We are always told to stay in a state of *rabita*, meaning to live as if you are always in the presence of Allah. This gives you confidence, as it feels like Allah's help is always with you.

The members often emphasize the *rabita*'s role as a means to lead a righteous life and emphasizing its role in ensuring adherence to sharia and sunnah principles and in the İsmailağa community Sharia is often associated with *tariqa* as Hafsa (33) suggests.

Firstly, it gives you the ability to do many things that you weren't able to do in practice before. I mean, it gives you strength, let me put it that way. That connection, whether it's called *rabita* or another kind of connection, means establishing a bond. Ultimately, your bond with your shaykh or with the path through Sufism allows you to become

stronger in practice. It makes you stronger in terms of worship. And then there's the ability to distinguish between right and wrong, which gives you a lot of strength in terms of character and the ability to fully fulfil the requirements of Sharia. It gives you insight that you didn't have before.

This discourse is (re)established through sohbet. The Ismailağa community's emphasis on the importance of *rabita* is constantly reiterated in almost every sohbet. The interviews also emphasized the importance of *rabita* in almost every aspect of their lives. The same notion is carried out in the İskenderpaşa community. The vast majority of the followers in the community still listen to the sohbet of the previous sheikh Esad Coşan and are still exposed to the same discourse. The interviews also reflect the importance of *tasawwuf* and *rabita*.

Finally, both communities (T4 and T3) distinguish themselves from others with reference to their Sufi lineage. The sufi lineage ensures a strong tradition and prestige that originated from the Prophet and purportedly continues uninterrupted to this day. This emphasis on lineage is also prominent in the İskenderpaşa community., where the emphasis on *tasawwuf* is often articulated in terms of the significance of the sheikh and the community's identity not solely as a religious entity but also as one deeply rooted in Sufi heritage. The profound significance attributed to the concept of sheikh/Mürşid is deeply ingrained in the sacred tradition of Sufism. This reverence is particularly evident in the context of the current sheikh. Despite young sheikh Nureddin Coşan's avoidance of regular sohbet and his limited public appearances, the community's dedication to him remains unwavering, akin to their devotion to previous sheikhs. Such strong devotion originates from the belief that sheikhs serve as a conduit to divine presence and represent a genuine spiritual path. This lineage is also being regarded as part of the prophetic tradition. Nurten (60) underscores the importance of the lineage, stating, "Allah says, 'After the prophets, I will send you great saints, but after a while, they too will disappear from the world. Then I will send you teachers.' I think Nureddin Coşan is one of these teachers."

Max Weber's charismatic authority (1978) can be relevant for analysing the role of the sheikh in Sufi communities, specifically in terms of the previous technique. In the sufi lineage the charisma is institutionalized (in Weber's terms, "routinized") through the succession mechanisms, in which the sheikh appoints someone in his place, thereby ensuring the continuity of authority and draws that authority to the prophet Muhammad. Thus, the charisma often automatically transfers to the institution/tariqa, making the Sheik less charismatic. The spiritual leadership also ensures that the legitimacy is through the sheikh's personal connection

to the divine and their capacity to bestow *feyz*. This aligns with Weber's description of charismatic authority where the leader is viewed as a vessel of divine powers.

In the İskenderpaşa community, the emphasis on tasawwuf remains integral, highlighting the significance of the sheikh and the community's deep-rooted connection to Sufi heritage. This connection is particularly evident in members' perception of the community as a continuation of traditional *tekke* heritage, albeit in a modernized form. Instead of gathering at a physical tekke, for example, *sohbets* (spiritual discussions) are broadcasted via radio, and *hatme* (collective recitations) still occur in groups, allowing followers to engage with Sufi traditions in a contemporary format. As Sözer (2019) notes, and as interviews conducted for this study confirm, members strongly assert the community's Sufi identity. When asked about differences between Sufi and non-Sufi communities, participants consistently viewed Sufi communities as rooted in compassion and possessing greater divine inspiration (*feyz*). Additionally, as Silverstein observes, these modernized *sohbets* maintain some of the traditional functions of lodges, a necessity since the proscription of Sufi orders and the closure of lodges in 1925 (p. 165). Thus, although the İskenderpaşa community has evolved significantly to incorporate modern media, members' positive outlook toward these adaptations suggests that it will continue to preserve its Sufi essence while remaining responsive to contemporary societal changes.

As in İskenderpaşa, the İsmailağa community also views tasawwuf as deeply intertwined with Sharia and Taqwa, reflecting an understanding that spiritual discipline is essential for fully observing Islamic law. Recent developments following the passing of Mahmut Ustaosmanoğlu have underscored the role of practices such as *rabıta*, which members consider crucial for adhering to Sharia. Indeed, when questioned on the necessity of tasawwuf for a Muslim's spiritual life, all participants affirmed its importance, indicating a shared belief that spiritual practices are not supplementary but rather foundational to living a life aligned with Islamic principles. Building upon their commitment to religious principles, both the İsmailağa and Meşveret communities further distinguish themselves through their distinct approaches to missionary work, viewing it as a core component of their respective identities. Despite differing methods, this focus underscores each community's dedication to spreading and reinforcing their values.

Meşveret vs. İsmailağa: (S6) Defining the community's mission as promoting "faith" as described in the RNK vs. (S6) Claiming distinction based on missionary work.

As mentioned in the first part of this chapter, the Meşveret community is part of the larger Nur Movement, which is a text-based religious community. The Nur movement is one of the largest religious communities in Turkey nearing ten percent of the Turkish population, according to one estimate (Reed, 2003, p. 35). A significant distinction between the Meşveret community and other communities examined in this research is their approach to Sufism. The primary method of achieving this distinction appears to involve (T1) refraining from engaging in or promoting non-essential aspects of religious practice, including Sufi traditions and rituals. To better understand the community's mission and how it diverges from the other two communities, a brief overview of the teachings and origins of the community is essential. Said Nursi, the founding figure of the Nur Movement, consistently emphasized in his writings and letters that the movement is not rooted in Sufism. This stance is clearly reflected in the foundational literature, as demonstrated in the following:

Those who read the Nur Collection accuse me of giving them discipleship and Sufi teachings. However, those who know me know that, as proven in courts, I am not giving Sufi teachings but rather teachings on the truths of faith and the Quran. Those who listen to my teachings are called Nur students. Our profession is not Sufism but rather the truths of faith (Emirdağ LahİKası, 481).

In fact, Nursi views Nur Movement as an alternative to tariqa, suggesting that it is better equipped to meet the needs of the modern Muslims, a sentiment that has been mentioned repeatedly by the members of the community. He also suggests that this is the natural progression that led to the formation of the movement and the production of the texts. According to Nursi the modernization led to a division between science and religion. Thus, RNK aims to overcome the breach. The mind as he suggests needs to be convinced through series of evidence.

Risale-i Nur has opened a path to truth within places of worship and centres of knowledge; it has paved the way for the truth of truths within spiritual practices and invocations, and within logical proofs and scientific evidences; and it has opened the path to the greatest sainthood directly within the knowledge of theology and the sciences of creed and religious principles. (Emirdağ LahİKası-I, 53rd Letter)

You know that if misguidance arises from ignorance, its elimination is easy. However, if misguidance arises from knowledge and science, its elimination is difficult. In ancient times, the second type was one in a thousand. Among those found, only one in a thousand could come to the right path through guidance. Because such people are

conceited; they neither know nor realize their ignorance. I perceive that in this age, the Words known as the Risale-i Nur, which are spiritual remedies from the miraculous aspects of the Qur'an, have been endowed with a healing property for this contemporary epidemic of misguidance and heresy." (See Ibid., 5th Letter)

Most famous of these is "It's not the time of tariqa, it's the time to save faith. Many go to heaven without sufi orders, but no one goes to heaven without faith (Emirdağ Lahikası, 433)"¹⁰ – a quote shared by majority of the interviewees. Thus, it can be ascertained that the main objective of the Nur movement and consequently Meşveret community is what the community defines as "saving/reviving faith". Thus Hacer (26) argues: "As the Master said, our purpose is to save faith. Essentially, this is a group focused on strengthening one's belief —beginning with saving one's own faith. Engaging too much in trivial matters distracts a person's inner world". In fact, Erkan argues that the aim of the Nur movement is to establish the truths of faith on a rational foundation against the thought that rejects belief and to disseminate these truths (2015, p.112).

Thus, the movement does not carry any notion of sheikh, golden chain, dhikr – although a counterargument can be made in regard to the "Cevşen". Said Nursi is never mentioned as a sheikh or a part of any sufi lineage, mostly there is a verbal emphasis placed on Qur'an as the "sheikh" (Erkan, 2015, p.113). However, as I argued before and as the community have emphasized RNK is mostly described as the Sheik. Furthermore, the notion of tariqa is associated with an increase in spirituality, while Nur movement aims to establish and promote faith through rational basis against those that reject belief. It is critical to mention here that this inclination towards rational explanations for faith and religion stems from modernity, and two very different approaches to modernity are displayed by the İskenderpaşa and Meşveret communities. The Nur Movement appeared as a new form of organization and community by separating itself from the Sufi based communities. The new emerging movement partially shaped its identity in contrast to what it deemed to be obsolete within the contemporary milieu, thereby distinguishing itself from established norms and practices of the past.

The rejection of Sufism draws from the atmosphere in which the texts were written and read. Said Nursi produced his influential texts in a political context where sufi orders, practices and ideas were strictly prohibited and sufi personalities were prosecuted by the Turkish state,

¹⁰ "It is not the time for Sufi orders; rather, it is the time to save faith. Many enter Paradise without following a Sufi path, but no one can enter Paradise without faith. Therefore, it is necessary to work on preserving faith" (Bediüzzaman Said Nursi, *Tarihçe-i Hayat*, Yeni Asya Neşriyat, İstanbul 1996, p. 198).

beginning with the ban on sufi groups in 1925. Within this conjecture, a new modern movement solely based on the written text by Said Nursi aimed to provide what it deemed as the crucial tool in the revival of Islam for the masses. The revitalization of Islamic faith was done in order to accommodate modernity. The aim was to rebrand Islam to combat with the harmful effects of modernity and to reconcile Islamic faith by way of sustaining the contradictions between religion and rationality by way of the west vs Islam. Şerif Mardin emphasizes the destabilizing atmosphere as monumental in the success of the Nur movement. This disruption in societal networks and connections prompted people to seek new avenues for reconstructing their sense of identity. Mardin defines the movement boundaries as wide and blurred.

The social characteristics of its earliest following, just as those of its present votaries, are difficult to pinpoint. Since it does not operate on the model of a traditional Islamic sect, but claims it is a medium for the dissemination of the truth of the Qur'ān, its boundaries are diffuse: every person who joins in the task of dissemination is ipso facto a disciple. There are no initiation rites and there is no formal organizational structure; a precise count of the membership is, thus, impossible. (Mardin, 1989: 25-26)

Having established the movement's origins, the community asserts that rather than following *tasawwuf*, the current generation's primary need is a revival of faith—a goal achievable only through (T2) promoting faith based on the teachings of the RNK. The current environment demands faith-based movement that prioritizes rationality rather than behavioural or mystic fixations. As Ceylan (43) and Ayşe (27) underline, the community views the RNK as the ultimate means of faith revival, as it uniquely integrates reason with religious principles.

He states that in these end times, there are intense attacks on faith, and with the rise of scientific advancements and evidence-based knowledge, the traditional or imitative faith that people once maintained through customs is now challenging to uphold. Today, with customs losing their hold, imitative faith without critical reflection has become weak. The primary goal is to prove the six pillars of faith with evidence, moving from imitation to verification (*tahqiq*). The entire method of the *Risale-i Nur* is built around this principle. The focus of this mission, centred on faith, is about spreading the truths of faith rather than emphasizing worship or Sufism. I'm not sure if I have the authority to say this, but I believe that in our current time—particularly among the youth—the *Risale-i Nur*'s combination of science and knowledge, and its adaptability to modern needs, would be valuable for other communities as well. In my view, the *Risale-i Nur*

isn't just for our community; it's a resource that can be used by all communities. (Ceylan, 43)

I took this lesson personally, and because it was proven to me with logical explanations like 'look, this is how it is,' I became convinced. The *Risale-i Nur* approach is the fundamental need of this time, as it doesn't only appeal to reason but also speaks to the heart and soul. This approach provides true fulfilment and a satisfying effect on all human faculties. It speaks directly to this era, addressing the questions that arise today and presenting itself as a scholarly work, suited for our age. (Ayşe, 27)

Furthermore, members frequently refer to the RNK as a "shortcut," arguing that it contains all essential lessons, including those that *tasawwuf* might traditionally provide. Modern lifestyle according to the members is too fast paced to retain all the information, in this context, the RNK is valued for offering a "shortcut" by providing all the essential lessons concisely, allowing individuals to integrate faith with the demands of contemporary life. This point was repeatedly emphasized by the community members, who believe that the essence of the RNK ensures its enduring relevance throughout history. They view it as a distilled compilation of essential knowledge, designed to remain applicable across generations.

The Meşveret community places a strong emphasis on remaining within the bounds of the community rather than actively seeking new members from outside. Their approach to "missionary work" is largely inward-focused, with efforts directed toward educating their children and strengthening the community's own members. This inward orientation contrasts with the approach taken by the İsmailağa community, which actively engages in outreach and missionary work beyond the community's confines. For İsmailağa, (T1) the act of "commanding the right and forbidding the wrong" extends beyond internal education and includes efforts to engage with broader society, encouraging individuals from other communities to adopt their religious practices. This outreach is not just seen as a duty but as a means of ensuring the survival and growth of the community's values. While both communities adhere to the principle of *emr-i bi'l-ma'rûf, nehy-i ani'l-münker*, their methods reflect differing views on how this duty should be carried out—Meşveret's inward focus emphasizes nurturing and guiding their own, while İsmailağa's outward orientation stresses the importance of expanding their influence onto others. As Nurcan (51) suggests.

One of the most notable aspects I observed in this community is its strong emphasis on *emri bil maruf nehyi anil münker* (commanding the good, forbidding the evil). Efendi Hazretleri often emphasized this in his talks. Speaking broadly of İsmailağa, there are

dedicated individuals known as emri bil maruf practitioners. They are trained as religious teachers and receive comprehensive education to fulfill this role. Groups of these individuals are sent to various parts of Turkey to continue this work. This is of great importance in our community.

From my observations, women in İsmailağa community tend to engage their direct relatives and within the community through sohbet, while men are encouraged to venture outside the community's boundaries. The sohbet often act as part of this missionary work as well. There is a strong belief that women's faith is weaker than that of men and requires constant reminders. Therefore, the sohbet predominantly include reminders of right and wrong as well as exemplary stories that once again serve as reminders to women, highlighting that concessions can lead to falling out of God's grace. Furthermore, this emphasis on missionary work and the principle of commanding the right and forbidding the wrong has permeated the everyday culture of the İsmailağa community. Members, both men and women, often feel compelled to correct perceived misdeeds or improper behaviour when they encounter them, even in public spaces. It is common for women, in particular, to engage in this informal missionary work by warning each other during social gatherings if they observe something they consider inappropriate, particularly with regards to attire. Clothing is often the primary focus of these corrections, reflecting the community's strict standards for modesty. In fact, in numerous occasions, I myself have been approached by people in the gathering who have explained in detail the right dress code for a Muslim woman. This culture of vigilance ensures that members are continually reminded of the importance of adhering to the community's religious expectations, reinforcing their solidarity and collective responsibility to maintain the moral integrity of the group. This culture of vigilance to communal traditions not only reinforces religious adherence and tariqa values, but also plays a key role in shaping the community's organizational dynamics. This leads to a deeper exploration of how the structure and internal organization of the community function to uphold its values and foster a sense of collective responsibility. Thus, a closer look at the structure of the community will allow for an in depth understanding of the underlying principles that define and sustain its identity, highlighting the most crucial aspects that shape community's collective ethos and practices.

2.4. Unravelling the Ideal Community Structure: An Exploration of Organization and Dynamics

The communities examined in this study exhibit significant variation in their ideal community structures and functions. These differences manifest across various dimensions, including the prioritization of education, the presence of hierarchy, the emphasis on relevance

and inclusiveness, and the level of trust within the community. The cultural values and teachings of the sheiks within these communities appear to exert a notable influence on the collective ethos. Additionally, the composition of each community appears to be shaped by its approach to community isolation, which reflects community's concerns about the adverse impacts of modernity.

For example, the emphasis on education varies among the communities: while both religious and secular education are valued in the İskenderpaşa community, the İsmailağa community focuses exclusively on religious education. In contrast, the Meşveret community prioritizes moral education and emphasizes the role of families in shaping their children's upbringing, rather than relying on external influences. Thus, this section will focus on the structure of an ideal community as described by its members.

Tradition and Transformation: Medrese Education vs. Modern Schooling in İsmailağa and İskenderpaşa Communities

İsmailağa: (S1) Affirming unyielding commitment to medreses as the bedrock of the community.

The interviews with members of the İsmailağa community emphasize the central role of education in shaping their identity. Notably, there is a clear disapproval of İmam Hatip and İlahiyat (theology) institutions. When asked about the defining characteristics of an ideal community and what distinguishes İsmailağa from other communities, its female members consistently highlight the importance of the medrese (religious school) curriculum. For the members, an ideal community is rooted in an unwavering commitment to the medrese education as its foundation. This raises the question of why such emphasis is placed on education within the İsmailağa community, and what distinguishes the medrese education from others. Thus, a detailed description of the medrese institutions within the community is essential to fully grasp the significance and the central role it plays in shaping İsmailağa's identity and values. While the medreses in Turkey is neither novel nor unprecedented – as had been the norm in Muslim history for centuries – it retains a sense of authenticity and nostalgia within the contemporary landscape (İhsanoğlu, 2020). From the interviews and the compilation of sohbet by figures like Mahmut Ustaosmanoğlu and other influential members of the İsmailağa community, several key aspects regarding the medreses emerge.

Due to economic and environmental circumstances modern medreses started out in small apartments, although now there are several big apartment complexes outfitted to meet

the needs of medreses. Thus, today the facilities designated as “kurs” or “medrese” encompass a variety of structures, ranging from modest apartment units to single-house accommodations to larger apartment complexes or buildings capable of accommodating large number of students simultaneously. The spatial configuration of medrese structures typically involve repurposing areas other than the kitchen, bathroom, and teacher's quarters to serve as classrooms during the day and makeshift sleeping quarters at night, with cots doubling as beds for students. Teachers typically have separate sleeping quarters with provided beds. Each kurs is overseen by a single administrator responsible for both financial and administrative. Education offered in these institutions, focusing on Arabic language, jurisprudence, hadith, and creed, spans a duration of 4 to 5 years and operates in a manner akin to a boarding school. Stringent regulations govern the conduct of students within kurs, including mandatory attire consisting of long-sleeved dresses and hijabs worn at all times, even during sleep. Additional dress regulations may include wearing a second hijab for taqwa during lectures and prayers. Modesty is rigorously emphasized, with prohibitions on behaviours such as laughing out loud, crossing legs, and wearing certain types of attire or colours (Özyağlı, 2018; Işık,2020; Öğüt, 2023).

The classroom structure reflects a traditional Ottoman-style arrangement, with the teacher positioned at the centre and students seated in a circular formation around them, typically on the floor. Furnishings are minimal, with students sharing communal spaces for activities such as prayer, meals, and sleep. Students typically stay at dorms, and return home once every two weeks, with the kurs operating on two weeks or weekly for others. Decor within kurs tends to be sparse, featuring Quranic verses and basic furnishings such as cots and low desks for study purposes. Electronic devices are prohibited, aligning with the community's aversion to modern media and technology, and promoting a minimalist lifestyle with limited external communication. Although recently technology is being used during large lectures given to all students.

These female students at İsmailağa spend four years in a shared space alongside nearly 100 other students and their *hocas*, with strict reliance on specific behaviours and sartorial norms. The kurs thus serves as a tangible manifestation of “habitus,” the set of tendencies and internal structures inherent in individuals’ minds and bodies, embodying the community's accepted norms and practices. According to Bourdieu, habitus is subject to change and adaptation over time and experience, suggesting that the habitus acquired within the kurs environment is not static. Thus, the *sohbets* provided to the members of the community aid in reestablishing and maintaining the learned knowledge. Furthermore, commemorative acts

within this space contribute to the evolution of habitus, which remains fairly insulated from external influence.

Operating within a tightly knit, female-centric environment, students engage in daily prayers and interact exclusively with fellow community members, thereby internalizing the community's moral culture and evolving into devout individuals. This insular setting, despite its central urban location, minimizes interactions with the broader society, fostering the development of a distinct hierarchical structure and communal identity characterized by specific dress codes and practices, such as wearing the *çarsaf*. This hierarchical structure, rooted in concepts of taqwa and piety, holds paramount importance within the community, individuals such as *hocas* serving as a model of exemplary Muslims. The teacher-student relationship is highly esteemed within this context, although it is governed by unspoken rules delineating the nature of interactions due to the revered status of teachers in the community. As such, the *medrese/kurs* institution legitimizes the existing power structure by perpetuating hierarchical norms (Özyağlı, 2018).

The significance attributed to these institutions and their centrality within the İsmailağa community can be credited to Mahmut Ustaosmanoğlu's emphasis on *medreses*. The interviews have consistently emphasized the statement of the sheik that "there is a need for a medrese in every neighbourhood" and "every street should have both a girls' and boys' medrese" (Ustaosmanoğlu, 2013, p.100). The discourse emphasizing the importance of these institutions is evident in nearly half of Ustaosmanoğlu's sohbetes. The members have continuously quoted his famous sentence: "Friends! The thing we will focus on the most is establishing medreses. Even if there are only three students in each neighbourhood, there should be both a boys' and a girls' medrese" (Ustaosmanoğlu, *Sohbetler* 3, p. 143). Not only Ustaosmanoğlu but the previous sheikh Ali Haydar Gürbüzler has also been quoted during the interviews to emphasise the importance of *medreses*, often quoting his statement: "My son Mahmut, open a *kurs* for students to study in every street." Furthermore, the community takes pride in the emphasis placed on girls' education, as prior to Ustaosmanoğlu the İsmailağa community lacked any *medreses* for girls due to shortage of female hocas. In fact, Yeliz (34) emphasizes this by stating that: "Our community is one of knowledge. I don't think any other community places such importance on learning; it's what sets us apart from them. Efendi Hazretleri (Mahmut Ustaosmanoğlu) placed great emphasis on women's education. The medreses were all opened during his time". This theme will be further discussed in the next chapter.

The overview of the medrese structure provided above offers essential context for understanding the techniques used to establish this strategy. Primarily, this strategy emphasizes (T1) the authenticity of the education offered within the community, positioning it as superior to both mainstream schools and other communities' educational approaches. The primary reason the community views medreses as their cornerstone is their belief that medrese education represents the most authentic form of Islamic education. Thus, when they were asked the following question, "What are your thoughts on the education provided by theology faculties and İmam Hatip schools? Do you find the education provided to be sufficient and accurate?" there was a unanimous response in reference to the inadequacy of legal institutions in regard to religious education. The community perceives medreses as providing pure and authentic education, contrasting it with what they view as impure education offered by state institutions. This is supported by the two arguments. First, there is a strong belief that modern education in itself is corrupt, therefore is not compatible with religious education. In fact, when asked whether they would send their children to schools if they were to adopt medrese format, with all classes selected by the *hocas* themselves and incorporating a modern curriculum; they have often replied that it would still lack *feyz* and would corrupt the Islamic education. When asked Kader (41), if schools operated as *mederses* would she send her kids to these schools she responded by stating that it would be impossible for these schools to provide *feyz*.

Exactly, that's what I'm saying. I did not send my kids to school. If you send someone to Efendi Hazretleri's medrese, they'll come out as one of us, directed towards our path. But if you send them elsewhere, they won't turn out the same. They'll be mixed, influenced by different ideas. The education they receive will inevitably reflect on them. They won't have the spiritual illumination (*feyz*) that comes from here. After all, the books taught in school aren't from the Ahl al-Sunnah perspective, and this will certainly have an impact on them. Our medrese model is one that advances solely through Islamic sciences. Now, if we were to add worldly sciences like mathematics, physics, and social studies alongside it, and still produce hafizes (those who memorize the Qur'an) while also providing Islamic medrese knowledge, the result wouldn't be the same. Even if the child trained there is deeply faithful, connected to our community, and devoted to Efendi Hazretleri, they will not turn out the same as one raised here. There's a difference between those raised within our medrese and those educated outside; the latter will be shaped by their personal inclinations. The one educated outside will have to live according to secular law, and consequently, their path will be influenced by it.

In above quotation Kader mentions that she would not send her kids to these hypothetical schools believing in that modern education corrupts, however when asked for a tangible example regarding how it can corrupt, she does not provide examples. The same response was also provided in other interviews. This may be attributed to the “believed” authenticity of the education within the community. Furthermore, the İsmailağa community suggests that extensive theological study, for instance, should not be encouraged for everyone, as it may lead to questioning beliefs. Kader again emphasizes this by stating “These are very profound topics. I believe they shouldn’t be taught to everyone, as they might lead to questioning or confusion. In my view, only a certain level of information should be provided to most people”.

The authentic medreses education in return stems from the carefully curated curriculum that exclusively includes texts that are approved and deemed acceptable by the community. These texts are chosen to avoid any content that may raise doubts or encourage students to question established beliefs. As outlined earlier in this chapter, there exists a pre-approved list of names and books considered to be in line with the beliefs of the community, adhering to the principles of Ahl al-Sunnah wa'l-Jama'ah. Instructors typically do not endorse or utilise any materials that have not been sanctioned by the community. This ensures that the education provided within the community adheres strictly to their beliefs and values, guarding against any perceived impurities such as references to fabricated hadiths or doctrinal controversies, although the authenticity of the hadeeth thought by the community have often been debated. This concern regarding the absence of authentic education in theology schools is also echoed in the Meşveret community. When asked if these schools provide genuine education, the responses were similar. However, it is noteworthy that the Meşveret community does not prioritize religious education to the same extent as the İsmailağa community. Instead, the emphasis is placed on revitalizing faith, which is believed to be achievable only through RNK.

Foucault's concept of discourse posits that power is exercised through the control and regulation of language and knowledge. He argues that those who wield power also control the formation and dissemination of discourse, thereby shaping the dominant discourse order of a society. This discourse order reflects and reinforces existing power structures and hierarchies within society. Thus, in the context of the İsmailağa community, the controlled discourse, achieved through selective education and the labelling of dissenting voices as not aligned with the approved discourse of "ehl-i sünnet," contributes to the creation of a mistrustful environment. This environment fosters socialization within the group while breeding suspicion

and scepticism towards those outside the group. Furthermore, in his work "Governmentality," Foucault delineates three distinct forms of discourse: those of the Church and confession, state biopolitics, and education. He underscores the significance of education as a mechanism through which power is wielded to assert dominance over the docile body. Foucault characterizes the docile body as malleable and shapeable, likening it to "something that can be made; out of a formless clay, an inapt body [from which] the machine required can be constructed" (Foucault, 1978/2012, p. 135). He further posits that the docile body is predisposed to being willingly "manipulated, shaped, trained" (Foucault, 1978/2012, p. 136). Individuals, according to Foucault, undergo processes of training to conform to societal norms and expectations in various institutions such as schools, hospitals, prisons, and mental institutions.

The *medreses* discussed earlier exemplify Foucault's concept by controlling discourse through the emphasis on "ehl-i sünnet" and employing constant surveillance to regulate and influence societal behaviour. In doing so, they contribute to the production of docile bodies – compliant individuals who are conditioned to perform designated tasks and uphold the prevailing social order. Consequently, Foucault's notion of the "docile, useful body" underscores how the body becomes a locus of political contestation, shaped and inscribed by power relations (Deveaux, 1996).

The emphasis on *medrese* education can also be observed on the community's mission statement in their webpage.

True scholars can only be trained in the medrese.

The knowledge that a certain segment of society must be familiar with includes the sciences of the Qur'an (recitation, Tajweed, and memorization), Aqeedah (creed), Fiqh, Hadith, Tafsir, Tasawwuf (Sufism), and the Arabic sciences, which are the path to Islamic knowledge. Scholars acquire the identity of a scholar as a result of studying these sciences and respond to the need for the affairs of society to be carried out in accordance with the will of Allah. Great scholars like Shaykh al-Islam Mustafa Sabri Efendi, Imam Zahid al-Kawthari, and Ömer Nasuhi Bilmen have all been trained in medreses, and the only institution capable of producing scholars like them is the medrese. As the İsmailağa Community, we consider it our primary goal to effectively perpetuate the medrese institution inherited from our ancestors. We base our approach

on the teaching method of our guide, Mahmud Efendi Hazrat, and the principle of "Let there be a male and a female medrese in every neighbourhood!"¹¹.

Furthermore, (T2) the authenticity of the education is drawn from its legitimacy that stems from its heritage. The Naqshi-Khalidi order has a long medrese tradition that was later adapted and expanded by the Ismailağa community. The Ismailağa *mederses* try to maintain the same structure of Ottoman medreses, purely focusing on religious education, such as Arabic, Quran, Fiqh, etc. Medrese is used to refer to Ottoman style education centres, most famous of those were the Sahn-ı Seman Medreses. The Ismailağa community's *mederese* education follows the same curriculum and entails classes such as Sarf, Nahv, Hadith, Tafseer, Fiqh, Quran recitation and Aqidah. The community's perception of the education it provides as being "pure" and the curriculum being regarded as resembling the Ottoman-era medreses, elucidates a pervasive sense of Ottoman nostalgia within the community that permeates various facets of its identity, serving as a point of reference and a source of legitimacy. Consequently, the community's adherence to the Ottoman-style curriculum not only reinforces its legitimacy but also ensures its steadfast and unchanging nature.

Humphreys (2002) argues that focusing on nostalgia helps us better understand the temporal aspects of organizational identity. He suggests that nostalgia provides access to a shared heritage of identity-related beliefs and values, serves as emotional support during times of change, and aids in individual-group identification. These nostalgic narratives foster a sense of unity and offer role models. Through nostalgia, the community links past intentions to future aspirations, legitimizes its position, and establishes boundaries to preserve its identity. These shared references connect members of the historical community across time.

Öğüt (2023) posits that this emphasis on adopting the Ottoman curriculum is rooted in the tradition of tekke-medrese, which integrates education with Sufi spiritual practices. This integrated approach, according to the research, suggests that rabita is incorporated as part of a comprehensive educational program conducted concurrently and in a communal setting. However, it should be noted that during the course of my research, there was no evidence of students engaging with texts solely focused on Sufi teachings, apart from Mukaşefetü'l Kulüp. While students convene in a large room after the tahajjud prayer for rabita sessions, these sessions are conducted individually, thereby ensuring minimal communication during the process. Therefore, the assertion that the curriculum reflects Ottoman-style education seems to

¹¹ See. <https://www.ismailaga.org.tr/talebe>

hinge primarily on the Ottoman Empire's historical emphasis on adherence to Sharia law. Moreover, interviews underscore the historical fact that Ottoman sultans themselves were graduates of medreses, highlighting the esteemed status of such educational institutions in Ottoman society.

It is also noteworthy that while the community extols medreses as the epitome of authentic knowledge, interviews reveal the challenges associated with working as an instructor in other medreses. Typically, teachers tend to remain within the institution where they received their education, a practice largely encouraged by medreses themselves. This is reflected in the tradition of medreses often requiring newcomers, even those transferring from other institutions, to start from the beginning of the curriculum. This reflects the lack of trust between medreses and begs the question of the legitimacy of either the education or the methodology of raising *hocas*. Even though they claim that madrasas follow similar curricula, they often do not employ teachers from other madrasas.

The İsmailağa community also (T3) distinguishes itself by criticizing other communities for their lack of emphasis placed on medrese education. Since the community endorses “authentic education” as part of its identity and even goes further to suggest that they are the true sources of fiqh education, there is a repeated emphasis on other communities’ lack of education. When asked the question, what makes an ideal community? There was a unanimous response in explaining that other communities mostly focus on either charity or social aspects while the İsmailağa community mostly focuses on education. In fact, a hierarchy based on education can be viewed by the response provided by the community members. . Merve (27) suggests that the İsmailağa community is the only community that provides authentic education amongst other communities. “That is to say, no community emphasizes knowledge as much as ours. Additionally, I don’t think there is any other community that provides as thorough an education in *fiqh* as we do. We strive not to make any concessions. Our aim is always to teach the truth (hak).” According to İsmailağa members, other conservative communities lack an authentic Islamic education or provide inadequate education, while the conservative people that are not affiliated with any community often only provide modern education to their kids, while the same is said for secular people

The community further underscores the importance of education within an ideal community, (T4) particularly emphasizing its role in fostering a deep understanding of fiqh (Islamic jurisprudence). It is asserted that a reliable fatwa, or religious decree, depends on a genuine comprehension of fiqh, a level of understanding supposedly only attained within the

educational framework of İsmailağa. Consequently, community members exclusively seek fatwas from the community's hotline, thereby ensuring that their religious guidance aligns with the community's perspectives. This practice also serves to cultivate and maintain a cadre of religious scholars (hocas) who reflect the values and beliefs of the community. Additionally, by questioning the authenticity of the Diyanet (Turkish Directorate of Religious Affairs), the community asserts its independence and autonomy, further consolidating its internal power dynamics. When asked who they particularly go to for religious questions? When asked whether they consult the Diyanet for *fatwas*, members of the İsmailağa community consistently responded negatively, expressing that the Diyanet is not adequately equipped to provide the needed religious rulings. In fact, Kader (41) responded to the questions by stating that; “No, they (Diyanet) are not receiving proper education. We have a *fatwa* hotline, and we refer to it more often. Also, the state issues *fatwas* that serve its own interests, so you cannot trust them.” This reliance on independent community sources for religious guidance is unique to İsmailağa, as both Meşveret and İskenderpaşa members reported being more open to consulting the Diyanet alongside İsmailağa for religious questions. Interestingly, members from both Meşveret and İskenderpaşa frequently mentioned that they trust İsmailağa to provide the most authentic answers, thus underscoring the latter’s authority in religious rulings despite differing approaches to external consultation.

In contrast, the İskenderpaşa community argues that a modern community should have highly educated members. They emphasize the importance of both religious and secular education, asserting that in today's world, education plays a crucial aspect in shaping well-rounded individuals who can effectively navigate the complexities of modern society as Muslims.

İskenderpaşa: (S1) Prioritizing modern education

A notable contrast in educational approach is evident within the İskenderpaşa community, as it extends beyond religious instruction to encompass modern education as well. This dual emphasis on both religious and secular education is consistently advocated by the community's sheikhs, as highlighted by Sözer (2019). Moreover, Sözer (2019) emphasizes the community's particular focus on women's education. However, his findings regarding attitudes toward higher education for women appear to differ slightly from those of this study. While Sözer reports mixed responses on this matter, my research indicates that the mixed opinions primarily revolve around the circumstances surrounding educational opportunities (mixed gender education and mixed gender working conditions for women) rather than the concept of

women pursuing higher education. Notably, Sözer conducted his research in early 2019, and subsequent developments suggest ongoing evolution within the community's perspectives, particularly toward more progressive views. Within the broader strategy of prioritizing modern education, two key approaches emerge: (T1) framing education as an essential component of a modern society and (T2) establishing hierarchical distinctions among communities based on educational attainment.

The İskenderpaşa community's approach to education is vastly different from that of the İsmailağa community. İskenderpaşa strongly advocates for modern education, positioning it as a foundational element critical for the community's adaptability to a contemporary world. This emphasis is so significant that women within the community frequently pursue advanced degrees. The prioritization of education is deeply embedded, having been established by previous sheikhs and continually reinforced by the current sheikh as well. Consequently, the community actively encourages the formation of educational initiatives, including the establishment of the Critical and Analytical Thinking Platform (Kritik ve Analitik Düşünme Platformu) in 2015. The platform's mission statement underscores this commitment, stating:

We need to support skilled professionals, intellectuals, specialists, educators, traders, industrialists, and ultimately all well-intentioned, insightful individuals in learning critical-analytical thinking so they can better understand the systems and organizations shaping global affairs and evaluate their policies and outcomes.¹²

The primary objective of the community as a whole is to cultivate educated Muslim youth. The community actively promotes education by establishing schools and providing scholarships to students, with a particular emphasis on supporting women's educational pursuits. Furthermore, lifelong learning is strongly emphasized, regardless of age, and is supported through community projects and gatherings that promote engagement with a wide range of reading materials. One interviewee highlighted this commitment, mentioning that she continues to attend Arabic classes sponsored by her community, emphasizing the importance of continuously learning new things.

For instance, our teacher (sheikh; Nureddin Coşan) says that just having a university degree isn't enough. Do a master's, whether you're married or single. Our late teacher used to say the same. Now our new teacher, who continues his legacy, says something similar about studying and self-improvement. Being a woman or being old is not an

¹² See. <https://www.kritikanalitik.global/>

excuse. To put it broadly, regardless of being male or female, young or old, we should always be ready for education and self-development. He says we should keep growing, that these are not valid excuses. In other words, saying, 'I'm old' or 'I'm this gender' shouldn't be an excuse. He emphasizes that we should always be in a state of learning and educating ourselves. (Rana, 67)

Similar to the İsmailağa community, the İskenderpaşa community also views a hierarchy among communities based on educational attainment. When asked about the fundamental characteristic that distinguishes them from other communities, members frequently cite education as the key factor. In fact, Lale (34) states, “It comes back to the same thing—being more educated. More educated”. Community’s strong emphasis on education has resulted in a high proportion of members with advanced degrees; nearly half of the interviewees possess some level of higher education. This emphasis is often cited as a distinguishing feature when compared to other communities. When asked about what sets them apart, interviewees frequently highlighted the community’s commitment to education and noted the lack of similar educational opportunities in other communities. Many specifically mentioned the İsmailağa community, suggesting that by restricting women’s access to formal education, it reinforces traditional gender roles and maintains the status quo. By limiting educational opportunities for women, they argue, İsmailağa effectively promotes the role of women as housewives and little else. Nesrin (47) further asserts that:

Our community places great importance on learning both religious sciences and social and natural sciences, integrating this knowledge into everyday life. For instance, our şeyh says that if you need to learn Chinese or English to be useful, then you should learn Chinese and English. In other communities, this is often discouraged. No matter what job you do, you can perform very serious services and earn significant rewards. But this is done through education. Starting from a young age. For instance, you should teach a girl how to ride a horse, how to handle a weapon, and how to shoot. You will teach this to both girls and boys. For example, you will teach both girls and boys how to drive a car. While İsmailağa did not approve of women driving, Esad Efendi encouraged saying, 'Get your wives driving licenses, teach your wives to ride horses, and teach them how to administer injections. The İsmailağa community does not send anyone to school at all, especially not girls. They generally allow boys to be educated only until a certain age. We've all seen Cübbeli's video about the English (language), but I think not seeing the bigger picture behind it is a mistake. I believe it's very important for a community to prioritize education. Our teacher (Esad Çoşan) placed

great importance on valuing women's education, and our current teacher does the same. If you do not educate the women, then she cannot educate her children.

Nilüfer (50) states similar points.

Women must be educated in terms of knowledge. They should read and possess scholarly qualifications. Economically, they should have the skills to support themselves and their families. So, if you ask me what type of woman the community expects, it is a woman who is educated—not only having completed university but also pursuing a master's degree or even a doctorate, someone who stands out in her field, exemplary in her prayers, morals, and capable of being a role model for others. I know that a respectable identity and character are desired. This is what is valued. However, if you look at Mahmut Efendi's community in Fatih, the prescribed role for women there is to don the *çarşaf*, to serve their husbands and children within the home, and to receive their education through the students we have raised. Essentially, they are expected to give birth to children, while men are obligated to take care of the woman and child. The responsibility lies with the man, and there is a prevailing belief that women do not need to work.

This observation is intriguing, given that the majority of women I interviewed expressed the belief that a woman's place is at home once she has children, and many were housewives themselves. In fact, only four of the interviewees were working full-time. However, there is a prevailing theme that women should be able to take care of themselves if necessary. By prohibiting access to modern education, women are often perceived as dependent on a male figure, specifically their husbands. Although most women choose to stay at home, obtaining an education empowers them to maintain a degree of independence and self-sufficiency.

As Gellner (1983) expresses “The ideal of universal literacy and the right to education is a well-known part of the pantheon of modern values (p.28). The emphasis placed on education is embedded in the ideology of striving to reach modern standards. Interestingly, there appears to be a higher number of educated women in the community compared to men. In my interviews, when I inquired about their husbands' educational backgrounds, most reported that their partners had only completed undergraduate degrees and were primarily engaged in business. This discrepancy may be attributed to two factors. First, women often have more time to pursue education since they are not expected to work and support their families financially. This allows them greater opportunities to attain higher degrees. Second,

education offers women a chance to gain influence and assert their presence within the community. The community actively encourages women to pursue education, which transforms the educational sphere into a domain for women, providing them with opportunities, albeit within a limited capacity. This creates a small space for women to exist outside of the home, allowing for a degree of autonomy. Finally, this emphasis on education within both the İsmailağa and İskenderpaşa communities serves as a foundation for understanding the broader structures at play. We will now delve into structural aspects of Meşveret and İskenderpaşa.

Hierarchy and Trust Building in Meşveret and İskenderpaşa

Meşveret: (S2) Absence of hierarchy; presenting their community as a non-hierarchical structure.

For members of the Meşveret and İskenderpaşa communities, the concept of an ideal community is characterized by the absence of hierarchy, a departure from the hierarchical structure evident in the İsmailağa community. However, the emphasis on this absence of hierarchy is rooted in different underlying principles. Meşveret argues that a hierarchical structure is unnecessary for the functioning of a religious community, advocating instead for a more egalitarian approach. On the other hand, the İskenderpaşa community promotes individual autonomy, encouraging each member to make decisions independently rather than relying heavily on the directives of religious leaders such as *hocas*.

The Nur Movement stands out from other communities due to its unique structure, characterized not only by internal divisions, with numerous offshoots and branches, but also by the operation of several of these branches without a central leader. However, there is a consensus in the literature regarding the emphasis placed on the texts rather than on individual leaders, a principle heavily promoted by Nursi himself (Mardin 1989, Efe 2013; Erkan, 2015; Fidan, 2015). Consequently, the community regards the works of Nursi as the ultimate authority and presents itself as devoid of any hierarchical structure. This discursive strategy involves several techniques, the foremost of which is the (T1) acknowledgment of RNK's exemplary role as "educator extraordinaire".

The community have greatly underlined the importance placed on Said Nursi but more importantly the teachings of RNK. This emphasis on the texts as mentioned earlier is due to Nursi's emphasis on it as well as underlining that this community is not a tariqa-based community thus does not need a succession of leadership. Nursi argued that sufi order could not revitalize Islam and disapproved the rigid relationship between the Sufi sheikhs and

disciples. The discussion regarding the nature of the community is still ambiguous, the community itself does not recognize any sufi culture or heritage, but scholars have argued that the community draws heavily from Sufi aspects and in fact Nursi's method of argumentation and thinking were influenced by the sufi orders in Anatolia and he heavily read the works of Sirhindi and Ahmed Ziyaüddin Gümüşhanevi, both highly esteemed Sufi sheikhs. The strong Tasawwuf themes can be witnessed in RNK. However, there is an overwhelming indication that the later in his life Nursi strongly advocated against Sufism's ability to stimulate modern Muslims (Efe, 2015). Thus, this theme was strongly mentioned in most of the interviews.

Moreover, interviewees noted that tasawwuf (Sufism) is not essential for attaining taqwa (piety), a view upheld by both the İskenderpaşa and İsmailağa communities. When asked if the RNK includes Sufi teachings, members confirmed it does; however, they often described their community not as a tasawwuf community but as one that incorporates tasawwuf within a broader framework. For instance, Sare (47) suggests "RNK contains it, we can say that it contains elements of Sufism, although certainly not a large part. Sufi groups are quite idealistic, almost dreamy. Beyond that, I would say they adapt certain things according to the times. But due to this idealism, I feel there's a sort of gap left in between." This distinction is significant, as the community suggests that while the RNK encompasses various teachings, including those from Sufism, its primary focus remains on "preserving faith." Hacer (26) cites an example from the RNK, which describes tasawwuf as a "fruit"—a valuable but non-essential addition. This metaphor is often used in the community to emphasize that while tasawwuf can increase one's spiritual journey, it is not a necessity.

For example, *tasawwuf* brightens the image of paradise. But people nowadays have issues with faith and with practicing Islam. It says, for instance, that *esasati imaniye* (the essentials of faith) are nourishment. It describes *tariqat* (the spiritual path) as a fruit. Everyone needs nourishment, but only those who are already full need fruit. You must first satisfy the hunger. The truths of Islam and faith are nourishment, in that sense. Otherwise, if I had the time, I would eat fruit—why wouldn't I? But I truly don't have the time, and that's how I think about it in my own life as well.

When asked if Said Nursi was regarded as a Sufi leader, members acknowledged his influence from Sufi figures in his writings but clarified that he was not a Sufi sheikh. Additionally, when questioned if tasawwuf was essential for fully living out Islam, they responded negatively, contrasting the responses from the İskenderpaşa and İsmailağa communities, where tasawwuf is considered essential. Thus, the members have also often

stated that the structure of the Sufi communities are outdated stating that a modern community should have a non-hierarchical structure that only follows RNK. Furthermore, the strict hierarchical structure typical of Sufi-influenced communities, where a rigid relationship between a sheikh and disciples or *hoca* and students prevail, were criticized by the members. Instead, the ideal modern community, according to the community's perspective, should foster an egalitarian environment where all members enjoy equal standing. Ceylan (43) states that the only teacher within the community is RNK.

We see the *Risale-i Nur* as our teacher. Anyone who kneels before the *Risale-i Nur* is a student, whether they have been studying for ten years or fifteen. When studying, we never assume a teaching role over others. No matter how long you've been involved, each lesson brings a new understanding from the *Risale-i Nur*. Sometimes, a person attending for the first time gains insight that a sister of fourteen years benefits from. I believe that assuming the title of 'teacher' in such settings can be more harmful than helpful. Even our *ustad* (master) referred to it as his teacher, saying, 'I leave this with you; I also learned from it.'

Furthermore, Hacer (26) emphasizes the status of *abla* within the community by stating that,

In the past, as you mentioned, there was a more systematic approach. A sister who had studied the *Risale-i Nur* deeply and benefitted greatly from it might open a *medrese* together with students like me, providing structured *Risale-i Nur* education. However, this method varies depending on the person who understands its principles. Some genuinely encourage others to grow according to our *ustad's* customs and approach, but do not act as a teacher themselves—this is how it should be. Our usual system works this way. For instance, I have seen this fully implemented in our *medrese*; there is no formal teacher structure. Instead, we already have a teacher, the *Risale-i Nur*, and many guiding principles in hand.

However, it is noteworthy to mention that each *medrese* is overseen by an *abla* (sister) or *abi* (brother). The circumstances surrounding the appointment of these *abla/abi* figures are not widely understood within the community, with members generally suggesting that such appointments occur as needed. The absence of a formal appointment system within the community diminishes the significance of the title *abi/abla*, eliminating the need for a hierarchical structure as was the case in *İsmailağa* with the appointment of *hocas*.

The prevailing sentiment within the community is that the ultimate authority, surpassing any individual figure such as the "hoca" (teacher) or sheikh or any leader, is vested in the text itself. This perspective is supported by several arguments. Firstly, the text is perceived as highly ambiguous, yet it is encouraged for each individual to engage with it directly, without undue explanation or attempts to uncover hidden meanings. Consequently, individuals are encouraged to read and interpret the text for themselves, as it is often stated that each person will derive their own understanding from it. In this way, the text is seen as providing individuals with the insights and guidance that they personally require. However, as mentioned there is also warning against "over" interpretation, as the community warns against misinterpreting or over-emphasizing certain aspects of the text.

However, there is an emphasis on the belief that the text contains answers to all the contemporary questions faced by Muslims today. Thus, the text is encouraged to not overexplain but from my experiences the *ablas* are given permission to explain certain things as it is a complex and vague text. Another technique interpreted from the interviews in regard to the emphasis on lack of a hierarchical structure of the community is downplay or minimizing the significance of Ablalık/Abilik status. In the İsmailağa community there is a strong reliance on hocas to oversee both the medreses and consequently the whole community is dependent on the production of the hocas. These hocas are raised starting from an early age and are subjected to 4 or 5 years of medrese education that results in graduation around 20-22 years of age. In contrast the Meşveret community have *abla* or *abi* that do not necessary claim to possess knowledge any Arabic, fiqh or other knowledge that is needed in İsmailağa community instead there are no "formal" education required within the community. The followers of the community refer to themselves as Nur students (Nur talebeleri). Fidan (2015) argues that the community lacks hoca-talebe (teacher-student) relationship, that is usually considered a crucial aspect of both communities and tariqas. It is important to mention here that the ablas are considered to be managers and are entrusted to gather people for readings (ders). There is also the notion that the ablas are there for spiritual guidance rather than as a teacher. The meaning of the word literally translates to older sister; thus, the connotation of older sister- younger sibling relationship is what is expected within the community. Fidan in her research explores the Nur community with its many branches, deduces that the relationship between abla and the student resembles that of a family member. This relationship is based on compassion that resembles that of sister-younger sibling, or mother and child. Thus, there no clear set lines that indicate a hierarchical status in the community. This is also evident in their gatherings. The structure of the community relies on collective readings of RNK. In the gatherings anyone who

wasn't to participate in the readings are encouraged, thus there is no one certain that reads every gathering. This ensures a lack of hierarchical formation. Another instance is the emphasis placed on the community as "Meşveret" which literally translates to "shura" or consultation or deliberation. This indicates that a making decision relies on a mutual agreement to be reached among the members of a community, ensuring that a collective reached among the stakeholders. Thus, even the smallest of decisions according to the members of the community are made in these deliberative gatherings. Thus, every decision made in reference to the community is agreed upon by the majority. Thus, a collective decision-making process (meşveret) that prioritizes unanimity affirms the perception of an ideal environment. That being said, the members also suggest that there are larger Meşveret conferences held that are only open to certain group of people. This indicates that there is a certain hierarchy that is unseen or felt within the community. My observations in various settings indicate that there are certain hierarchies within the community especially in larger medreses, however the smaller gatherings this hierarchy is often unfelt or only seen in form of management of schedules and other miscellaneous things.

Members of the Meşveret community emphasize the importance of (T3) devaluing hierarchical frameworks present in other communities, asserting that such structures are antiquated and obsolete. The interviews notably underscore the role of the sheikh and, in certain communities, the hocas, deeming them unnecessary in contemporary society. According to the community's perspective, the positions held by hocas and sheikhs only foster pride and cultivate loyalty and trust in individuals, rather than in the teachings of religion itself. Consequently, this fosters obedience to specific individuals rather than adherence to religious principles, resulting in individuals blindly following others. For instance, the members have given examples of other communities specifically İsmailağa and Süleymanlılar comparing that these communities' emphasis on sheiks and hoca promote an individual-centred approach and distract from the real purpose. Ceylan (43) mentions that there is no need for hocas in this environment.

In communities like İsmailağa, the structure is much more hierarchical and systematic. I believe there's even a kind of rivalry among hocas. They appoint children as hocas from a young age and have them give lessons. This system does not exist in the Nur community. If a child attends the lesson and listens to a few words, that's already sufficient for us—everything else will come on its own. Opportunities are abundant, but faith is lacking. Because of this concern, they don't overwhelm the children with a rigid system.

Meşveret and the İskenderpaşa community share a similarity in their promotion of a non-hierarchical or egalitarian approach to an ideal community. However, their underlying motivations differ. In the Meşveret community, the RNK acts as the ultimate authority alongside the Quran, whereas in the İskenderpaşa community, members are encouraged to question everything other than the Quran. This contrast highlights the emphasis placed on individualization and critical thinking within the İskenderpaşa community, in contrast to the reliance on authoritative texts within the Meşveret community. Furthermore, while the İskenderpaşa community adheres to a Sufi-based structure, characterized by a mürid-mürşid (disciple-sheikh) relationship and a strong tradition of tasawwuf stemming from tekke practices, both communities emphasize the importance of the sheikh as a figure of wisdom and spiritual guidance. This emphasis on the sheikh's direct connection to God in İskenderpaşa remains prominent across generations, despite variations in individual engagement with practices such as rabita. Thus, while the İskenderpaşa community also promotes an egalitarian approach, it diverges significantly from the practices observed in the Meşveret community.

İskenderpaşa: (S4) Downplaying the significance of internal hierarchy within the community.

The İskenderpaşa community downplays the importance of internal hierarchy, by presenting its structure as inclusive and egalitarian. This indicates that, leaders or senior members or hocas are typically depicted not as authoritative figures but as guides or mentors. By emphasizing this approach, İskenderpaşa aim to foster a sense of unity and minimize hierarchical distinctions that they view as promoting egocentric approach and division among members. The main technique for this strategy includes (T1) promoting self-directed learning over passive adherence. The absence of hierarchy within the İskenderpaşa community is closely aligned with its doctrinal principles, which as mentioned above prioritize education above all else. Unlike other communities, İskenderpaşa emphasizes self-learning rather than passive adherence to authority. Since its inception under Mehmet Zaid Kotku, the community has attracted highly educated individuals and university students, fostering a culture of continuous education and lifelong learning. As a result, İskenderpaşa disciples are among the most educated groups within the community. This educational emphasis is reflected in the generational education gap, with older members of the community, particularly women affected by historical head covering laws, having limited access to formal education. Nevertheless, many of these individuals have since pursued online courses and obtained degrees. In contrast, younger members of the community, whom I have interviewed, are predominantly university graduates with multiple higher institute diplomas. Moreover, there is

a consistent emphasis on cautioning individuals against blind adherence to authority figures, with an overarching ethos of encouraging independent thinking. Consequently, when asked about the characteristics of an ideal religious community, İskenderpaşa members frequently mention the absence of hierarchical structures. For instance, Nilüfer (50) emphasizes that the community's most significant distinction from others lies in its focus on education rather than blind adherence to authority. She also states that unlike other communities the İskenderpaşa community relies less on hocas and promotes equality based on education.

In my opinion, the most distinguishing feature is that, unlike other communities where the Sheikh's statements are of utmost importance and are accepted unconditionally without question, this community prioritizes the teachings of the Quran and Sunnah above all else. These hold the first position in importance. Our current leader acknowledges that he can make mistakes and that he, too, is human, stating that if he is wrong, he can be corrected; he does not assert that everything he says is absolutely right. In fact, he does not engage in discussions himself, which I find very appealing. He encourages those who wish to listen to discussions to do so from those who have expertise in different fields. I find this approach remarkable. It suggests that he may even see himself as inadequate in this regard because those individuals have dedicated significant time, perhaps their entire lives, to acquiring knowledge in this area. This understanding is something I greatly appreciate. I have seen İsmailağa community and the Süleymacılar. They become hocas at such a young age and stop learning all together after. There is also polarization in the community based on hocas. We do not have that, we do not have prominent hocas, everyone is treated equal.

Interviews have also highlighted the presence of checks and balances to prevent any individual from maintaining authority indefinitely. Rümeysa (55) specifically mentioned her experience stating that she has been constantly moved around to ensure circulation and prevent establishing authority.

I moved around a lot. This is our system. For instance, a person can only stay in the same position for three years. I worked in different units, doing public relations for six years, and then spent three years in the education unit. In this way, I worked in various units for about 10-15 years. In our community, roles are always rotated so that no one becomes too comfortable in one place. It's not a situation where you come in and stay as a hoca in the same place for years.

When inquired about the perceived shortcomings of other communities, members of İskenderpaşa community underscored the prevalent hierarchical structures within many tariqa-based communities, which they argue perpetuate the status quo and inhibit individualism. They contend that such communities fail to provide equal opportunities for all members and discourage personal growth by relying heavily on hierarchical authority figures, such as sheikhs and hocas, for guidance and decision-making. In contrast, İskenderpaşa fosters a culture of individualism and meritocracy, facilitated in part by the support of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that fund community projects and promote active engagement among members through various initiatives and educational courses. Criticisms of the reliance on hierarchical authority figures extend to the educational sphere, where the community prioritizes self-learning and critical thinking over unquestioning obedience to higher-status individuals. By emphasizing education as a means of empowerment and merit-based achievement, İskenderpaşa seeks to establish a hierarchical structure founded on individual merit rather than traditional institutional roles based on positions of authority. This approach reflects a broader commitment to promoting personal development and autonomy within the community. The İskenderpaşa community perceives a deficiency in the educational system provided in İsmailağa's framework. Specifically, members express concerns regarding the inadequacy of the four-year educational program offered by İsmailağa, noting that it does not equip individuals with the requisite qualifications to assume the role of a hoca within the community.

Generally, the people among us are educated individuals. When you look at them, they are educated, not blindly ignorant. They are more educated. When someone asks a question, there are people who can answer it scientifically. I don't understand this. They finish elementary school and then go to the medrese. Before five years pass, they become teachers. What do they know to become like that? People study theology for five years and know nothing. What are they learning that allows them to do this? Then they tell you not to do this or that, etc. There is a lot of ignorance. (Kübra, 61)

Furthermore, the final technique for this strategy revealed that (T3) female members believe that they are provided same opportunities as their male counterparts and the community fosters a cooperation between genders that was not present with the earlier sheikh. Most argue that the progressive views of the community have enabled them to create an equal footing for the community to operate on. Recent initiatives have underscored this commitment to equality, with projects funded equally between male and female *waqf* (charitable foundations), and increased collaboration observed between them. Moreover, members highlight the presence of women in all branches, including executive decision-making structures, ensuring their equal

representation. The role of the hoca-anne (sheikh's wife) is also emphasized, with members noting her active involvement across various aspects of community life, striving to enhance all facets of communal functioning.

Because women's associations and men's associations were separate. Everything was always divided, but now even that has changed. Our leader united everything under one banner. Now, there are specific groups working together. There are no longer separate groups for women and men; it's all integrated. We are given the same roles as men; we do projects together. I think women are even more active than men. It's become very nice (Rümeysa, 55).

Meşveret: (S3) Prioritizing the absence of financial motives.

Another aspect of an ideal community for the Meşveret community is ensuring trust both with its members and across hierarchical structure which was not prominent in the İsmailağa or the İskenderpaşa communities. Under the theme trust building several strategies emerged most prominent of these within the Meşveret community was the (T1) positioning a lack of financial motives as the basis of communal trust and solidarity. Members revealed that an ideal religious community prioritizes the absence of financial motives and often (T2) distinguished their community from others with reference to financial burdens.

In delineating its identity from other religious communities, particularly the Süleymanlılar and the specifically the FETO terrorist group, the community underscores its divergence in financial practices. This emphasis on the absence of financial burdens within the community is pivotal in establishing its authenticity as a religious community rather than an entity focused on seeking monetary contributions. Once again, when asked about the foundational traits of an ideal community, the predominant response among members was disavowal of any pursuit of financial gain from its members. This collective sentiment reflects a commitment to fostering trust and integrity within the community, emphasizing transparency and accountability in financial matters as essential pillars of an ideal community. In fact, Aysun (45) states the difference between Meşveret and other communities by emphasizing lack of financial expectations from the community.

I think most important things is to provide for the community rather than asking its members. But in our community, such things do not exist, so at events like charity fairs, fundraising, and sales, our community does not permit selling anything for the benefit of the community. Yes, it's intended for good maybe. People might say they are doing

this for the community profit. However, uninformed individuals might think, 'Look, they are actually making money by using religion. I do not find this right. Specially using women to sell things and to aid the community.

Meşveret, thus distinguishes itself from other communities such as Süleymancılar, by emphasizing community's lack in asking financial assistance. However, it is important to recognize that the community sustains itself financially through its publishing house, with members often purchasing texts from this establishment as a means of supporting it financially. Thus, by refraining from collecting money, the community establishes a foundation of trust, assuring its members that financial gain of few or economic power is not a motive or a priority.

Meşveret: (S7) Upholding the principle of non-engagement in politics.

Furthermore, under the trust-building theme another strategy was employed: Upholding the principle of non-engagement in politics. As highlighted earlier in this chapter, Nursi vehemently spoke against political involvement during the later stages of his life, a stance that is upheld by the community to this day, although during the 2023 Presidential elections as well as 2024 local elections the community released a statement in support of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and AK Party respectively. When asked about this stance, members expressed that they found it necessary. They acknowledged that conducting thorough research on their own would be challenging, and they felt the community made a well-informed decision regarding the elections. They also viewed it as the community's responsibility to disclose their chosen candidate.

However, still the majority of members view Nursi's discouragement of political engagement as a defining characteristic of an ideal community. Nursi's drastic change as mentioned came later in his life, he was highly influenced by Jamal al-Din al-Afghani and Muhammed Abduh, who were highly politically engaged. In the community's website called "SorularlaRisale" there is a page dedicated to the political views of Nursi written by the Meşveret community itself. Some quotes of Nursi are highly used by the members of the community today to indicate Nursi's aversion to politics. This has been a recurring theme during the interviews. The reason for that was once again related to FETÖ's coup in 2016.

Yes, in this era, politics corrupts hearts and leaves anxious spirits in distress. A person who seeks a peaceful heart and a restful soul should leave politics behind." (Kastamonu Lahikası)

"Contemporary politics is so mired in lies, deceit, and devilry that it has essentially become like the whispers of devils." (Sözler)

"Nur students never involved themselves in politics, nor did they join any political party. This is because faith is a common good; people from all factions are in need of it and possess it. Partisanship cannot enter here. They only take a stand against disbelief, heresy, and deviation. In the Nur path, the unity of believers is fundamental." (Emirdağ Lahikası-I)

When asked about the role of politics in their community, members consistently indicated a strong opposition, viewing politics as unsuitable for a devout Muslim. Sare (47) and İrem (27) emphasized that the intersection of religion and politics is fundamentally incompatible,

One cannot serve Islam through politics. This is a very important principle. Additionally, money is never discussed—absolutely, politics and money have no place. Even within our own circles, we don't dwell on politics; our interest in it is limited to knowing the basic situation of our country as concerned citizens, but not beyond that. We also avoid engaging in any form of political manoeuvring, even within interpersonal relationships, as it disrupts harmony. This is why political discussions are kept to a minimum, and money is never asked for or accepted. If there's a donation, that's fine, but that's it. Given the nature of politics, we are fundamentally opposed to it. Engaging deeply would only end up tarnishing one's spirit.

An Islamic community must serve without allowing politics anywhere near its core or even its periphery. Why? Because politics is like a club (topuz), while Islam is a light—two things that fundamentally cannot come together. One cannot serve the light of Islam with the club of politics. Politics blinds the light, causing people to be fearful and avoidant, as if saying, 'You brought me here for political reasons, using Islam as a mere tool.' Such an approach would be severely criticized. Especially in these times, politics poses significant dangers. Islam must be served in its purest form, without political interference. In fact, I believe that even men's engagement in politics can be troubling given certain temperaments. In this context, I think that women's involvement in today's political scene is entirely inappropriate.

The connection between dishonesty and political involvement is often emphasized within the community. Members argue that devout Muslims may find it challenging to maintain

honesty and adhere to religious practices while engaging in politics. Finally, the discourse surrounding the intersection of religious ideals and political engagement within certain communities underscores a nuanced tension. Despite an overarching disapproval of individual or communal involvement in politics within certain religious communities, the perceived significance of the trajectory of the nation compels reconsideration of this stance. Within this context, proponents of political engagement draw upon the teachings of figures such as Nursi to justify their actions. Nursi's endorsement of pursuing righteous endeavours for the betterment of the country and its Muslim populace serves as a legitimizing factor for those advocating for political involvement. However, amidst this discourse, a prevailing sentiment persists that any form of political engagement is antithetical to the ethos of an ideal religious community.

Other religious communities mentioned in this research have not promoted a collective involvement in politics as a central tenet of their ideology. While members of the İskenderpaşa community have advocated for representation within the political sphere, particularly to amplify the voice of the conservative demographic in Turkey, such advocacy has not been posited as a fundamental requirement for the realization of an ideal community. The perspective differences between communities underscores varying interpretations of the relationship between religious identity and political participation. While İskenderpaşa community members prioritize political representation as a means of safeguarding their interests and amplifying their influence within the broader socio-political landscape, other communities may prioritize alternative avenues of societal impact or adhere to a more stringent separation between religious and political domains and promote social relationships for personal and societal change. The İsmailağa community, on the other hand, has only disclosed their voting preferences and released a statement stating that the community will vote for Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in 2022. In recent events that unfolded with the death of the previous sheikh they have strongly stated that they do not have any intentions of political involvement. This divergence in approach highlights the multifaceted nature of religious communities and the nuanced ways in which they navigate their engagement with the political sphere.

Inclusiveness, Relevance and Civic Responsibility in Meşveret and İskenderpaşa

İskenderpaşa: (S3) Emphasizing the dual nature of the modern community as both "tekke" and "waqf".

Both the Meşveret and İskenderpaşa communities conveyed that an ideal community should be inclusive, relevant, and foster civic responsibility. The İskenderpaşa community, in

particular, highlighted its adaptability to contemporary socio-cultural shifts, positioning itself as both a *tekke* and a *waqf* (NGO). This dual identity enables the community to expand its influence beyond its members, emphasizing contributions to society as a whole. This emphasis reflects the community's core ethos of commitment to positively impacting the welfare of society, underscoring active civic engagement over exclusive focus on internal matters. This proactive stance is actualized through projects designed to benefit marginalized groups, including women, children, and environmental causes. Guiding this civic-oriented approach is a strategic framework grounded in a multi-layered understanding of communal identity and purpose. By synthesizing traditional spiritual values with contemporary notions of social responsibility, the İskenderpaşa community acknowledges the evolving nature of communal structures and the need to adapt to contemporary societal needs.

The strategy of emphasizing the dual nature of the modern community as both as a *tekke* (lodge) and *waqf*, was further outlined by several distinct discursive techniques. The first of these techniques' (T1) entails positioning Tasawwuf as the foundational pillar of the community. As mentioned above the community views itself still as a *tariqa* and also argues that communities based on *tasawwuf* have several differences compared to others. This underscores the community's dedication to its Sufi heritage, especially by honoring the two previous sheikhs, while recognizing the current sheikh's efforts to modernize and adapt the community without losing its Sufi roots. For instance, eight out of eleven interviewees mentioned they practice *rabita* regularly. When asked about the distinctions between Sufi and non-Sufi communities, respondents frequently pointed out the deeper *feyz* (divine inspiration) and heightened piety they feel within Sufi practices. To illustrate the perceived spiritual depth within Sufi communities, Nilüfer (50) emphasizes a unique sense of inspiration and piety that she believes distinguishes these communities from others. She notes:

I definitely think there are differences. Living according to a book is one thing, but following a living, breathing person is another, an example for us to follow. There's definitely a difference between the two. In Sufism, piety is about your relationship with the Creator, and it takes on a purer form compared to others. Through *rabita* you delve deeper into yourself and the creator. And by studying yourself, you know your ego and recognizing the identity and attributes of your Lord, you draw closer. This helps increase your sincerity, and as your sincerity grows, you become more pious and devoted.

There is also a strong belief as Fahriye (37) suggest that “only through tariqa that one can reach the divine truth (*hakikat*), God can only be thoroughly known through *rabita*”. When asked whether the recent structural changes in the community had impacted its *tekke* aspect, members responded that, although they miss the traditional atmosphere and the large *sohbets* they used to hold in the mosque, they believe these adjustments were necessary for today's circumstances and trust that the sheikh understands what is best for the community.

The move from an only *tekke* based institution to one with NGOs indicate the second technique under this strategy by highlighting the community's (T2) integral role in fostering and supporting community-oriented projects and initiatives. The move towards modernity in the İskenderpaşa community comes with denouncing several obsolete traditions. Although a Sufi community that comes from a *tekke* tradition and still emphasizes this tradition when it comes to the evolution of the community there is a large advocacy for deemphasizing Sufi practices. There is an emphasis for example on the sheik being a leader rather than only taking on Mürşid roles. The community now expects Nureddin Coşan to not only provide spiritual guidance but also establish monetary funds, modern projects that promote education, and environmental aid. This can also be viewed in the way the community promotes female education as it had not done so before. Rather than *medrese* learning or communal education the community supports individual education and promotes state sanctioned education rather than only religious education. This is also associated with (T3) deemphasizing traditional Sufi practices. The conventional Sufi practices, such as the humble gatherings of *sohbet* within the "tekke," are considered outdated within the community. This shift is attributed to the community's broader mission, aiming not solely at the internal members but aspiring to extend its reach to encompass the entirety of humanity. This again reflects the role the sheikh has assumed in leading the community.

Nureddin Coşan, a highly educated leader with a BA from The College of Saint Rose, has notably shifted the traditional role of the community leader. Upon his return from studies, he took charge of the community's finances, overseeing operations within Server Holding and steering away from direct preaching or adopting the title of sheikh. This modern approach has facilitated the community's adaptation to contemporary values. Rather than the conventional model, he has prioritized supporting project-based initiatives, emphasizing the community's financial sustainability and development. Although he is generally unavailable for personal matters, members observe that he remains accessible for well-defined, impactful projects. Additionally, his presence at key events—Eid greetings, formal openings, and community celebrations—demonstrates his leadership style, which leans more toward an executive role

than that of a traditional spiritual guide. Community members collectively affirm that an ideal community is one that embraces progress, a sentiment that is visibly encouraged by Coşan's example. This notion towards a new role of the “sheikh” is also clearly outlined in many of his speeches. During a speech in 2003 Nureddin Coşan outlines the new role he has taken upon himself.

Thirdly, I reinterpret and clarify all descriptions, perceptions, and expectations related to me. I am solely and exclusively a natural, genuine leader to be followed by my loved ones. All other attributes attributed to me only make sense when evaluated in the light of my leadership qualities. And at the same time, I am a humble brother guiding and calling you to the taqwa competition, which is the most ideal and just of beauty contests.

I invite you to reconsider the environments we inhabit and to design, draw, and support each other in creating environmentally friendly new homes, workplaces, mosques, shopping centres, and gas stations in line with our faith. I encourage you to compete in this endeavour. I urge you to establish world-class standards in accordance with our faith, to make discoveries, to seek beneficial knowledge and education, and to push your limits in doing good deeds for the sake of your hereafter. Together, I want us to exemplify and promote beauty, truth, justice, and utility.

The discernible discrepancy in the evolution of communities underscores varying degrees of receptivity and adaptability to modernization processes. While certain communities, exemplified by İsmailğa, demonstrate a limited willingness to incorporate modern educational modalities within existing frameworks, the depth and breadth of transformation pale in comparison to the progressive ethos espoused by the İskenderpaşa community. As such, the evolution of communities in response to modernization remains contingent upon a myriad of factors, including ideological predispositions, leadership dynamics, and socio-cultural contexts.

İskenderpaşa: (S6) Promoting inclusiveness and openness as a fundamental principle.

The İskenderpaşa community emphasizes inclusivity and openness as essential elements in an ideal community, supporting this stance with two key practices: (T1) advocating for non-uniformity in attire and religious behaviour, and (T2) critiquing the rigid standards often found in other communities. Members frequently mentioned that İskenderpaşa is comparatively more accepting, welcoming individuals as they are, without pressuring them to follow specific books or dress codes. This approach is often contrasted with communities such

as İsmailağa and Süleymancılar, who are perceived as favouring uniformity in dress and doctrine. For instance, İsmailağa's expectation for women to wear the *çarşaf* and the Nur community's emphasis on the RNK were frequently cited as examples of rigid expectations. İskenderpaşa members argue that such requirements are outdated, particularly with regard to the *çarşaf*, and that non-uniformity reflects their modern outlook. This adaptable approach is seen as central to their vision of a progressive and sustainable community. *Çarşaf* is often associated with modest in the İsmailağa community, as mentioned previously when asked, what makes someone modest, they have often responded with proper attire. This perception is often overlooked by the İskenderpaşa community. Rejecting the notion of formalism in clothing as a virtue, the community takes pride in acknowledging various forms of modest attire, emphasizing subdued colours and loose-fitting clothes. Fahriye (37) emphasizes that true modesty is not dependent on attire. She suggests:

I don't think there is a specific clothing. For instance, the method that Allah has outlined includes, yes, a headscarf as a definite element, but there isn't any specific directive like 'you must wear a *çarşaf* or *jilbab*' or anything of that sort in terms of attire. Therefore, I think what's important here is dressing in a way that doesn't draw attention from men, attire that doesn't overly display one's body shape, so that one can exist within society. I believe that *taqwa* (piety) should be more about intention rather than mere appearance. If one doesn't lose the intention of *taqwa*—living without straying from Allah's will, not engaging in actions that deviate from His approval, striving to act in ways that align with His favour, and taking part in deeds that lead to His approval—that's the essence of it. In my understanding, it's not about wearing a *çarşaf*, putting on a *niqab*, or simply being meticulous with bowing or prostrations during prayer. Yes, these too fall within *taqwa*, but they are more about formal adherence. For me, true *taqwa* is about the sincerity of intention.

The emphasis on specific clothing as the "correct" attire in some other communities, while labelling alternative forms as improper, is viewed within the İskenderpaşa community as both outdated and divisive. Many members argued that insisting on women wearing a *çarşaf* or adopting a particular style of hijab, as is commonly observed among Süleymancı members, creates unnecessary barriers between communities. When asked about perceived shortcomings in other communities, members often responded that these communities focus excessively on outward appearances and adherence to specific practices, which can alienate people. They viewed such attitudes as overly rigid and unwelcoming. Nesrin (47) suggests that:

There's nothing like "you must tie your headscarf this way," as is common among the Süleymancı community. For example, I went to Gönen in the summer, and everyone looked the same. In İsmailağa, they have the çarşaf, turban, and robe, but we don't have such requirements. I think, it's off putting, people think that they have to be dressed or follow the same principles to join these communities. It is not very welcoming to different aspects.

This emphasis on openness and inclusiveness, while manifesting differently across communities, was distinctly present only within the Meşveret and İskenderpaşa communities. The Meşveret community, however, interpreted these concepts of relevance and inclusiveness through the lens of the RNK, shaping its approach consequently.

Meşveret: (S5) Promoting inclusiveness and openness as a fundamental principle.

The Meşveret community emphasizes inclusiveness and openness as essential characteristics of an ideal community. This perspective parallels that of the İskenderpaşa community, particularly in its first technique: rejecting formalism as a communal virtue. In this way, the Meşveret community maintains an open-door approach, welcoming individuals without any prerequisites regarding attire or educational background. Similar to the İskenderpaşa community, members of the Meşveret community often suggested that focusing on specific attires is impractical in a modern environment.

When it comes to clothing, I think there are three things determined by the Sunnah: it should not be thin, it should not be transparent, and it should not reveal the body's shape. Anything that fits within these guidelines is considered modest attire (tesettür). The çarşaf may be the most suitable garment to fulfil these three criteria. However, if someone can achieve the same modesty with a different local garment instead of the çarşaf, that is also considered modest. Those who do not wear a çarşaf should not be seen as not observing modesty.

The community has often suggested that other communities are too isolated and do not engage much outside of their own group. However, a similar observation can be made about the Meşveret community. When asked if they had friends outside of their community, many members responded with a resounding "no." They predominantly socialize within their own community, reinforcing the tendency for insular networks even within a group that emphasizes openness and inclusiveness. Furthermore, the community establishes a hierarchy among other communities, placing Nurculuk at the forefront, emphasizing the sacredness of the text. They

advocate for the adoption of Nurculuk as a central tenet. By emphasizing the need to renew the message in order to address the contemporary challenges faced by Muslims, they often argue that the RNK is the only source that can effectively guide today's Muslims. As a result, the second technique for this strategy emerges: criticizing Sufism's narrow boundaries. This perspective suggests that traditional Sufi approaches may not be sufficient to address the complex issues of the modern world, and therefore a broader, more inclusive framework is necessary for spiritual and social guidance. While the community emphasizes that "it isn't the time for Sufism (zaman tarikat zamanı değil)", they assert that tasawwuf is also encompassed within the teachings of RNK, which is evident through their practice of dhikr after each prayer. This focus on adaptability and responsiveness to modern challenges is particularly evident in the community's approach to remaining relevant and applicable in today's context, which leads to a broader discussion of its perceived enduring relevance.

Meşveret: (S4) Praising the community for its ability to stay relevant and applicable in today's context.

Emphasizing relevance, the community further distinguishes itself through a text that remains applicable and meaningful in contemporary contexts. This principle shapes not only its internal dynamics but also defines its approach to broader societal engagement. This adaptability is reflected in its rejection of Sufism and its critique of other communities' more exclusive practices, highlighting the enduring significance of the text as a unifying and guiding framework. By aligning with modern challenges while preserving core values, the community finds a balance between tradition and adaptation, solidifying its identity and enhancing its resilience over time. There are three techniques that make up this strategy: establishing the text's enduring relevance, emphasising tasawwuf as obsolete, stressing RNK's alleged rationalism and highlighting the text compatible approach regarding modern time constraints.

As mentioned above the members all agreed that the text will remain relevant until the end of time. This idea of relevance has been emphasized repeatedly, yet the applicability of the text itself is seen as inherently dynamic, contingent upon its interpretation. Members often remark that future generations will interpret the text according to the unique challenges they face, ensuring that any issues Muslims encounter can be addressed by referring to the text. This perspective not only solidifies the text's role as an adaptable framework but also reinforces the belief that it can continuously provide solutions for evolving societal concerns. For instance, Aylin (30) suggests that: "What I read and take away from the text could be so much different than what you might take away from the text or some else takes away from it. Do will the next

generation and others after that”. Fatma (32) emphasizes the same issue “But the fact that these books have been written and have lasted nearly 150 years shows their relevance over time. Even now, if I find new and fresh meaning in them, I believe that future readers will also find the same freshness. It will retain its relevance for the future generations.” This has been often mentioned during the Turkish earthquake of February 6, 2023. After the earthquake the members often mentioned that there is an earthquake *risale* and they have often read it during this time. This indicates that the text maintains its relevance according to the members.

The second point is that when dealing with truths, one doesn't grow tired of them. Just as one doesn't tire of reading the Qur'an, certain other sources can also be revisited multiple times. This is due to the way truth resonates within these texts and the aesthetic quality of the language. Many people find that their needs align with specific passages, almost as if by coincidence. For instance, when I needed contemplation, I found it there; I don't know of any other book that facilitates contemplation so beautifully. It expands the mind, enabling people to interpret the world more effectively. Reading even a single sentence can sometimes be more meaningful than reading an entire book, emphasizing quality over quantity. So, the aim should be depth rather than simply finishing the text.

Second technique that has been mentioned before is the emphasis placed on the outdated method of tasawwuf, which emphasises RNK's rationality. For instance, when asked about the differences between Sufi communities and the Meşveret community they have often responded that given the current environment, people need to be rationally convinced towards the things they believe in. The text according to the members provide rational arguments and logical explanations regarding the existence of God and tie science to religion. This was seen as a great issue to Said Nursi. Instead, tasawwuf asks people to spiritually believe in things, however humans have become much more rational thus tasawwuf although worked better in the past, the main issue is now to push people to believe in God first and to save faith. Most members have almost always mentioned that what sets them apart from other communities is they focus on both rational and faith together and rather than pushing people to believe in a single individual they refer them to the rational text. Merve (31) underlines this by stating:

I'm not sure if I'm in a position to say this, but I believe that the current era, especially for the youth, requires an approach that combines knowledge and science—something that *Risale-i Nur* provides. I think other communities also recognize its relevance today. *Risale-i Nur*, as a commentary on the Qur'an, isn't only for our community; it's a resource that can benefit all communities. Since the Qur'an is not just a book of

religious knowledge but also encompasses scientific understanding, any true commentary on it should integrate both, rather than isolating science. Otherwise, it would diminish the Qur'an's full meaning. Many scientific insights already find their roots in the Qur'an. For instance, when *Risale-i Nur* discusses the miracles of the prophets, it addresses how these stories are relevant today. Prophets, therefore, serve as not only spiritual but also practical guides. Bediüzzaman Said Nursi even states that each branch of knowledge explores the universe and reflects one of God's names. Thus, science and knowledge together form a dual path, much like uniting reason with the heart. As is the case in *tasawwuf*, believing blindly is not possible anymore. Especially youth need a rational approach to faith.

Finally, the community has also highly emphasised that the modern world demands so much of our time and constant requirement of family life does not leave too much time to thoroughly educate ourselves. Thus, in this context RNK provides everything that needs to be learned as it contains both *tasawwuf* aspects and other religious issues regarding Muslims needs. Furthermore, the *dhikr* section also provides the most crucial aspects. Thus, most members referred to RNK as the shortcut. It is what the modern Muslim needs in the current environment. Merve (31) underlines that “we are already so busy with spending time with our parents, kids and friends. We cannot do for instance *ders* (*rabita*) for 2 hours. The RNK feeds your soul and provides essential information”.

In conclusion, the concept of an ideal community is shaped by numerous factors. For the *Meşveret* community, the RNK serves as a practical and spiritually fulfilling solution for modern Muslims seeking a balance between family, work, and religious education. Other communities follow modern aspects as well as Sufi lodge culture. As we shift focus, the next section will explore the perceptions and expectations surrounding the ideal woman within these communities. The ideal community differs largely according to each community. In this chapter I have outlined what each community views as the ideal community. This was needed since members identify themselves in relation to their community, other communities and in opposition to men. Thus, now in the following section I will dive into what each community considered to be ideal women.

CHAPTER III
MODES OF SUBJECTION: DISCURSIVE CONSTRUCTION OF AN IDEAL
WOMAN

This chapter draws on Foucault's concept that subjects or identities are constructed within and through discourses, which are deeply embedded in specific social and historical contexts. It seeks to discover how individuals are shaped by these discourses, uncovering the processes that define and maintain their subjectivities. The concept of the "ideal women" or "idea women disciples" in these communities, whether they share similar or different characteristics, is shaped by specific practices and discursive traditions. These "traditional" practices—performances and utterances—are based on previously authorized or accepted discourses. Through the technologies of self, Foucault argues that individuals "by his own means" forms himself or herself into a subject through their own self-perservations (Foucault, 1984).

However, religious traditions also offer a strong influence on identity. Asad (2003), rather than focusing on an autonomous interpretation of self and personal choice, argues that individuals are heavily influenced and shaped by the discourses and practices of the religious tradition they inhabit. The traditions in these communities, as Asad suggests, provide authoritative discourses that guide disciples' actions, thoughts and identities. By participating in practices of the community, the individual embodies the norms of tradition which in turn, shape their sense of self and place in the world. Thus, individuals by performing within the boundaries of their communities and by engaging in authoritative traditions, understand their selves and roles within the society. And through the established order in these communities, the members are able to sustain their values across generations. Thus, Asad challenges the notion of autonomous individual, but provides more complex view of identity formation, by emphasizing the role of authoritative discourse, embodied practices, and internalized discipline (Asad, 2003).

Table 4: Main themes, discursive strategies (S's) and techniques (T's) of the “ideal women” by İsmailağa disciples.

THE İSMAİLAĞA COMMUNITY		
THEME	DISCURSIVE STRATEGIES	DISCURSIVE TECHNIQUES
HOMEMAKER	S1: Promoting a family centred identity and traditional gender roles.	T1: Reinforcing home as women's domain T2: Affirming motherhood and child rearing as a deeply sacred and revered duty. T3: Criticizing other conservative women for their similarities to secular women. T4: Criticizing "secular" women for being overly ambitious. T5: Viewing women as the actual influencer at home.
EDUCATION	S2: Underlining the significance of education.	T1: Emphasizing the importance of four year medrese education. T2: Dismissing İmam Hatip and İlahiyat schools for their impure and insufficient knowledge. T3: Criticizing other communities for their insufficient Islamic knowledge. T4: Self- criticism for relying on memorization-based and repetitive education.
ÇARŞAF	S3: Stressing the importance of "çarşaf".	T1: Promoting the çarşaf not just as an ideal covering for Muslim women but also embracing it as part of one's identity. T2: Viewing çarşaf as a source of pride " <i>çarşaf-ı şerif</i> ". T3: Expressing çarşaf as a manifestation of <i>taqwa</i> . T4: Criticizing other clothing as not meeting the standards of modest attire.
GENDER ROLES	S4: Defining women as subordinate to men.	T1: Emphasizing the delicate and weak nature of women. T2: Considering women’s modern practices a weakness in faith. T3: Stressing women's obedience to men.

Table 5: Main themes, discursive strategies (S's) and techniques (T's) of the ideal women by *İskenderpaşa* disciples.

THE İSKENDERPAŞA COMMUNITY		
THEME	DISCURSIVE STRATEGIES	DISCURSIVE TECHNIQUES
HOMEMAKER	S1: Establishing a dual role for women as both homemakers and career seekers. S2: Highlighting the priority of homemaking over a career.	T1: Affirming motherhood and child rearing as a deeply sacred and revered duty and a primary role of women T2: Reinforcing equal division of labour at home. T3: Encouraging women to pursue part-time employment that complements their responsibilities at home.
EDUCATION	S3: Emphasizing the paramount significance of education.	T1: Advocating education as a lifelong pursuit. T2: Deemphasizing “religious” gender boundaries for educational purposes. T3: Criticizing other communities for deemphasizing girls' education. T4: Reversing the traditional gender hierarchy based on education.
BIOLOGY	S4: Emphasizing gender roles by referencing biological attributes.	T1: Affirming the intrinsic connection between women's identity and their biological makeup. T2: Affirming gender-based separation in executive positions. "Separate but equal" T3: Emphasizing women's innate educator role in society.

Table 6: Main themes, discursive strategies (S's) and techniques (T's) of the ideal women by *Meşveret* disciples.

THE MEŞVERET COMMUNITY		
THEME	DISCURSIVE STRATEGIES	DISCURSIVE TECHNIQUES
HOMEMAKER	S1: Promoting a family centred identity and traditional gender roles	T1: Reinforcing home as women's domain T2: Affirming motherhood and child rearing as a deeply sacred and revered duty T3: Criticizing other women for neglecting their family. T4: Criticizing other conservative women for their similarities to secular women
BIOLOGY	S2: Affirming the intrinsic connection between women's identity and their biological makeup.	T1: Acknowledging the role of biology in shaping women's sense of self and gender identity. T2: Valuing compassion as a foundational trait for women T3: Associating <i>taqwa</i> with biological nature T4: Reversing women's perceived vulnerabilities into their strengths
GENDER ROLES	S3: Defining gender roles as equal but separate	T1: Promoting equality based on intellectual abilities T2: Preserving equal division of labour at home T3: Detaching <i>taqwa</i> from gender identity. T4: Emphasizing gendered boundaries T5: Criticizing other communities for mixing gender roles.

3.1. Constructing the Ideal Woman Archetype

As Foucault argues, the religious traditions exert power through the internalization of these norms that discipline body and mind. Through the embodiment of these norms, disciples emerge as subjects who willingly conform to the community through thoughts, actions and values. The institutions outline normal and abnormal behaviours and through surveillance, training, and correction shapes individuals into “docile bodies” that conform to the norms of the group. However, individuals can resist and challenge the norm imposed upon them which in turn can alter identity and subjectivity (Foucault, 1975).

Despite their claims of distinct identity, an analysis of the three communities reveals that the "ideal woman" typology exhibits consistent themes, with small variations, across the three groups. The primary distinctions among the communities are their approach to education, gender segregation, and attire. In this context, Foucault's concept of discourse aids in understanding how these communities construct and maintain their notions of the "ideal woman." The discourse within each community functions to define and reinforce specific gender roles, establishing ideals for women by delineating boundaries for acceptable behaviour and identity. Central to these discourses is the construction of the home as the primary domain of women and the framing of proper childrearing as the ultimate measure of female success. This reinforces a consistent boundary across the communities, where women's roles are circumscribed by domestic responsibilities and the cultivation of future generations, upholding a traditional conception of femininity rooted in domesticity and motherhood.

The recurring themes of traditional gender roles across these communities suggest that these roles are deeply embedded within the habitus of each group, reinforcing a shared understanding of the ideal female. However, the variations in education, segregation, and attire can be seen as adaptations of these communities to their specific social and cultural contexts, reflecting Bourdieu's notion of the field, where different social spaces exert unique pressures on the individuals within them (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). This shared understanding is not merely a passive reflection of tradition but an active process of identity construction, where community members internalize, maintain and modify these gender roles through daily practices, rituals, and discourses.

Bourdieu's concept of habitus in this context aids in understanding how these traditional gender roles are maintained and reproduced. The habitus is shaped by interpretations of religious laws, cultural norms, and social expectations, all of which are interpreted through the lenses of the specific community in question, and define what it means to be an "ideal woman."

The similarities of the "ideal woman" across these communities signify the pervasive influence of traditional gender roles, which propose a specific set of behaviours, attitudes, and appearances that women are expected to embody, thereby ensuring the continuity of the community's values and beliefs. The differences in approach, on the other hand, reflect the unique social and cultural contexts in which each community operates.

“Discursive practices” in this thesis underline the deliberate linguistic actions and utterances derived from religious or communal teachings, ideas, concepts, and interpretations that community members undertake that denote and reference an “ideal Muslim women” subject. These discursive practices suggest that an individual possess certain desirable traits and sensibilities that are “ideal” and found in Muslim subjectivity, but more importantly these traits are preapproved by the community and are deemed prerequisite for an ideal woman. These actions may not be present in the person but can be aspirations that, promoted by the community. These aspirations are commitments or desires that person wants to become. “Rather they should be understood as practices “taking a stand about how we propose to conduct ourselves in the future” These Sufi Islamic traditions of practice involve, as William Connolly puts it, “embodiment in repetitive practices that help to consolidate the dispositions, sensibilities, and ethos through which meaning is lived, intellectual beliefs are settled, and relations between constituencies are negotiated” (2005, 56). Now let us have a closer look at the main themes and discursive strategies and techniques associated with them that help the members of these communities to construct their selves and subjectivities as “sufi women.”

3.2. The Homemaker Ideal: Traditional, Conventional, and Orthodox Perspectives

İsmailağa: (S1) Promoting a family-centred identity and upholding traditional gender roles.

The research revealed four discursive strategies for İsmailağa and İskenderpaşa communities, and three strategies used by the female members of the Meşveret community that make up the ideal women in each community. These strategies are made up of “discursive techniques” – a subset of strategies- which support identity formation in the community and further detail discursive strategies. These discursive strategies and techniques help shape and define the ideal men and women in each community. Building on the notion that women's primary status is derived from traditional gender roles that emphasize the home as their domain, the İsmailağa community prides itself in (S1) promoting a family-centred identity and upholding traditional gender roles. This strategy is further supported by five discursive techniques: (T1) reinforcing the home as women's domain, (T2) affirming motherhood and

child-rearing as deeply sacred and revered duties, (T3) criticizing other conservative women for their perceived similarities to secular women, (T4) criticizing "secular" women for being overly ambitious, and (T5) viewing women as the actual influencers within the home.

Members of the İsmailağa community primarily recognize their own religious leaders as the sole authoritative figures on religious matters, disregarding individuals outside the Ehl-i Sünnet unless explicitly recommended by the community. Consequently, identity formation within the community is shaped predominantly by internal discourse, with little influence from external sources. This reflects the community's emphasis on gender roles defined by religious teachings rather than biological determinants or external religious perspectives. As noted in the previous chapter, women in the community engage primarily with medrese textbooks, carefully selecting reading materials that align with the so-called Ehl-i Sünnet principles and avoid *shirk* (polytheism/blasphemy). My interviews reveal that women's reading outside the medrese curriculum is quite limited, mostly confined to required texts during their formal (compulsory) education. Thus, within the İsmailağa community gender identity, too, is derived largely from the medrese curriculum and communal teachings, with minimal external influence. The female identity mirrors the community's concept of the "ideal woman." Let us now analyze the first strategy in more detail.

In the selected communities for this research, particularly in İsmailağa and Meşveret, there exists a prevalent belief in a gendered division of the world, with women's roles largely confined to the domestic sphere, while men are expected to engage in external activities for religious or financial purposes. The community's leaders and prominent scholars emphasize in their *sohbets* and writings that men and women should not be in the same spaces, thereby defining women's roles as primarily centred around the home. This division reinforces the idea that the public domain is inherently masculine, whereas the private domain is feminine. The İsmailağa community also strongly emphasizes the home as the primary domain for women (T1), defining the ideal woman through her devotion to domestic responsibilities. In fact, a recurrent theme in the *sohbets* is the conceptualization of women as "precious jewels" that must be meticulously safeguarded. Yaren (36) reiterates that the female members in the İsmailağa community, influenced by the Sheikh, acts in reference to religious obligations set and interpreted by the community, by stating that:

Women are physically and emotionally weaker. And I don't mean that they are at a lower level than men, just that they are created differently, and God gave the job of

protecting women to men. In this community we are protected, just as you would protect a jewel with a case and hide it. We are hidden and protected as we should be.

This notion posits that the protection of women from external influences, particularly foreign men, which essentially amounts to anyone else outside the close family, is paramount. According to this perspective, the most effective means of ensuring such protection is through the confinement of women to the domestic sphere. For example, Havva Özkan, a prestigious female preacher (hoca) in the community, highlights in her book that,

A woman's duty is to protect her husband's honour and raise her children in accordance with Islam. If she can also engage in legitimate activities for Islam (such as teaching, studying, giving sermons, etc.), then she becomes one of the highest saints (2019, p. 204).

Furthermore, women are often encouraged during *sohbets* to leave tasks that require outside interaction, such as shopping, to men. Although the community attempts to maintain a clear-cut gendered distinction between public and private domains, the realities of urban life frequently necessitate that women undertake these chores, particularly when men are occupied with their jobs. However, women are still advised to leave the house only for essential reasons, termed "zaruret," which typically include healthcare or emergencies. Despite the practical challenges of adhering to this guidance in contemporary urban settings such as Istanbul, the message persists, with community leaders, or hocas, advocating that women should remain homebound unless absolutely necessary. In his influential, multi-volume collection of his sermons *Sohbetler*, Ustaosmanoğlu justifies women's withdrawal from public life with reference to prophetic history, specifically to Maryam, the mother of Jesus:

Zakariya (pbuh) became the guardian of Maryam. Why was a guardian necessary? It was necessary because she was a woman—she could not go to the grocer, the bakery, or the well. All our female scholars are like Maryam; they cannot go to the butcher or the bakery, and if they do, they lose their status as 'Maryam.' Understand that a woman cannot go anywhere, and if she does, her value diminishes (1999: 1, pp. 4-5).

In another *sohbet* he again refers to history when defining women's roles vi-a-vis men's:

Women should withdraw from schools and offices; not one of the 104 religious texts supports the idea that a woman should work. A girl's place is not in middle or high school. The downfall of the Children of Israel was due to women. A woman's duty is to do household chores, obey her husband, and raise good children and soldiers for the nation. That is the role of women, nothing more! Working, providing for the household, and earning money are the responsibilities of men. If a man cannot take care of his home, why did he marry a woman? He is allowing someone else's daughter to suffer in workplaces (p.258).

Thus, as mentioned above, the community's mission is to promote good housewives and devoted children, reinforcing the idea that women's primary domain is the home. However, the concept of "zaruret" provides a socially acceptable framework for women to engage in public tasks, effectively creating a "patriarchal bargain." Kandiyoti (1988) argues that women often navigate patriarchal systems by making strategic choices that maximize their autonomy within these limited frameworks. In this context, women negotiate their roles by taking on "male" tasks out of necessity, which can be seen as a form of passive resistance to the rigid gender norms imposed by the community. This negotiation illustrates how women manage to balance their responsibilities within the constraints of the community's expectations, subtly challenging the strict division of gendered spaces while still adhering to the overarching patriarchal structure.

In addition, the establishment of home as women's domain is often promoted and constructed through *sohbets*, where women are frequently told that their "battlefield" is within the confines of their home. The battlefield metaphor references jihad, and women are often told that their jihad is within the home. Furthermore, this "battlefield" analogy frames women's role within the community. These frames aid in women's perception of their responsibilities and identities and reinforce a collective understanding of women's value within the domestic sphere (Goffman, 1974). In this context, the analogy of the "battlefield" serves to reproduce the home as the domain of women, thereby reinforcing their roles within the community. By framing the home as women's domain and idealizing the traditional family structure, these communities enable women to perceive their domestic duties as significant and valued contributions to the collective well-being. This framing not only guides women's actions but also reinforces their gender identities within these communities. Women are "valued" for their commitment to their responsibilities towards their home and children. In fact, most interviewees have stated that "women shape the lives of their children and the household",

thus, provide an immeasurable service in raising the next generation. *Sohbets* in this sense provide a hegemonic discourse that reinforce traditional power structures that associate women's value closely with the roles within the home. In fact, Yeliz (34) mentions that women are main contributors to the lives of their children and husband:

Yes, you can save one person. You can save maybe one young girl, a young boy, but to save an entire family together, the only way possible is through woman. The value given to women is different and it is closely associated with her family specially her children. Mothers are valued much more, because they educate their children raise good Muslims.

Furthermore, in the İsmailağa community, the emphasis on women staying at home is deeply reinforced by the sanctity attached to domestic duties. *Sohbets*, or religious gatherings, often feature hocas framing domestic work and serving one's husband as acts of devotion to God. For example, a prominent hoca in the community, Ahmet Mahmut Ünlü, also known as Cübbeli Ahmet, suggests in one of his *sohbets*: "A woman who stays in her home, except in cases of necessity, will be rewarded with the same merit as those who strive in the way of Allah." This framing is grounded in the belief that observing these roles is a pathway to spiritual fulfilment and, ultimately, to attaining heaven. The frequent analogy of the home as a "battlefield" underscores the notion that women serve God through their work within the domestic sphere, which is portrayed as both significant and sacred. By repeatedly emphasizing domestic duties as religious devotion, these *sohbets* reinforce the idea that a woman's primary role is within the home. Nurcan's (51) underlining of this view and harmonizing it with an emphasis on "teaching" are reflective of her habitus:

The primary duties and responsibilities of a woman include raising and maintaining the family, nurturing the children, and keeping the household stable. After that, on a personal level, our Master advises us to "learn knowledge, teach it, and raise students." So, as he says, it's about balancing our own lives with raising students, serving the ummah, keeping the household clean, feeding and nurturing the children according to Islamic principles, and maintaining a harmonious relationship with the husband. Balance is key.

Interviews conducted for this research reveal that many women in the İsmailağa community internalize the belief that their value is closely tied to their success in managing household duties and balancing it with "raising students" – the latter often used interchangeably

with raising children. This emphasis on domestic success is rooted in the conviction that a strong and nurturing family environment necessitates the active presence and commitment of women. As a result, a woman's worth is often perceived through her role in raising devoted, God-fearing children and her dedication to her husband. Within the community, the successful upbringing of children who adhere to religious principles is viewed as the ultimate duty of the ideal female archetype. This process reflects a broader societal pattern in conservative segments of Turkish society, where motherhood and child-rearing are often elevated to the status of sacred duties, reinforcing the notion that women's primary responsibility lies within the private sphere of the home. Işık (2021) posits that within the İsmailağa community, the attainment of heaven for women is depicted as being almost entirely dependent on their ability to please their husbands, further cementing the link between women's religious and domestic obligations.

However, it is also important to mention here that there is an emphasis placed on active women. The *sohbet* and Mahmud Ustaosmanoğlu's rhetoric often emphasize this. In fact, most women argue in the community that women at least need to attend *sohbet* once a week. Sila (30) says that "a woman who stays at home benefits no one—not her household, nor her children". The interviews mentioned a prominent *hoca* referred as *Hocanne*, whose *sohbet* described the home as a trap: "The home is like a trap; it draws you in, and you cannot escape. You should have three doors: the door of knowledge, the door of spirituality, and a door where you learn how to navigate worldly matters with ease". Thus, women are encouraged to be active within the community to attend *sohbet* and constantly learn, as will further be discussed in the education section of this chapter, however, they are also encouraged to maintain their households and refrain from working.

The (T2) idealization of motherhood and child-rearing as deeply sacred and revered duty not only reflects the specific communities studied in this thesis but also represents the attributes ascribed to conservative women in Turkish society at large (White, 2004). This institutional narrative, while providing a sense of purpose and respectability to women's domestic roles, simultaneously draws boundaries and reinforces traditional gender roles. In the İsmailağa community, the value attributed to womanhood is closely tied to marital and motherhood status, which are strongly associated with a male figure, typically the husband. Marriage provides social status for women, as the community's education consistently emphasizes their role in raising the next generation and being responsible for their children's moral and religious education. Consequently, the knowledge and skills imparted to women are not primarily for their personal development but are directed towards preparing them to raise

God-fearing and faithful children or to teach others. Thus, the status and value of women within the Īsmailaḡa community—and by extension, similar conservative communities—are largely determined by their association with a male figure.

As mentioned before, gender and other identities are constructed through “others.” Similar to Cooley’s (1998) “looking-glass self,” Foucault (1975, 1982) posits that identity is frequently constructed through a process of differentiation from others. Concepts such as normality, sanity, and morality are often defined in contrast to their opposites—abnormality, insanity, and immorality. This process of constructing an ideal archetype inherently involves consideration of what it is being contrasted against. In the context of the Īsmailaḡa community, the construction of the ideal woman is similarly shaped by distinctions made between the women of Īsmailaḡa and those perceived as “other,” including men (see next chapter), secular or non-religious women, as well as conservative women from different communities or those unaffiliated with any specific religious group. By asking questions about these perceived differences in priorities and values, it becomes evident that the archetype of the “other woman” plays a critical role in defining the boundaries of identity and self-perception within the Īsmailaḡa community. The “deviant” or non-conforming behaviours are used on community’s formation of the ideal women. This differentiation helps to reinforce the community’s ideals and contributes to the construction of a distinct gender identity that is aligned with its religious and cultural values. The participants’ responses indicate that women in the Īsmailaḡa community often (T3) criticize other conservative women for their perceived similarities to secular women. Specifically, these women were criticized for not receiving adequate Islamic education or for not dressing modestly enough. Yeliz (34), for example, emphasizes other communities’ members as being similar to secular women or taking on unnecessary tasks.

Women are shown only to those who are worthy. I see that women in other communities, by trying to be very prominent, are actually harming themselves, their families, and themselves. For example, our Sheikh says, 'Focus on your knowledge, let it be part of you.' There’s no need for anything else. But when I look at other communities, there’s this obsession with organizing charity events every summer. Those women work so hard just to prepare for those events, to organize that program. For what? To put a little more money in the institution’s pocket, whether it’s justified or not, I’m not arguing that. But that little bit of money will be spent. If you really need money, do something like teaching in an all women environment. For example, if you need to teach children, you can work in a children’s school, no problem. But our main

goal is to preserve Sharia. Other conservative women, they work and their goals are similar (to secular women): receive education, marry and financial stability. And they teach their children that too. Our goal is for the sake of Allah (Allah rızası için).

This is often followed by the community's (T4) criticism of "secular" women for being overly ambitious. Despite the criticisms, these women were still viewed more favourably than conservative women not affiliated with any religious community. The latter were often described as having secular goals and aspirations, such as obtaining a good education, securing employment, getting married, and raising children without an emphasis on Islamic education. The overly ambitious depiction of secular women is based on the perception that women outside the community often strive to achieve everything (career, money, and children), aspiring for the unattainable, and often forgetting women's primary role of providing Islamic education to the next generation. This is often overlooked by economic ambitions of women to provide for herself.

Additionally, the women interviewed expressed the view that there is no equality between men and women in Islam, arguing that equality does not equate to justice. More importantly, they believe that Islam protects women's rights and values women highly. They criticize modern approaches that seek to establish gender equality or defend women's rights, arguing that these approaches merely pit women against men in competition, which they see as a product of modernity. In their responses, the sufi women frequently referenced the behaviour of the community's leader, Mahmut Efendi, towards his own wife, as well as verses from the Qur'an and sayings of the Prophet Muhammad. In contrast, the ideal aspiration within the İsmailağa community is to live a life devoted to God and to raise children who will contribute to the Islamic cause. The differentiation between the İsmailağa community's ideal woman and those of other groups serves to reinforce the community's values and social norms. By delineating clear boundaries between their ideals and those of secular or less religiously observant groups, the community creates a sense of identity and cohesion among its members. This process also reflects broader societal dynamics, where religious and cultural communities define themselves in opposition to secularism or differing interpretations of religious practice, thereby maintaining and reinforcing distinct social and moral codes.

The final technique in this strategy involves (T5) positioning women as the actual influencers within the home. While the community publicly emphasizes that men are the leaders both at home and within the community, there is frequent acknowledgment that

decisions made within the household are significantly influenced by women. This perspective is often highlighted in community *sohbets*. It is suggested that, with the right techniques, women can subtly direct men towards desirable outcomes. In fact, when asked, "Who is the decision-maker in the house?" many women responded that decisions are either made mutually or that women themselves make most of the decisions. However, further inquiry into specific decisions reveals that these are often made in alignment with what the community perceives as the right decisions, and other domestic decisions are mostly influenced by men. This situation may reflect a socially constructed perception of agency, reinforced by *sohbets* and communal narratives, which leads women to believe they have significant decision-making power (Foucault, 1975). In practice, however, substantial decisions within both the community and the family are often influenced by male figures. The *sohbets* frequently emphasize this perspective, often advocating for the importance of obedience to one's husband. Thus, this subtle impression of power creates an illusion that veils the constrained norms and structures imposed on the individual. Women internalize these beliefs and perceive themselves as having more agency and influence than they actually possess, thereby reinforcing their own subordination by conforming to an ideal that keeps them within traditional roles. This dynamic highlights how power structures can operate subtly, perpetuating patriarchal norms while presenting an appearance of gender equity or shared decision-making.

İskenderpaşa: (S1) Establishing a dual role for women as both homemakers and career seekers

As previously noted, with some variations the ideal woman as homemaker is a consistent theme across all communities studied in this thesis. In the İskenderpaşa community, women adopt strategies and techniques similar to those in the İsmailağa community, emphasizing motherhood and child-rearing as primary roles. However, unlike İsmailağa, İskenderpaşa attributes a dual role to women by (S1) encouraging them to be both homemakers and career seekers. This dual role involves a blend of traditional and more progressive approaches to gender roles that is only present in the İskenderpaşa community. According to Göle (2011), the women aspired to be both modern and private in the İskenderpaşa community. Göle references this in terms of the female disciples' push towards visibility in the public sphere, which was acknowledged and promoted by Esad Coşan. This is due to an emphasis placed on productivity in the community, which encourages members to educate themselves in order to serve both their community and society. The education here does not refer to basic Islamic education as was the case in the İsmailağa community but refers to the interests and abilities of the individual. Women in İskenderpaşa aspire to work while maintaining their

religious and cultural values, which includes wearing their scarves and adhering to what they perceive as proper working conditions and work ethic. However, there is still an emphasis placed on the traditional women that raises children and takes care of the house. In fact, in his article in 2008, Coşan praises the traditional women by comparing them with “Western” women:

One's source is the Islamic religion, the Qur'an, and the Sunnah; the other originates from various philosophical and ideological currents of the modern West. ... In one, honor and chastity come first; the woman is fully devoted to her husband and home, does not go out, look at, or be seen by non-mahrams, observes segregation at home, and does not leave the house or accept guests without her husband's permission. ... In one, the woman covers her physical beauty with modest dress, does not adorn herself outside, does not show her jewelry to strangers, covers her head, and wears loose clothing. In the other, the woman appears disheveled at home, with curlers and makeup, but fully adorned and perfumed outside. ... In one, the woman is raised as a housewife, engaged in household chores, and sometimes helps her husband in the field. In the other, work life is very free; any type of work can be done, as long as it brings good money! ... In one, establishing a family home and raising children is fundamental. The woman is a faithful wife to her husband and a compassionate mother to her children; she manages the house, does the chores, cooks, and strives for the good upbringing, education, and teaching of the children. In the other, the family is a cage and a trap, which one does not easily fall into.

This discrepancy in part-time employment and regarding women's place is also found in Sözer's (2019) research: “There is no complete consensus on issues such as women, scarfs, women's participation in the workforce, and privacy. However, it is evident that while there is some difficulty in accepting what we might call modernity as a lifestyle, there are also many reservations” (p. 234). This discrepancy on women's status is most visible across age groups. It is evident through education and employment status that the younger generation, while still insisting on women's primary role to be childrearing, also argue that women should not stay home. Lale (34), for instance, advocates that women should be productive but should not neglect her family.

Okay, in Islam, men are naturally strong by nature. Men should work, and women should prioritize their home, that's it. But women can also work and should work, I

don't mean that she should work for the income but for self-improvement. But in my opinion, women should work part-time. When a child is left behind unattended, the child is already lost; the one who will raise the child well is the mother. Even if the mother works part-time, one part of her should always be at home, with her child and home. Otherwise, the child is lost.

Thus, the recurring theme of ideal women as homemaker is still very prominent in the community. The İskenderpaşa community members emphasize that (T1) motherhood and child-rearing are deeply sacred duties and central roles for women, a sentiment echoed in the İsmailağa community as well. Thus, almost everything mentioned above for the İsmailağa community is emphasized here as well. The emphasis on motherhood and child-rearing in İskenderpaşa reflects a broader commitment to maintaining traditional gender roles. Women are seen as crucial in ensuring the effective functioning of the household and are expected to prioritize their domestic responsibilities. This perspective is rooted in the belief that a strong and nurturing family environment is essential for raising the next generation of ideal Muslims. Ahsen (39) encourages the dual role of women, claiming that children also benefit from working mothers.

We have many roles. We are very active with Esad Hoca. For example, he says, 'Let's divide the population in half. Half of it is women. If you confine women to the home, you will not only be unable to raise your children properly, but half of the population will be lost.' Therefore, he strongly supports both women's education and their participation in social life. Since then, women's associations have greatly increased, and significant work has been done. Since that day, there has been a surge in women's activities, and I think women are now more active and engaged in meaningful work. We now live in a world where women are more active and knowledgeable, which is also evident in today's youth.

In the İskenderpaşa community, education is highly emphasized, with both men and women being encouraged to prioritize it as a key value. Higher education, in particular, is a prominent alternative to work for women within the community. This focus on education within İskenderpaşa is particularly remarkable when compared to other communities, where such a pronounced emphasis on modern educational attainment is less prevalent or even non-existent. However, despite the emphasis on lifelong learning, there is a strong consensus among women that their primary responsibility remains with their duties at home. Regardless of the

encouragement for women within the İskenderpaşa community to pursue higher education, pursuing full-time employment are frequently discouraged.

However, the younger generation, while still adhering to the belief that women's main duty is towards their home and children, are now pushing for women to work outside the home. As a result, female members of the community are (T2) encouraged to pursue part-time employment that complements rather than interferes with their domestic responsibilities. This approach while reflecting a "family-first" ideology, where the welfare of children is deemed paramount, also depicts an ideal woman as productive and not primarily home bound. Specifically, when children reach school age, the community encourages women to re-enter the public sphere, albeit in a limited capacity. This encouragement to pursue part-time employment or engage in educational activities, such as learning new languages or attending religious classes, is designed to maintain a balance between personal development and domestic responsibilities. By promoting part-time work or educational pursuits, the community aims to reinforce women's social roles while also allowing them to contribute to public life. Interviews have indicated that women who remain at home without engaging in external activities may be perceived as less productive. This perspective aligns with the "productive homemaker" ideal, which values women's contributions in both domestic and public spheres. The community's approach ensures that women do not entirely neglect their familial duties while still offering opportunities for personal and professional growth, reflecting a nuanced understanding of gender roles and responsibilities within the sociological framework. Fahriye (37) promotes this productive ideal for women by stating:

Since men are responsible for providing for the family, it should naturally be left to them. There is a bond that a child forms with the mother. Especially during the child's early years, I think prioritizing home life could be beneficial. Perhaps when the children grow up and a certain system is established, maybe, maybe her job could also be suitable—I don't know. She could also achieve great success in her professional life. Sometimes women say, 'I'm not working; I'm taking care of my child,' but that child could end up being entrusted to the TV or tablet. Because they get used to that complacency, it leads to sitting around, socializing—whatever it may be. Instead, she could achieve great success in her career as well. I think it all depends on how she spends her time at home and at work.

The emphasis on education and productive roles for women has disrupted the traditional division of labour within the home. Women who engage in part-time employment, as well as full-time homemakers, have emphasized the need for a more (T3) balanced division of household responsibilities. They argued that regardless of whether women work outside the home, men need to contribute more significantly to domestic tasks. Although women often bear the majority of household duties, they expressed that while a truly equal division of labour might be unrealistic, men should still take on a greater share of responsibilities at home. When discussing the characteristics of an ideal husband, many interviewees highlighted the importance of men being more present and actively helping out within the home, rather than leaving everything to the women. There is a prevailing belief in the community that, since many women work outside the home, even if only part-time, men should be more involved in household chores. Yasemin (27) argues that men are expected to do as much as women at home.

I mean, truly, someone who is tender and compassionate towards their spouse, someone who never asks anyone for even a glass of water, does everything on their own. Since I work, when necessary, he needs to sweep the house, mend his own clothes. After eating a meal, compliments and says it was delicious, and sometimes runs a race with their spouse, jokingly teasing them at the end. Of course, as women, this is the kind of spouse we all wish for. But if you ask whether this is possible, it's difficult.

However, when asked about the actual division of labour at home, many women acknowledged that the bulk of household chores still fall on them. The discrepancy between belief and practice reveals the established nature of gendered expectations and the challenges in altering these dynamics, even when there is awareness and desire for change. In the Meşveret community on the other hand, women reported that their husbands are more active at home, often sharing household chores. In contrast, in the İsmailağa community, household chores are strictly designated as women's responsibilities. Although the İskenderpaşa members highlights the hardships women face since joining the workforce, there has not been a significant change in the behaviour of men in the community. Interestingly, while the women of Meşveret do not necessarily believe that men need to perform household duties, they say their husbands often do so. On the other hand, the women of İskenderpaşa are more aware of the situation and attempt to address it, but they often seem less successful than their counterparts in the Meşveret community.

The ideal woman in the İskenderpaşa community is expected to balance dual responsibilities: being both educated and primarily accountable for domestic duties. This reflects a tension between modernity and traditional religious values. While education is promoted and valued, traditional gender roles and the division of labour remain dominant. Although there is a subtle shift in the discourse towards encouraging men to contribute more in household tasks, the community largely upholds these established roles.

However, the female member of the İskenderpaşa community have redefined religious boundaries, retained their religious identity while engaged in employment, leading to new expectations that blend traditional and contemporary roles. However, as these behaviours do not fully align with traditional gender roles, resistance to change remains, particularly in the expectation of domestic responsibility. Despite this, women have managed to renegotiate their identity, extending into areas traditionally considered men's domain (Blumer, 1969).

This emphasis on part-time employment acts as a compromise of modernity, mixing the traditional with the modern – or what Ardiç (2012) calls the “accommodation” of modernity with Islam. Women in the İskenderpaşa community still emphasize that their priority is homemaking over a career (S2), but they also ensure that they adhere to the values of their community and align with their religious views. This approach underscores a commitment to traditional roles while navigating modern societal expectations, reflecting a complex interplay between maintaining cultural and religious integrity and engaging with contemporary gender dynamics. Additionally, this dual role functions as a control mechanism for men, allowing women to operate within boundaries set by the community. This strategy maintains traditional values and limits women's defiance against the established norms, thereby reinforcing the existing power structures and preserving the community's ideological framework.

The İskenderpaşa community's prioritisation of education serves dual purposes: it is viewed as a vital tool for religious and community advancement, as well as for the broader socio-economic progress of the nation. This pronounced focus on education is not merely a recurring theme but is emblematic of a broader community ethos that places educational achievement at the forefront of its values. The community's commitment to education reflects an overarching strategy to enhance both individual and collective development, reinforcing education as a cornerstone for the advancement of religious, communal, and national objectives.

Meşveret: (S1) Promoting a family centred identity and traditional gender roles.

The Meşveret community defines the ideal woman primarily as a homemaker, reflecting its distinct family-oriented nature. The community emphasizes a family-centred identity and upholds traditional gender roles, with its main focus on raising the next generation of Muslims as devout believers. This process begins at home, with faith being instilled through everyday behaviours rather than extensive theological education. Unlike the İsmailağa order, which places a strong emphasis on detailed knowledge of aqaid, hadith, and tafseer, the Meşveret community prioritizes moral education based on the teachings of the RNK. (We have already discussed the centrality of the RNK for the community in the previous chapter.) Children are introduced to RNK texts at an early age, both at home and later in medreses, integrating faith into all aspects of life.

The mission of the Meşveret community is to preserve faith, believing that current societal issues are faith-based and can be addressed through rational arguments rather than purely mystical teachings. Consequently, the education provided to young children is designed to "convince" them of their faith through rational discourse. This family-oriented approach reinforces traditional gender roles, particularly emphasizing the domestic sphere for women. Motherhood and child-rearing are viewed as deeply sacred and revered duties. Women are encouraged to focus on raising children and managing the home, with the family unit being the most critical element in the community. Women's identities are closely tied to their roles within the family, described as being responsible for the "inner circle" (home), while men handle the "outer circle." Unmarried women often avoid men's domains, and married women strive to remain home to maintain modesty.

Thus, this division of space between men and women (T1) reinforces home as women's domain and (T2) affirms motherhood and child rearing as a deeply sacred and revered duty. Almost all the interviews have made the distinction between "iç daire" (inner circle -meaning home) and "dış daire" (outer circle) between genders drawing very clear boundaries between gender which was not present in other two communities. This ensures that women do not or should not be engaged in anything concerning the *dış daire*, that they are solely responsible for the *iç daire* that entails just their husband and their kids. Thus, the space especially in this community becomes a key sphere in exploring the power relations and symbolic boundaries that maintain the main identifying symbols when exploring identity formation in the Meşveret community.

Henri Lefebvre (1975) argues that social space is essentially a social construct and is not simply a production of physical goods and objects. It is the result of network of relationships formed by social practices, structures and institutions. The result of the accumulation of knowledge through labour of production and reproduction. In addition, it is through everyday interactions that any form of production originates. He furthermore argues that space has a social character, that is in a dialectical relationship with human agents. The identity formation, too, is closely associated with the construction of space. Thus, spaces are constructed as social or historical products, containing social relations. This view can aid in understanding the reciprocal construction of female and male spaces within the Meşveret community. Furthermore, Ed Soja (1996) argues that the space in addition to being a means of production is also an arena of control and therefore domination of power (p.26). On the other hand, everyday spatial practices encourage (re)production of space, and it can be both subjective and collective. Therefore, by dividing the physical space in the community, and assigning roles accordingly and corresponding those roles with “appropriate” gender, there develops a distinct identity in reference to the drawn boundaries by the community. Thus, when women define themselves as the managers of the “*iç daire*” that also corresponds to certain behaviours and roles. The İsmailağa and the İskenderpaşa communities encourage venturing for *mederese* and educational/part-time employment purposes, while women in the Meşveret community locate themselves only within the boundaries of their home, and very rarely *dershanes*. For instance, Irem (27) emphasizes the importance of this distinct division.

A pious woman... when I think of myself, I say, "I perform the obligatory duties, Alhamdulillah, but avoiding sins is something I can't do fully." Why? Because from the environment I work in to the places I am, there are inevitably points where we fall into sin. It happens, for example, perhaps even with my students, especially with my male students. Because they are teenagers, you don't know how they think, what they do, or in what manner they interact with you. I wish I could cause no harm to anyone. If it were up to me, I would stay at home and engage in the medrese. I would serve within my household, with my own child. But sometimes, circumstances don't allow it. For instance, I don't have a father, so I'm forced to take on the entire responsibility of the house. I have to work. In my opinion, or rather, a pious woman is someone who raises her child very well, truly on the path of Allah. Because the ones from the innermost circle (family) will question you the most in the Hereafter. They will hold you accountable. I don't think I should focus too much on others' children without first raising my own. First, I must improve myself, my family, and my close relatives, my

inner circle. That's why if I were to get married now, I would step back and focus more on my faith, on what I've learned, on my children's morals, giving importance to my home, and later to the medrese, and I would still use my English for the sake of Allah. For example, instead of spending 30 hours, no, 20 hours on worldly matters – well, looking at it from the perspective of intention, Inshallah, it will take the form of worship. We only read Tafsir in English, and I use it with a few students. And during that time, with brothers from all over the world who read the Risale, we study lessons. That's it, really.

When asked about other communities and how they differ in terms of gender identity, women in the Meşveret community often (T3) criticise others for neglecting their homes and venturing outside. (It is important to note that İsmailağa women only attend sohbet and work as hocas in medreses within highly segregated environments with only female students.) The Meşveret community also criticises women who neglect their families in pursuit of community activities, emphasising that a woman's primary duty is to her children and to inner circle first. They also (T4) criticise other conservative women for their similarities to secular women, viewing them as overly ambitious in seeking education, careers, and financial stability, often raising their children in a similar fashion.

This typology of conservative women being similar to secular women (as a negative trait for them) is a recurring theme across various communities. This phenomenon may be understood based on in group and out group theory - "us versus them" dynamics, where communities define themselves in opposition to others. Foucault's notion of how identities are constructed in relation to what they are not evident here as well. By defining their own gender roles as distinct from those of secular and other conservative women and defining those "other" in a deviant discourse, these communities reinforce their own identity and values (Tajfel, H., & Turner, J. C., 1979).

The criticism from the Meşveret community reflects an ongoing negotiation of identity and values within conservative circles, where the role of women is a central point of contention. By positioning themselves against what they perceive as the secular or modern approach to gender roles, these communities reinforce their traditional values and maintain a clear boundary between themselves and others. This dynamic can be seen as a form of social control, where adherence to traditional gender roles is not only encouraged but also enforced through communal pressure and criticism of those who deviate.

3.3. Biological Determinants: Maintaining Gender Roles Based on Biological Foundations

İskenderpaşa: (S3) Emphasizing gender roles by referencing biological attributes.

In each community, gender roles and identity are approached through two lenses: biological differences and religious teachings. The İskenderpaşa and Meşveret communities primarily emphasize biological differences, reinforcing a deterministic view where these attributes dictate appropriate behaviours for males and females. In contrast, the İsmailağa community focuses more on religious teachings, framing gender roles within a religious context while still acknowledging biological differences. Thus, the İskenderpaşa community reinforces traditional gender roles by (T1) affirming the intrinsic connection between women's identity and their biological makeup. There was an overwhelming emphasis on women's biological make-up during the interviews. The interviewees constantly made connections between their biological make-up and what that entails, meaning that their biological sex demanded responsibilities that can only be performed by them. The main focus here is based on the fact that women are first and foremost "mothers" which indicates that they are much more emotional and nurturing than men. The ideal women were often described as smart, naïve, and merciful. For, instance when talking about the ideal job for women, they have often mentioned that since motherhood entails education and teaching women would be best suited in educational jobs (T3) Emphasizing women's innate educator role in society. Defining "educator" as an ideal female profession, considering women's inclination towards motherhood and the relatively limited exposure to men, ensures a safer environment for women. Since motherhood is closely associated with disciplining and educating children as their primary role, when asked what an ideal job for Muslim women entailed, they often responded with teaching. This preference is based on two main premises: first, that women are innately and biologically wired to educate, as they are naturally involved in raising children. Second, the role of an educator ensures minimal or no contact with the opposite gender, as women are permitted to associate with males only until they reach puberty.

Furthermore, there is an emphasis placed on (T2) gender-based separation in executive positions promoted by "separate but equal" ideology. The women emphasize that due their gentle nature women should not take on executive positions which includes politics or any high demand job that does not comply with women's biological make-up. The interviews revealed that, while men have more flexibility in their choices and activities, there are certain limits placed on women due to expectations of modesty such as working in a mixed environment or pursuing a political career or becoming executives in *diyanet*. For instance, men are encouraged

to actively engage in politics and assume leadership roles, while women are often expected to remain in the background. For, instance Ayla (45) argues in regard to politics:

It's crucial to get a solid fatwa from a knowledgeable scholar about women pursuing apolitical career. Sometimes I observe that some women work in a much more proper manner, and perhaps with more compassion and understanding. There are indeed such women. Now, I wonder if that woman doing that job really fill a void? It is just no in her nature, men are built for that role, but even than politics is dangerous, you have to lie and deceive, but someone has to do it. But as I said before, even in politics, or rather in women who are in the public eye, unfortunately, we sometimes struggle with things that stem from our nature. For instance, we may face difficulties regarding proper hijab, or we may encounter challenges in male-female relationships, leading us to stray from the principles of Sharia in these areas. We need to think whether this stems from over ambition.

Although in the community there is an emphasis placed on education for women and as mentioned earlier there is also the idea female as explained through productivity and career. However, there is still the notion of women being originally created different than men. While men can take up executive positions, women are meant to remain in the background. Fahriye (37) underlines this difference by emphasizing that God created men and women with different attributes.

What I mean by the concept of 'gracefulness' is this: I believe that women are created in a very special way. Women embody the gentle attributes of God. Naturally, a woman who carries these gentle attributes of God appears graceful. This gracefulness is reflected in her sitting, standing, speaking, demeanour, and style. It influences her spirit and every action. A woman should be aware of this. For example, I don't like women who adopt masculine attitudes and behaviours. When a woman uses hand gestures like a man, or speaks in a deep voice, or adopts a rough manner—there's a certain 'tough guy' vibe—I find it unbecoming for a woman. Because you weren't created that way. Men are created with different attributes of God, and you with different ones. You need to act and behave according to the qualities that define you, because that is your essence.

It seems that there's a minor shift in the younger generation, specifically those that are career oriented, advocating for absolute gender equality, although it hasn't gained significant traction yet. However, most of the women interviewed, despite being highly educated and

advocating for part-time work for women, were not employed. As mentioned earlier, women often stayed home after becoming a mother.

Meşveret: (S2) Affirming the intrinsic connection between women's identity and their biological makeup.

The Meşveret community places significant emphasis on the biological differences that influence the behaviours and roles of men and women. The community strongly highlights the intrinsic connection between women's identity and their biological makeup, particularly focusing on childbearing abilities. This biological perspective shapes views on what women are capable of, and underscores the differences between men and women, which are not primarily derived from religious teachings but rather from biological aspects. The gendered disposition in the Meşveret community is based on the notion that women are biologically weaker than men, leading to a clear distinction in female capabilities. Social expectations rooted in these biological differences are internalized and influence women's behaviours within the community. Boundaries, such as designating the home as women's domain, are established to protect women and maintain gender distinctions. Consequently, women are shaped from an early age to adhere to these predetermined roles.

There are several discursive techniques that underlie the intrinsic connection between biology and identity such as (T1) acknowledging the role of biology in shaping women's sense of self and gender identity. The recognition that certain physical differences exist between genders, and women's biological makeup renders them physically weaker and more reliant on others for support and protection. From this viewpoint, any activities or behaviours that deviate from this traditional understanding, such as women driving cars for necessary tasks, are seen as encroaching upon what is considered biologically associated with males. This division between genders is attributed to the qualities inherent in women's biological makeup.

I don't see it as a division, but rather a distribution of responsibilities. For example, a woman handles internal affairs, while a man takes care of external matters. In this sense, Islam assigns tasks in this way, I believe. Both serve each other—men serve women, and women serve men. They are responsible for our external affairs and material well-being, while we are responsible for ensuring their comfort in domestic life and helping them lead a good life. I believe Islam has entrusted us with this mission. Particularly in İsmailağa, there's a constant emphasis on the concept of 'qawwam'. I don't view it as superiority, but rather that God has endowed men with certain superior qualities and

women with different superior qualities. Men have a broader perspective, physical strength, and more courage, while women have greater aesthetic sense, delicacy, and emotional depth, which I believe surpass men's. Sometimes, my spouse and I even debate this. We are superior in one aspect, and you in another. You can't think through details the way I can. And women can multitask, whereas men really can't. (Kevser, 43)

These biological differences are closely associated with emotional attributes as well. Or they may drive from these emotional attributes. For instance, (T2) valuing compassion as a foundational trait for women is instilled in the culture of the Meşveret community. This may be due to the fact that women are referred to as the “heroes of compassion” (Şefkat Kahramanları) by Nursi. According to his writings, compassion is suited for women since he describes it as delicate, pure, and grander than love. Compassion does not demand reciprocation thus is a selfless act, and women forgo their lives to raise their children thus are referred as the compassionate ones. In his book *Mektubat*, he explains the emotional aspects of motherhood that is closely associated with womanhood.

A person, by feeling compassion for their child, extends that compassion to all children and living beings, thus reflecting the encompassing nature of the name Rahim (The Merciful (Nursi, 2007b: 52). "Yes, a mother, to save her child from danger, would sacrifice her life without expecting any reward, and, with genuine sincerity, she would naturally sacrifice herself for her child. This shows that women possess a very high level of heroism. With the development of this heroism, they can secure both their worldly and eternal lives (Nursi, 2007a: 461).

Thus, women are expected to take on roles that enable their biological strength. This indicates that any deviation from this biological leniency can cause imbalance in the lives of the children. As mentioned earlier the main focus of this community is towards protecting the family unit as they believe that the next generation of faithful Muslims can only be raised in a good family environment. Marriage protects the roles of men and women as they were biologically possessed. Hülya (47) explains marriage as bringing together the strength of men and women to create the perfect environment to raise children in.

‘The master (Üstad) states that in a woman, there are 'two women and one man,' while in a man, there are 'two men and one child.' He explains that the presence of 'one man' in a woman is so that she can protect herself until marriage. That is why women find

their true nature (*fitra*) once they get married. As for the man, why is there a child in him? This part is more of my interpretation. The child is because the predominant role for a man until marriage is being a son. After marriage, he starts behaving more like a parent to his own parents, taking care of their needs, and moving out of his childhood role. The master says that after marriage, the 'man' in the woman and the 'child' in the man switch places—the woman becomes a mother, understanding the language of the child, while the man steps into his role as a complete man and finds his true nature. I really like this concept because it explains not only nature (*fitra*) but also the significance I place on marriage. Additionally, I relate the concept of a woman's compassion to this. Compassion is inherently part of womanhood, and when a child comes to a woman, it fully solidifies. I feel that God has endowed women with a vein of compassion, so explaining nature through compassion could be a beautiful way to understand it.

The Meşveret women closely associate (T3) *taqwa* with their biological nature, too. Adhering to roles such as managing the household, caring for children, and maintaining the home aligns with their gender-specific duties and is viewed as a reflection of *taqwa*. By fulfilling these roles, women are seen as acting in accordance with the principles of *taqwa*. In fact, Fatma (32) states; “I believe that *taqwa* is when a woman behaves like a woman and a man behaves like a man. It means behaving according to one's natural disposition (*fitra*).” Furthermore, *taqwa* also ensures women to refrain from exerting dominance over male areas. This also provides strength for women by (T4) reversing women's perceived vulnerabilities into their strengths.

Taqwa is heavily emphasized in both the Meşveret and İskenderpaşa communities to almost regulate behaviours by setting standards to what is considered “righteous” and “sinful”. This ensures that individuals are constantly monitored, not only by the community—which is the case for İsmailağa, but also by themselves through an internalized sense of duty to religious and moral norms. Thus, acting one’s gender may encourage to adapt certain behaviours, dress codes, or roles can be viewed as the expression of *taqwa*. Thus, as Foucault suggests in the concept of the “technology of the self”, members internalize societal norms and surveil themselves as part their “self-care.” This also ensures in the reproduction of the norms in the community by normalization of behaviours and norms. Foucault also emphasizes that this is how subjectivities are constructed by internalization and normalization of discourses (Foucault, 1975). On the other hand, Saba Mahmood argues that through *taqwa* women acquire agency

and autonomy. She thus maintains that taqwa is an empowering tool that provides women with a sense of moral and spiritual agency. By adhering to taqwa and consequently the religious norms and modesty coded set by the community women gain respects and status. Thus, taqwa becomes a way of exercising agency within the community. Taqwa thus serves as a positive force that shapes their subjectivity – how they see themselves and how they want to be represented within the community. Thus, taqwa takes on a dual role: on the one hand it enables women to actively construct their identities as through religious practices, on the other hand this subjectivity is deeply rooted in the traditional and communal expectations (Mahmood, 2005).

Taqwa also acts as a regulatory practice, especially in the İsmailağa community, as women internalize the essence of taqwa which enables them to conform to certain behaviours, which include obedience and deference to male authority. Through commitment to taqwa women effectively discipline themselves, aligning their behaviours with the norms of the community. Thus, this form of self-regulation mirrors what Foucault (2010) argues in “governmentality,” that power is exercised through internalization of social norms rather than direct coercion.

In sum, while the İskenderpaşa and Meşveret communities emphasize biological attributes when defining an ideal woman, more focus is placed on gender roles that are defined by the community’s interpretation of religion on gender roles. Although this is also slightly present in the İskenderpaşa community, it is not emphasized as part of the ideal women perspective.

3.4. Sustaining Traditional Gender Roles: Men as Providers, Women as Homemakers

İsmailağa: (S4) Defining women as subordinate to men.

Both the İsmailağa and Meşveret communities particularly emphasize the delicate nature of women that in turn aids in sustaining traditional gender roles that promotes women as homemakers and men as providers. The distinction between emphasizing biological attributes and claiming gender roles based on religious associations represents two different approaches to gender within the communities. Thus, both biological attributes and gender roles based on religious associations are discussed in this chapter to highlight the differences in how the communities emphasize the source of the ideal woman.

The formation of identity within the İsmailağa community, particularly concerning gender roles, is deeply intertwined with the communal construction of characteristics attributed

to men and women. This construction involves defining identity in opposition to the "other," with women described in terms of biological traits such as being "delicate" and "emotional," seen as intrinsic to their nature (T1: Emphasizing the delicate and weak nature of women.). In contrast, men are associated with strength and protectiveness. These associations help define and reinforce gender roles within the community. The reason women are described as delicate and weak is due to their vulnerability in faith which is overly emphasized in *sohbets*. During participant observations, a sentence that was most heard during *sohbets* was that "the women are created weaker than men in terms of intelligence, religion, and morality". For instance, although in the Qur'an men and women are mentioned equally in chapters associated with adultery; sheikh Ustaosmanoğlu's *Ruhul Furkan* tafseer mostly focuses on women (Ustaosmanoğlu, *Ruhu'l Furkan*, 4/626). In fact, he states that "since women are often the cause of adultery, Allah the Almighty clarifies the rulings concerning adulterous women and leaves the judgment of men to be deduced in comparison to them." Furthermore, the women are often portrayed as the first sinner, and often portrayed as temptresses. Thus, women are often told that "woman is a source of fitnah" and often compared to the fitnah of Satan. One of the most quoted verses was the following: "So when he (her husband) saw that Yusuf's shirt was ripped from behind, he said to her: "It is one of the tricks of you women! Your trick was mighty indeed!" (The Qur'an, 12:28). Thus, gendered interpretation of religious doctrines often contributes to the construction of gender roles. The communal reinforcement of these roles through religious teachings and social practices reflects the hegemony of traditional gender norms. For example, women are often told that disobeying one's husband is crucial, and women must obey her husband in all things. An example that is often given in *sohbets* is if a women's husband does not allow for her to attend her father's funeral, she should not.

This positioning of women as weak aligns women with roles suited to these perceived traits and limits their participation in male-dominated areas. By highlighting perceived weaknesses of women, such as naivety or emotionality, and contrasting them with men's strength and capability, the community delineates gender-specific roles and expectations.

Moreover, the discourse surrounding women's engagement with modern practices, such as gossip and the acquisition of luxury items, is frequently framed as a manifestation of weakness, particularly given that these attributes are not typically ascribed to men (T2: Constructing women's modern practices as a weakness in faith). In the İsmailağa community, modern practices, particularly those associated with secularism, are often viewed as reflective of a weakened commitment to faith. The characterization of women as weak is often linked to their perceived susceptibility to worldly desires and vanity, as well as their greater

susceptibility to external influences. This perception suggests that women are more easily swayed by materialism and social pressures compared to men. In fact, when asked, are women more inclined towards modernization compared to men? they frequently affirmed this, noting that women, particularly brides, tend to engage in excessive shopping and show a greater inclination towards luxury items compared to men. "Without necessity, women go shopping; they will destroy the domes without supports!" (Zaruret olmadan kadınlar alışverişe çıkıyorlar, direksiz kubbeleri yıkacak bunlar!) (Ustaosmanoğlu, 2018: 257-260). This sentiment is frequently expressed as a characteristic of secular women and is regarded with disdain.

This perspective highlights a significant contrast between the priorities of secular women and those within the İsmailağa community. Secular women are frequently critiqued for their focus on career advancement and financial independence, which, according to community members, leads them to deprioritize traditional family roles and religious obligations. This perceived shift away from religious values is seen as indicative of a broader decline in spiritual dedication. In contrast, İsmailağa women emphasize the importance of religious education and adherence to Islamic principles as central to their lives. Their focus is on educating themselves and their children to live according to religious teachings, thus placing family and faith above career ambitions. Interestingly, when comparing themselves to conservative women who do not align with a specific religious community, the İsmailağa members note similar criticisms. Although these conservative women may observe traditional religious practices such as prayer and fasting, they are also perceived as being primarily driven by worldly ambitions.

Of course, their ultimate goal is also to attain paradise; they place importance on acts of worship such as prayer and fasting. However, in general, they also focus on worldly goals, such as their child getting a good education, graduating, finding a job, buying a house, and getting married. Ultimately, I think the goals are the same with secular women. (Hale, 33)

This comparison reinforces the İsmailağa community's self-perception of maintaining a purer, more devoted religious identity. By emphasizing their distinct priorities—religious commitment and family devotion—over secular and even other conservative practices, the İsmailağa community defines itself through a contrast that underscores its adherence to traditional values and its critique of modern, secular approaches to life and faith.

Another technique with which they applied this strategy was: (T3) Stressing women's obedience to men. In the İsmailağa community, the roles and statuses of women are framed through a combination of religious teachings and societal expectations. Female members of the

community frequently emphasize their position relative to men, drawing on religious concepts such as the Qur'anic principle of Qawwam (men's role as protectors and maintainers of women). This principle is used to underline the expectation of women's obedience and respect toward their husbands. Women are often portrayed as docile, and their roles are reinforced through religious discourses and *sohbets* (religious discussions). In these gatherings, defiance against husbands is framed as a sinful act, and the community often makes references to hadiths that highlight the superior status of men. For instance, a hadith states, "If I were to command anyone to prostrate to another, I would have commanded women to prostrate to their husbands" (Tirmidhi, Rada 10; also see Abu Dawood, Nikah 40; Ibn Majah, Nikah 4). The constant reiteration of the husband's rights over women was a frequent theme in the *sohbets*. In fact, women were often told that their entry into heaven was contingent upon pleasing and obeying their husbands. Quranic verses are frequently invoked to support these themes. In particular, Chapter An-Nisa, verses 34-35, are often cited to delineate the husband's rights over his wife. This notion is further reinforced by the documented *sohbets* of Ustaosmanoğlu.

"O Aisha! If any woman prays to her Lord and, after praying for herself, prays for her husband, if she does not pray for her husband before praying for herself, Allah Almighty will certainly reject her prayer. O Aisha! Work diligently, for you are among those who associated with Yusuf (peace be upon him), led David (peace be upon him) into temptation, expelled Adam (peace be upon him) from paradise, and disobeyed Noah and Lot (peace be upon them)." (Ustaosmanoğlu, 1997: 5/88)

This selective reading, which emphasizes women's obedience and virtue while omitting references to male obligations, serves to reinforce and perpetuate the status quo. By focusing mainly on women's roles and responsibilities within religious discourse bolsters existing gender hierarchies. The omission of subsequent expectations for men ensures that power dynamics remain unopposed, allowing the community to continue operating within traditional gender frameworks.

Meşveret: (S3) Defining gender roles as equal but separate.

Compared to others, The Meşveret community creates an interesting enigma. As previously mentioned, the community has a family centred ideology. The gender roles and identity formation are usually adapted based on family roles and family identity given within the family unit. The roles of men and women within this community is often (S3) defined as separate but equal. This indicates a combination of techniques that encompass both intellectual abilities as well as religious connotations.

The Meşveret community, in contrast to İsmailağa, places a strong (T1) emphasis on equality based on intellectual abilities. Women within this community often articulate their belief that they are capable of achieving anything that their male counterparts can, a perspective that is notably aligned with the views expressed in the İskenderpaşa community. The women argue that intellectual capacity is not gendered.

I believe there is a difference in fitra (natural disposition) between men and women. For instance, they are never physically the same, but in every other aspect, we are equal. I think women can study in any field they wish; I don't see any distinction between "men's" or "women's" professions. However, I find mixed-gender work and school environments inappropriate, which is why I don't support them. (Sare, 47)

This approach diverges significantly from the perspective found in the İsmailağa order, where a clear distinction is made between male and female intelligence. In İsmailağa, the educational curriculum provided to men is broader and more comprehensive compared to that offered to women, reflecting an underlying belief in the superiority of male intellect. This difference in educational focus reinforces the community's view on gender roles and intellectual capacities. Despite the belief in intellectual equality in the Meşveret community, the mixed environment discourages women from working. This theme of restricted female vocation is a recurring one across all three communities studied, indicating a broader communal resistance to women's participation in the workforce, despite the acknowledgment of their intellectual capabilities. Thus, while women in the Meşveret community may perceive themselves as equal to men in terms of intelligence, the social environment limits their opportunities to demonstrate this equality in practical, professional contexts. Thus, women often remain at home and usually do distant learning and remain focused on raising children. Although, there is a clear understanding of quality based on education, in practice the women in the Meşveret community receive little education and do not usually receive any other education than thoroughly reading RNK.

In the Meşveret community, the division of labor at home reflects a more egalitarian approach (T2: Preserving an equal division of labor at home) compared to other Islamic communities, such as İskenderpaşa. While in İskenderpaşa, the equal division of labor is often necessitated by women's part-time employment, in Meşveret, this division appears more culturally embedded and widely practiced. Interviews revealed that men frequently participate in household chores and child-rearing, challenging traditional gender roles that typically assign domestic responsibilities exclusively to women. Women in the Meşveret community reported

that household cleaning, grocery shopping, and other domestic tasks were often shared, with men taking on these responsibilities when possible.

I mean, compared to other communities, the men in our household are more active. They are helpers. For example, my father wouldn't do it, but my husband does everything—he sweeps the house, cooks, and helps with other chores. I see the same with my friends' husbands as well. In general, I believe they are helpers. (Merve, 31)

Although women still bear a larger share of the household duties, the significant involvement of men suggests a more collaborative approach to home management, reflecting an evolving understanding of gender roles within this community. This shift could be interpreted as an attempt to balance the demands of modern life with traditional values, demonstrating a nuanced adaptation to contemporary social expectations.

This egalitarian approach is also mirrored in the community's understanding of taqwa (T3: Detaching taqwa from gender identity). In contrast to İsmailağa and İskenderpaşa, where taqwa is emphasized particularly for women and often linked to modest dress codes, the Meşveret community applies the concept of taqwa equally to both genders. For instance, Hafsa (33) suggests that:

taqwa, truly fearing Allah, is the essence of it. In my opinion, there is no distinction between the taqwa of men and women. It's about fearing Allah sincerely (hakkıyla korkmak), regardless of gender. And acting according to one's gender. I think this is important. Not taking on mens role for example for women and men not taking on women's roles are important.

In this context, taqwa is framed as acting in a manner that reinforces gender boundaries (T4: Emphasizing gendered boundaries), meaning that men and women are expected to refrain from venturing into spaces traditionally reserved for the opposite gender. Furthermore, the Meşveret community often criticizes women in the İsmailağa community for overstepping traditional roles by becoming overly active within the community, suggesting that such actions detract from their familial responsibilities (T5: Criticizing other communities for mixing gender roles). Aylin (30) for instance states: I think they give too much of themselves and their families under the name of "service." First, that child needs them, but they are focusing on other people's children, for example. I don't think this is right. We are responsible first and foremost for our own families, our inner circle." These criticisms reflect Meşveret's concern with maintaining a balance between community participation and domestic responsibilities,

underscoring their commitment to preserving distinct gender roles while allowing for some degree of flexibility.

3.5. Çarşaf as Modesty, Expression and Identity

İsmailağa: (S3) Stressing the importance of "çarşaf"

The İsmailağa community, in addition to emphasizing religious education and the role of women as homemakers, strongly defines itself through its standards of modesty, which for women is characterized by the wearing of the çarşaf. As Işık (2021) argues, the çarşaf carries significance and mission that extend far beyond its basic function as a covering and modesty. The importance of the çarşaf as the ideal form of covering for women was a recurring theme throughout all the interviews. The çarşaf embodies, in this context, both nostalgia and a form of protest within the community. Modern clothing is consistently rejected as it is perceived to resemble the attire of non-believers. The *çarşaf*, along with the traditional dresses worn by the women, serves as a symbolic link to the past, particularly to the Ottoman Empire and early Islam—the two periods regarded by the community as the height of religious purity. By wearing çarşaf, women associate themselves with the ideals of the first Muslim women, supporting a connection to the early Islamic tradition and a sense of historical continuity. By adhering to the ideals established by earlier Muslims, the women of the community view the çarşaf as the only authentic and true form of covering. Consequently, any other form of covering is largely associated with non-believers.

The community by (T1) promoting the çarşaf not just as an ideal covering for Muslim women but also embracing it as part of one's identity is a theme recurring throughout the community. It thus functions as the main boundary marker for these women. When asked about the ideal dress code for women, all members consistently responded with "çarşaf." This same response was given when inquired about the main differences between the İsmailağa community and other communities. The distinction established by the çarşaf was significant in every aspect. When women defined themselves, they frequently referred to their çarşaf, expressing pride in the community by noting that women begin wearing the çarşaf as soon as they reach puberty or by the time they graduate from the medrese. When asked how they would feel outside without the çarşaf, the women responded, "I can't be myself without the çarşaf; I can't imagine such a thing." As discussed in the Ideal Community chapter, the women argue that the çarşaf is the authentic covering first worn by the earliest Muslim women when the revelations concerning women's head coverings were revealed. They make a direct connection between the head coverings of today and this original, pure form of modesty, which they

believe is the most authentic way to observe Islamic principles. This belief is frequently reinforced in sohbet, where hocas repeatedly emphasize that the "çarşaf-ı şerif" is a defence of Islam and women's modesty, asserting that on the Day of Judgment, the exalted çarşaf will protect women and speak on their behalf. Due to the sanctity associated with the çarşaf, those who wear it are often praised for making the "right" choice in their practice of modesty.

Thus, the çarşaf is not merely a form of clothing; it is intricately linked to one's identity, carrying connotations of religious adherence and the sanctity associated with it. The effect of the çarşaf on identity within the İsmailağa community is profound, as it serves not only as a physical manifestation of modesty but also as a powerful symbol of religious commitment and most importantly communal belonging. *Çarşaf* is deeply embedded in the self-perception of women in the community, to the point where many express that they "can't be themselves" without it. This sentiment highlights how the çarşaf transcends its function as a piece of clothing to become a defining aspect of personal and collective identity. Yeşim (37) suggests that by wearing the çarşaf, they are also emphasizing their distinction from others.

This is who we are. This is the only form of covering described in the Quranic verse is the form of the çarşaf. When this is expanded, it varies according to regions, countries, and climates. I'm speaking from a formal perspective, but Efendi Hazretleri, as a general principle, would explain that when the çarşaf verse was revealed, it was as if Mecca was overrun by black crows. This does not change; it remains the same. In our community, everything has to follow the prescribed, right path, and you will be advised to follow it. It used to be unconsciously. In our community, there's no such concern. Look, they've already accepted being outsiders, they wear the çarşaf, and they say, "We are different," loudly.

Çarşaf is often (T2) viewed as a source of pride and referred to as "çarşaf-ı şerif". The resistance to modern clothing, and by extension to modernity, is intimately tied to a profound connection to God within the İsmailağa community. The *çarşaf* is not merely seen as a traditional garment but is imbued with deep spiritual significance, representing the most authentic form of women's covering. This association provides the community with a sense of pride and a reinforcement of their religious identity. The community views the çarşaf as a steadfast symbol of adherence to traditional values, resisting the compromises often made by other communities in the face of modernization. By upholding the çarşaf, the İsmailağa community asserts its commitment to preserving religious practices in their most authentic form, distinguishing itself from other groups that may have adapted their practices to align with

modern trends. This stance is seen as a testament to their unwavering dedication to religious principles, maintaining a clear demarcation from the perceived influences of modernity. The pride in wearing the *çarşaf* thus becomes not just a matter of personal or communal identity but a symbol of resistance and fidelity to traditional religious observance.

This is *çarşaf-ı şerif*. This is the only correct form of covering. But other communities like İskenderpaşa does not follow this approach. For instance, in İskenderpaşa, it is not mandatory to wear the *çarşaf*. Or let me talk about my father's community, the Erenköy community. I observe, for example, the issue of gender segregation. In our community, it is very strict, but they don't have such a thing. It's not that it doesn't exist, but when it comes to practice, they're not as strict as we are. Yes, as a difference, in our community, everything is not just taught in books; practically, for example, if someone wears a *pardesü* or a *çarşaf*, after putting on the *çarşaf*, they also incorporate gender segregation into their life. Of course, this varies from person to person, but the general lifestyle in the İsmailağa community is like this. You need to act according to the *çarşaf*. They wear the *çarşaf* and pay attention to gender segregation. They follow the prescribed path step by step, in relation to their own ego. The *çarşaf* protects you from other sins, because you have to live up to its name (*çarşaf-ı şerif*). It is personal, but generally speaking, this is how it is. However, in İskenderpaşa, you can wear a *çarşaf*, wear a black headscarf, or even wear pants underneath. No one will make a comment about this, but in İsmailağa, they will. This is the difference. (Hale, 33)

Çarşaf also provides a sense of protection from immodesty according to the women in the community. They have often (T3) expressed *çarşaf* as a manifestation of *taqwa*. As previously mentioned, the *çarşaf* is regarded as the most authentic form of covering, essential for achieving full modesty and true religiosity. However, it also functions as a barrier between genders, restricting women within the community from entering male-dominated spaces. Members often articulated that the *çarşaf* signifies that women must adhere to certain behavioural norms, such as limiting interactions with men to essential circumstances only. This garment is seen as reinforcing traditional gender boundaries, ensuring that women do not venture into spaces designated for men. For instance, some women in the community have chosen to discontinue their education upon adopting the *çarşaf*, as they feel unable to participate in mixed-gender environments. The *çarşaf* thus plays a role in maintaining the separation between genders, reinforcing the *haremlik-selamlık* concept where distinct spaces and roles are assigned based on gender. Işık (2021) further argues that wearing the *çarşaf* has psychological implications, serving as a constant reminder for women to adhere to modesty and devotion. It

is seen as a means to avoid sin and uphold purity, reflecting the values esteemed by Mahmut Ustaosmanoğlu.

As *çarşaf* holds sacred value, wearers are expected to adhere to specific behaviours, including avoiding interactions with men outside, refraining from inappropriate actions such as going to cafes, and privately dressing and behaving modestly (T3: Expressing *çarşaf* as a manifestation of *taqwa*). Encompassing both internal and external adherence to God's mandates, *Taqwa* is often reduced to its external manifestations within the *İsmailağa* community. This reduction is particularly evident in the emphasis on visible and measurable expressions of piety. For women, the degree of *taqwa* is frequently assessed based on their modesty in dress and behaviour. Reyhan (50) argues that “*taqwa* is to fear Allah as He deserves to be feared. However, outward appearances also reflect *taqwa*. For example, wearing wide and muted-colored clothing, and of course the *çarşaf*, I think. Not laughing out loud or speaking too loudly—these kinds of things are all part of it.”

This discursive focus on external qualities reflects the community's tendency to equate outward expressions of religiosity with the internal spiritual state, thereby prioritizing visible markers of piety over the more nuanced internal dimensions of *taqwa*. The women in the *İsmailağa* community identify several forms of modest attire that reflect both their individual identities and the collective identity of the community. The attention given to modesty and “*tessettür*” (Islamic dress code) serves as a measure of *taqwa* (God-consciousness), which in turn establishes the foundation for the community's hierarchical structure. Among these attires, the *çarşaf* is considered the most significant, symbolizing the highest degree of *taqwa*. The majority of interviewees expressed a strong desire for their daughters to adopt the *çarşaf* as their regular outfit.

Identifying the *çarşaf* with the highest level of God-consciousness is a powerful discursive technique among *İsmailağa* women. To understand the community's daily practices in terms of clothing and appearance, Symbolic Interactionism, particularly Erving Goffman's dramaturgical approach, can be applied. Goffman uses theatrical metaphors such as stage, actor, performance, character, prop, and masks to analyse micro-level social interactions. In this context, the “front stage” includes elements such as clothing, physical characteristics, posture, speech patterns, and bodily gestures, all of which contribute to the social identity of the actor. The women in the community are judged not only by their behaviour but also by their appearance, with the width of their hijab, the thickness of their socks, and the modesty of their outfits all signalling their level of *taqwa*. The more a woman's attire conforms to these

community standards, the higher her status in the community's social hierarchy, reinforcing the idea that outward expressions of modesty are closely tied to spiritual piety (Özyağlı, 2018). Thus, the *çarşaf* has become an integral part of the İsmailağa women's habitus as well as their sufi identity, affecting and shaping their behaviours, thoughts and feelings.

In the İsmailağa community, those who do not wear the *çarşaf* are often perceived as lacking modesty or succumbing to their desires (*nefsine uymak*). The community holds a strong belief that any form of clothing other than the *çarşaf* contradicts religious principles and is sometimes viewed as a deviation. As a result, other religious communities, such as İskenderpaşa and Meşveret, are often criticized for not adhering to what İsmailağa members consider the Islamic standards of modest attire (T4: Criticizing other clothing as not meeting the standards of modest attire.). Given that one of the central elements of the community's identity is intertwined with the *çarşaf* and its perceived authenticity, the lack of emphasis on modest dressing in other communities is viewed as indicative of a weaker faith. Yeşim (37) argues that "you can ask any scholar, but the only acceptable form of modest outfit for women is *çarşaf*. For instance, Süleymancı women wear tight skirts and pardüses, it is not proper. The whole body is visible. Same with other communities doing their hijabs tide back, it is not right for muslim women."

The *çarşaf* is believed by many in the community to be the true form of modesty, as they associate it with the attire worn by the first Muslim women, reinforcing the notion that only through wearing the *çarşaf* can one achieve true modesty. However, despite the dominant discourse around the *çarşaf*, subtle changes in dress codes are evident. For instance, accessories like large watches and sheer socks are increasingly seen as improper within the community due to their ability to attract attention. Additionally, there has been a notable shift towards women opting for pants and t-shirts at home, signalling a significant change in *çarşaf* culture within a relatively short period.

This evolution in dress within the İsmailağa community underscores that even in environments where tradition is deeply revered, practices are not static. The subtle modifications in how women dress, such as the adoption of accessories that might be considered flashy or the shift towards more casual clothing at home, illustrate that identity is continuously negotiated and reshaped. The evolving practices around dress in İsmailağa demonstrate how norms can shift in response to internal and external pressures, ultimately leading to a redefinition of what it means to embody the community's ideals. This fluidity within the context of a rigid framework reveals the complex interplay between tradition and

modernity, as well as the ongoing process of identity negotiation within the community. Thus, as new influences seep in, common practices are reinterpreted, leading to subtle transformations in how women embody modesty, which illustrates how the *habitus* itself is dynamic rather than fixed.

Modesty in the community is symbolically constructed. It is not only a personal choice but is negotiated in the community. It is sustained through communal practices and ensured through constant reassurance through *sohbet*, where often a distinction is made between those who do not wear *çarşaf* as immodest. The *çarşaf* also mandates to regulate women's visibility in public spaces and delineate their roles within the private sphere.

3.6. The Educated Woman: From Medrese to Modern Education

İskenderpaşa: (S3) Emphasizing the paramount significance of education.

The İskenderpaşa community's approach to education reflects a distinctive sociocultural ethos compared to other communities examined. Modern education for both genders is highly emphasised in this community, something that is not commonly seen in other religious communities. Especially, female education across communities is a varied subject that differs largely based on their interpretation of gender segregation laws and varying degrees of openness to external, particularly modern, influences. This distinction underscores the community's relatively progressive stance on gender and education within the broader context of religiously conservative environments. Furthermore, the İskenderpaşa community's prioritization of education led to a shift in the previously established *habitus* for women. The *habitus* is “the product of history, it is an open system of dispositions that is constantly subjected to experiences, and therefore constantly affected by them in a way that either reinforces or modifies its structures. It's durable but not eternal” (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, p.133). Thus, *habitus* is not static but can be adjusted and reshaped in response to new experiences, such as the pressures of modernity and changing educational norms in the İskenderpaşa community.

While modern education system often entails mixed-gender environments, the community accommodated this aspect of modernity by emphasizing the essentiality of education for women, yet simultaneously discouraging them from participating in the workforce. This approach reflects an accommodation strategy where the community navigates

modern influences by integrating aspects like education while maintaining traditional gender roles, emphasizing women's roles within the home rather than outside.

The (S3) emphasis placed on the paramount significance of education is evident by the high number of undergraduates and graduates within the sample. (Based on my conversations with the experts as well as my participants, this is also true for the male and female members of the community in general.) All the women interviewed had received a university education, with five holding master's degrees. As emphasized in the methodology chapter, the sample was chosen via the snowball method and included ages above 50 to include those who could not complete their education during the scarf ban in Turkey. During the interviews I have discovered that those who could not complete their education due to the ban had received distance education later on when it was available to them. In fact, Yasemin (55) was in her second university degree through distance education. These women specifically stressed that the community is widely recognized for its strong emphasis on education, viewing it as a core aspect of their identity formation.

Thus, in the case of the İskenderpaşa community, the discourse surrounding education—particularly modern education—serves to construct and reinforce specific identities for women. By promoting higher education for women, the community is participating in a discourse that aligns with broader societal norms entailing modernity rather than religious discourse that is prominent in Meşveret and İsmailağa communities. This educational emphasis is not simply based on acquiring knowledge but also about shaping the way individuals see themselves and are seen by others within the community. It also allows the community to negotiate its position within the broader societal framework. For instance, when asked, “how do you assess the social status of women within the community? From an external perspective, where do you see your place in society?” they have unanimously suggested that they make up one of the most educated groups within the Turkish society. For instance, Nilüfer (50) argues “women in this community is highly educated. Education is very important to this community. Even those that could not go to university because of the hijab ban later in life completed their studies, as I did. We push women to receive master’s and doctorates and many do. When you compare it with the women in Turkish society, I think we are highly educated.” Thus, education is closely associated with a higher social status not only in the community but within broader social context.

Education is therefore perceived as a form of cultural capital within the İskenderpaşa community. As Bourdieu suggests, "capital is always a resource that can be used to maintain or improve one's position" within a particular field (Bourdieu, 2002, p. 263). This community not only establishes a social hierarchy based on education, placing itself at the top of the societal pyramid, but also constructs a hierarchical distinction between other communities, positioning itself as superior once again based on its emphasis on education and intellectual achievement. Drawing from this, the emphasis on education within the İskenderpaşa community not only sets it apart from other communities but also indicates a visible ideological shift toward gender equality in intellectual pursuits.

The İskenderpaşa community's support for (T1) education as a lifelong pursuit for women highlights a deviation from embedded traditional practices. Much similar to the İsmailağa and other religious communities, the İskenderpaşa supported a religious and all female education until late 1990s. However, the community's educational philosophy is further reflected in the role of its leaders. Both previous and contemporary sheikhs have actively promoted the education of women, embedding this value deeply into the community's identity. This advocacy indicates a commitment to egalitarian principles within the educational domain, contrasting sharply with the more conservative approaches observed in the other communities. During 1990s Esad Coşan has emphasized and promoted homemaker against what was perceived as the "modern women". The community's magazines specifically *Kadın ve Aile* (Women and Family) continued to promote the ideal women as self-sacrificing and educated mother, an obedient wife, and a woman who cooks, washes dishes, and does laundry (Acar, 1993). However, it is important to note that the İskenderpaşa community has consistently emphasized some form of education for women, whether it be religious instruction or home economics, underscoring its significance in their lives and more specifically in the community. The lean towards modern education started with Coşan (2008) in the community as reflected in the following quote, he argued that "A good education lifts a primitive society out of backwardness and transforms it into a modern, advanced, and enlightened community". This perspective suggests a certain alignment with the linear evolutionary theory of modernization. However, the form of enlightenment endorsed here is not a radical, Westernized version of modernity. Instead, modern, advanced societies are seen as those that enjoy prosperity, protect rights and freedoms, and uphold contemporary standards. Coşan, reflecting this belief in his community, emphasizes education as the key differentiator of modern societies, as illustrated by his statement: "As far as I have observed, modern societies place great value and importance on education; their victories, wealth, and successes are due to this"

(Coşan, 2008, p. 206). Unlike other communities, Coşan's perception of modernity was endorsed positively and promoted on the basis of instrumental rationality. Thus, there is no negative connotation behind his description of modernity.

Thus, the İskenderpaşa community is particularly characterized by its pronounced emphasis on education, which is reflected in the responses of its female members to various inquiries. When questioned about the community's mission, objectives, values, and ideal vision for the future, the predominant theme in their responses was education. Specifically, when asked to describe their community's mission and goals, identify its core values, and articulate an ideal community's foundational principles and priorities, the female members consistently highlighted education as central.

This emphasis on education also emerged in discussions regarding the ideal female role within the community. Responses to questions about the role of women in İskenderpaşa compared to other communities, the primary duty of an ideal Muslim woman, and the characteristics of an exalted female figure consistently centred on education. Female respondents frequently identified themselves by their educational qualifications. The members advocate for a lifelong pursuit of education for women, with most women being valued based on their productivity within the educational sphere. Thus, female members mainly define themselves by the classes they take and their qualifications. Furthermore, encouragement of lifelong education for women, who are often seen as primary caregivers, is rooted in the notion that women are innate educators based on motherhood qualities, thus a lifelong pursuit ensures that children are also educated. This theory suggests that while men are typically expected to be the primary breadwinners, women, due to their domestic roles, are provided with more opportunities for educational engagement.

So, when we think about our own community, the most obvious thing I think is that the focus should be on education. Academic work. From our teacher Zahit Kotku, and even before him, you must have noticed while doing research that the Naqshbandis are divided into branches, and when they are divided, starting from the Müşavi Hazretleri, the group that I belong to is separated as the path of knowledge. So, it's not just academic; all of our previous teachers also had very serious works related to knowledge. Mehmet Akkurt Hazretleri also tells our teacher Esad, and Esad, who graduated in Persian language and literature, he says, 'Son, stay at a university.' What year was it? 1950s-60s? At that time, it was like, how will that work? But somehow, it happens.

After the 50s and 60s, everyone is advised to stay at the university as an academic. I think now women are more educated than men, since they don't have to work and provide. Me and my sister both have master's for example. We also have more time than men again because we do not have to work and provide. (Lale, 34)

A notable distinction within the İskenderpaşa community is the prioritization of education over traditional religious values related to gender segregation. This divergence is evident in the nuanced application of gender boundaries within educational settings. Furthermore, interviews reveal a consensus on the critical importance of education, even if it requires the relaxation of traditional religious gender boundaries. This trend underscores a significant aspect of the community's educational philosophy: a pragmatic approach that prioritizes educational attainment over rigid adherence to conventional gender segregation in schools. The tendency to (T2) deemphasize "religious" gender boundaries for educational purposes represents a marked deviation from traditional religious communities. For instance, when asked whether girls should receive education beyond religious training and what type of education they should pursue, all respondents affirmed that girls should receive the same education as boys. When questioned about their stance on co-education, they indicated that mixed education is acceptable up until puberty, after which gender-segregated education should be implemented until university. Nevertheless, they conceded that if mixed education were the only available option, girls should still attend school. Regarding university education, all respondents expressed that mixed education is acceptable and that women should attend university. However, when asked if distance education could be a viable alternative and whether it is more suitable for women, they uniformly rejected it, citing that it is not productive and cannot serve as a viable alternative.

I think it should be school, meaning formal education. I don't think distance learning works. You can't learn that way. Of course, during adolescence, I think mixed environments can create problems. But I don't think children should be too separated either, because then boys can't understand the difference between genders. At university, of course, by that time, people are older, so I think it's not a problem anymore. Of course, I would have preferred separate schools for women and men, but I think education is very important. (Fahriye, 37)

However, within the İskenderpaşa community, there is a slight division in the community between those that express the importance of education and those who maintain that gender segregation remains crucial, even in educational contexts. This divergence suggests

a complex negotiation between modern educational imperatives and traditional religious values. Notably, there is a consensus across all age groups regarding the acceptance of mixed-gender university education. This agreement underscores a generational shift and indicates a broader trend towards the modernization of educational practices within the community.

The emphasis on education within the İskenderpaşa community further facilitates its construction of a hierarchical distinction among other communities. As previously discussed, the promotion of identity within a group necessitates a comparison with an "other." The İskenderpaşa community differentiates itself by (T3) criticizing other communities for their perceived neglect of girls' education. Specifically, it critiques the İsmailağa community for its focus on gender-segregated education, which restricts female members to receiving only Islamic education in Medreses. This approach is strongly opposed within the İskenderpaşa community, which views the lack of broader educational opportunities for girls as untenable in the current environment.

In some communities, like İsmailağa for example, they don't let girls go to school, which I think is very wrong. This way, they become dependent on men, and uneducated generations are raised. They don't even go to primary school. They don't learn anything. After four years of education in a medrese, they become a teacher. So, a child teaches other children. (Nesrin, 47)

The community's ethos is grounded in the belief that both men and women possess equal intellectual capabilities, although it is perceived that women tend to place a higher value on education than men. From the perspective of the women in the community, there is a pronounced emphasis on women being more educated and intellectual in the current context. Consequently, the İskenderpaşa community is actively (T4) reversing the traditional gender hierarchy through its emphasis on education. My interviews have revealed that since women are encouraged to pursue education and they do not have financial obligations towards their families, they often seek higher education. As a result, the educational attainment of women frequently surpasses that of men. Lale (34) emphasizes the importance of male education now.

In my view, the men in our community tend to be more positive and understanding, particularly those with vision. However, it appears that they are increasingly falling behind women in many areas. While some older men who have improved themselves well may still keep pace with women, the younger generation, including those around our age, struggle significantly to keep up with women. Women, if they are motivated,

can excel remarkably in both academic and moral aspects, with few obstacles remaining in their way. Currently, in our project, which is predominantly staffed by women, there is a noticeable complacency among men.

Since the community primarily defines itself as a highly educated group, its internal hierarchy is significantly structured around this characteristic. Consequently, the reluctance of some men to pursue further education has led to a shift in the gender hierarchy within the community. This change reflects the growing prominence of women, whose higher educational attainment has increasingly influenced their status and roles relative to men. This shift in hierarchy, driven by the increased educational attainment of women, often competes with the entrenched traditional gender roles within the İskenderpaşa community. Although women perceive themselves as more intellectually advanced than men, this intellectual superiority has not translated into significant changes in their social roles within the community. Women frequently note the absence of any substantial alteration in their roles, despite their higher educational status. This situation is paradoxical in a community that ostensibly values education above all else, revealing a tension between the community's educational ideals and its adherence to established gender norms. The community members' habitus, continues to uphold traditional gender roles despite the increasing educational capital of women. This indicates that while educational attainment is recognized as a form of symbolic capital, it is insufficient to disrupt the established gender hierarchy, which remains firmly rooted in the community's outlook. The persistence of traditional gender roles, even in the face of shifting educational dynamics, underscores the power of habitus in maintaining social structures and hierarchies, even when they appear to be at odds with the community's perceived values.

Both İsmailağa and İskenderpaşa communities place paramount importance on education for women. However, the nature of the education pursued in each community differs significantly. İskenderpaşa community emphasizes modern, comprehensive education for women, while the İsmailağa community focuses exclusively on religious education. Furthermore, the İsmailağa community takes pride in offering what it considers the most authentic form of education among its peers, which significantly influences the identity formation of women within the community and draws hierarchical structures similar to that of İskenderpaşa but exclusively based on Islamic education.

İsmailağa: (S2) Underlining the significance of religious education.

Islamic education according to the İsmailağa community is deemed compulsory for every individual, regardless of gender; however, the level and type of education are differentiated based on gender roles. Female members are required to complete a four-year Islamic education, while male members are expected to pursue both *medrese* and formal schooling, given their anticipated future role as the financial providers for their families. Women, on the other hand, are permitted and encouraged to engage solely in *medrese* education, reflecting the community's emphasis on the preservation of traditional gender roles and gender segregation by avoiding mixed-gender environments. However, when asked if they would consider sending females to schools with all-female staff and students, many respondents indicated that their approval would hinge not only on the gender segregation of the environment but also on the appropriateness of the curriculum in aligning with Islamic principles and values. In the context of the İsmailağa community, moreover, the distinction between government-run secondary and tertiary religious (İlahiyat and İmamhatip) schools versus traditional medreses is deeply rooted in the perception of educational authenticity and divine grace, or "feyz." The community's critique of the state-controlled religious schools—where education is deemed inauthentic and lacking in spiritual enrichment—reflects a broader sociological phenomenon of religious authenticity and institutional legitimacy. The nuanced understanding within the İsmailağa community that government schools lack "feyz" underscores a critical dimension: the tension between religious tradition and modern state institutions. The community's preference for *medrese* education is thus not merely about educational content but is also about preserving an environment that is perceived as authentically aligned with their spiritual and doctrinal values. This conflict underscores the broader struggle between traditional religious institutions and state-run educational systems in negotiating religious authenticity and authority.

Thus, the issue with public schools for women is not just caused by the mixed environment but also by the curriculum. Many suggested that the methods also needed to change to follow a more *medrese* style education which prioritizes the traditional teaching methods and encourages former textbooks. When asked about the appropriate scope of female education, specifically whether girls should receive education beyond religious training and what kind of education they should pursue, respondents unanimously emphasized the importance of religious education. However, they did not refer to just any form of religious education; they specifically highlighted *medrese* education provided by the community, emphasizing its foundation in authentic knowledge. Similarly, when asked to define an ideal woman and the characteristics she should possess, the respondents consistently underscored

the significance of this specific form of religious education, suggesting that it is central to the identity and role of women within the community. Sıla (30) for example stated that, “Islamic knowledge is obligatory for every Muslim. Our fiqh education, in particular, is very good. We have separate medreses for men and women, and everyone receives a 4-year medrese education. Those who want to continue can also pursue memorization (hafızlık) and other studies.”

Much similar to İskenderpaşa, the İsmailağa community defines itself in terms of the authentic education provided in the community. This is closely mirrored in how female members define themselves as well, which is through medrese education – implying that religious education is part and parcel of their habituses. A key component of this educational framework is the (T1) four-year medrese education for women, which is integral in shaping the ideal female archetype within the community since the members spend much of their formative years socializing entirely with other members of the community, thus creating a homogenous environment without any outside interaction. Furthermore, girls medrese share a confined space with nearly 100 other students and their hocas, which requires them to consistently adhere to specific behaviours and dress codes. Consequently, the medrese becomes a key physical space for reinforcing the community’s habitus, embodying all that the community deems acceptable. Foucault’s concept of the panopticon is applicable to the structure of the kurs. Foucault used the panopticon to examine systems of social control, particularly in contexts where individuals are subject to continuous surveillance, and to explore the relationship between power and knowledge (Foucault, 1977). In medreses, students are constantly observed and scrutinized, from their clothing to their behaviour, under unceasing surveillance. In some instances, the teachers’ lounge functions as a panopticon, with its doors always open, ensuring that at least one teacher is watching the students at all times. Moreover, the language used by the teachers embodies certain “dispositions or attitudes and behaviours,” which become ingrained in the students as self-reinforcing memories or schemas. The students are continually exposed to the hocas’ examples of proper conduct and are encouraged to emulate them. They are seldom left unsupervised by the teachers. The communal setting enforces a strict schedule where students eat, pray, study, and sleep at designated times, fostering shared religious values through the shared space and time (Özyağlı, 2018).

This religious education typically begins after the fourth grade, as female members do not continue onto middle school but instead embark on their religious studies. In the initial years, there is a strong focus on Qur’anic studies, particularly for younger students, where

memorization of the Qur'an is prioritized for those perceived as intellectually capable. Following this, the four years of medrese education equip these young women to become "*hocas*," or religious teachers, by the time they reach the age of 18-20. The limited scope of this educational path, however, leads to early graduation, which in turn creates a dynamic where very young women assume authoritative roles as educators within the medrese system. This early assumption of authority often results in conflicts within the medreses, particularly in the form of bullying by young *hocas* towards their students. Such incidents were frequently reported by interviewees.

In the İsmailağa community, despite the strong emphasis on women's education and the role of women as *hocas*, most women transition to the role of housewives after a few years, typically following marriage. The female *medrese* environment is exclusively female, creating a gendered space governed entirely by women. Based on my observations, this setting becomes crucial for the negotiation of identity and power among the female members of the community. Within this female-only space, without male oversight, women exercise significant influence, making the *medrese* not only a site of religious education but also a space where social hierarchies among women are established, reproduced and contested. The resulting factions within the *medrese* reflect the broader community dynamics, mirroring the power, authority, and status structures prevalent in the larger, male-dominated society. The *medrese* thus becomes a battleground for influence, where younger members vie for recognition and leadership roles under the guidance of their respective *hocas*. The hierarchical nature of these factions underscores the limited opportunities available to women for achieving status outside their roles as wives and mothers. Given the restricted avenues for public participation or leadership, the *medrese* serves as a vital space where women can assert their identities and gain social capital.

Given that this educational and religious sphere is the only domain available to women within the community, it becomes a site of intense competition and hierarchical structuring. The competition within the medrese system has resulted in the formation of distinct factions, with the community's female members aligning themselves under the leadership of one of the four prominent *hocas*. These hierarchical formations reflect the broader dynamics of power and status within the community, where the limited opportunities for women outside the domestic sphere intensify the significance of the medrese as a space for both spiritual and social authority. In fact, a previous study conducted based on a large number of *hocas* in İsmailağa community reflected a different identity formation than that of others in the community.

Thus, female members are typically assigned two primary roles: "*hocalık*" (teaching) and motherhood. It is commonly observed that women engage in *hocalık* (teaching) before marriage, after which their focus shifts towards family responsibilities, including care for both their husbands and children. These two roles, though distinct, often coexist and are considered parallel ideal types within the community. Previous research on the ideal female archetype in İsmailağa, particularly a study involving a large sample of female hocas, revealed that these women frequently identify themselves as hocas before mentioning their role as mothers. The "sacredness" attributed to the title of hoca significantly contributes to the social status of women within the community, acting as a form of social capital, especially given the limited avenues for status acquisition outside of marriage. The sacred aspect of *hocalık* is further emphasized within the community, reinforcing its importance as a key element of female identity (Özyağlı, 2018). While the İsmailağa community emphasizes the dual roles of "*hocalık*" and motherhood, it shares with other communities, such as İskenderpaşa and Meşveret, a broader commitment to family-centeredness and traditional gender roles. These communities collectively endorse the notion that women's primary responsibilities lie within the home, reflecting a shared belief in the importance of maintaining traditional and biological notions of motherhood.

The İsmailağa community frequently emphasizes that it prioritized female education long before other communities, often citing Mahmut Ustaosmanoğlu's advocacy for the establishment of *medreses* as evidence. During Ustaosmanoğlu's lifetime, the socio-political environment in Turkey did not allow women to attend schools while wearing headscarves, nor were there sufficient female-only schools or institutions offering Islamic education. As a result, the *medreses* provided an optimal solution for women, aligning with the community's belief that a woman's primary responsibilities should be to her home and children. The four-year *medrese* education was seen as an ideal compromise, allowing women to receive religious training without conflicting with their domestic duties. However, changes in Turkish law that allowed girls to attend school wearing the hijab, along with the introduction of *İmam Hatip* and *İlahiyat* schools that offered religious education, created alternative educational pathways for women. Additionally, the availability of distance learning further expanded educational options. Despite these developments, women in the community, as previously mentioned (T2), often dismiss these alternatives, particularly *İmam Hatip* and *İlahiyat* schools, criticizing them for providing what they consider to be impure and insufficient knowledge. Nurcan (51) suggest that "they are giving very wrong education, and it's even said that there are atheist teachers.

There are many heretical beliefs. Some are even against the hadiths. The creed becomes corrupted”.

In İsmailağa community, the *medrese* completes a distinct field within the community, where religious knowledge is the primary form of cultural capital. By dismissing *İmam Hatip* and *İlahiyat* schools as impure, the community seeks to preserve the singularity and perceived superiority of the *medrese* education. This boundary maintenance underlines the community’s cultural capital and warrants that the *medrese* is preserved as the central institution for the cultivation of religious knowledge and authority. Furthermore, the community through this notion aims to control and shape female education. Foucault suggests that modern power operates not just through apparent domination but through subtle means of regulating bodies and social practices (Foucault, 1977). In this context, the *medrese* system functions as a form of disciplinary power, structuring the lives and educational experiences of women in a way that aligns with the community’s broader social and religious objectives. The rejection of *İmam Hatip* and *İlahiyat* schools, which represent more modern forms of education, can be seen as a way of resisting external influences and maintaining control over the production of religious knowledge and female identity within the community. This is primarily done to maintain the position of the *medreses* and preserve the status quo within the community. By prioritizing *medrese* education and dismissing alternative forms of religious schooling, the community reinforces the authority of its traditional educational institutions and upholds established power structures. This approach ensures that the *medreses* remain central to the community's identity and social order, thereby preserving the existing hierarchy and cultural continuity. The community's rejection of government schools for their failure to adhere to the İsmailağa curriculum reflects a commitment to maintaining a religious identity that is closely tied to adherence to Sharia and Sunnah, as established in the traditional *medrese* framework.

In fact, most members argue that the *medrese* not only provides an authentic religious education but also aids in providing moral guidance that a “government” school lacks. This is due to the modernization of the education. While the community argues that the *medreses* still maintain the Ottoman style of education, which, based on the interviews, reflects the purest form of religious life; the public schools have deviated from the traditional perspectives. There is a strong nostalgia about the preservation of the old. Ottoman social life serves as a model for the community, inspiring a form of "Ottomanism" that is particularly evident in education and clothing practices (see also above). The community adheres to an Ottoman curriculum in their *medreses* and follows Ottoman-inspired clothing styles for both men and women, though these

have been modified to be more modest. The importance of the Ottomans as the ideal society is also evident in *sohbets* and the *kurs* curriculum. History classes within the community are designed to foster a sense of connection to their heritage, with a particular focus on the Ottoman Empire. The *kurs* curriculum includes lessons on Ottoman history but notably excludes the history of modern Turkey.

This Ottomanism is strongly associated with the cultural and ideological anchor of the community that defines its identity and values. It serves as a symbolic reference point, romanticizing the Ottoman era as the period of Islamic unity, moral integrity, and societal order. The community portrays the Ottoman era as an authentic time before the onset of modernity and asserts that modernity led to moral decay in Turkish society, particularly through the introduction of mixed-gender education. Thus, by emphasizing what the community constitutes as Ottoman traditions in education, dress, and religious practices, the community tries to preserve what it views as authentic Islamic heritage, resisting the influences of modernism and nationalism that the community believes shaped contemporary Turkey. This focus on Ottomanism also reinforces a sense of continuity and legitimacy. By linking the community's current practices to a valued historical period and by adopting and adapting Ottoman customs, the community not only differentiates itself from the broader society and other religious communities but also constructs a shared and communal identity rooted in what it perceives as the golden age of Islamic evolution. This also helps to maintain communal cohesion and provides its members with a clear framework for understanding their place in the world, guided by the principles and values they associate with the Ottoman period.

The community's instance on Ottomanism, is not to revive the past but a reflexive tradition used to address modern issues, such as female education. Thus, by invoking the Ottoman tradition, the continuity of the past creates a sense of belonging and stability, and a tool to face modern changes, such as secularization. This allows for the community to selectively adapt aspects of modernity while preserving the strong connection to its perceived roots (Giddens, 1994, pp. 56-109). The Ottomanist approach also aids in the reproduction of the community's social structure across generations. Humphreys (2002) contends that nostalgia allows for a deeper understanding and consideration of the temporal aspects of organizational identity (p. 143). He further suggests that nostalgia grants access to a collective heritage of beliefs and values relevant to identity, offers emotional support during times of change, and contributes to the process of individual identification with the group (p. 156).

Thus, in addition to upholding sharia, sufi genealogy and a specific dress code, the İsmailağa community constructs its identity around medrese education, which is perceived as embodying genuine spiritual and educational values, as opposed to the secularized and perceived spiritually deficient government schools. As previously mentioned, the İsmailağa community constructs its identity around the provision of authentic Islamic knowledge, distinguishing itself from other communities through adherence to Sharia law and traditional medrese practices. By (T3) Criticising other communities for their insufficient Islamic knowledge the İsmailağa community establishes itself as the only source of authority in this regard. This distinction is pivotal in understanding their critique of other communities, particularly regarding the education of women and the perceived authenticity of Islamic education.

For example, we say İskenderpaşa is very educated, but there is no Islamic education at all. That's the most important thing. It's obligatory for every Muslim. But in the Nurcu communities, for instance, they only read Risale. *Fiqh* is not properly taught anywhere, and this is crucial. We are very careful about this matter. In our community, everything is examined in great detail. For example, our books have been the same for years. They are the ones that were taught in the madrasas during the Ottoman period. In fact, other communities call us to ask for *fatwas* (religious rulings). (Reyhan, 50)

The İsmailağa community's self-concept is deeply rooted in the notion that their educational system provides a form of Islamic knowledge that is both traditional, meaning it follows the Ottoman structure and curriculum, spiritually enriching (*feyz*) and authentic. This self-identification as purveyors of authentic Islamic education is used to delineate their practices from those of other Islamic communities, such as Meşveret and İskenderpaşa. The community's emphasis on adherence to Sharia law and traditional Islamic education serves as a basis for creating in-group solidarity and out-group differentiation. The critique of other communities' educational practices reflects an attempt to reinforce their own social identity and perceived superiority in terms of religious authenticity (Tajfel and Turner, 1979). Symbolic Interactionism, particularly as articulated by George Herbert Mead and Erving Goffman, can be applied to understand the community's approach to religious education. From this perspective, the meaning and value of Islamic education are constructed through social interactions and community practices. The İsmailağa community's education system is perceived as authentic because it aligns with their specific interpretations of Sharia and Sunnah,

which are continuously reinforced through communal practices and critiques of other communities.

Furthermore, the İsmailağa community's critique of other groups' educational systems reflects a broader struggle for religious legitimacy and authority. Their criticisms of the Süleymancılar and Meşveret communities for allegedly inadequate Islamic education for women, and their view of İskenderpaşa's achievements as hollow due to a lack of traditional Islamic education, underscore their belief that authentic religious knowledge cannot be equated with secular achievements. This perspective reinforces their stance that true education is intrinsically linked to adherence to their specific religious practices and principles. By positioning themselves as the defenders of authentic Islamic education, they reinforce their role and status within the larger religious and social context. By arguing that these groups fail to provide proper Islamic education, particularly for women, the İsmailağa community positions itself as the custodian of genuine religious knowledge and practice, as expressed by Yaren (36)

For example, İskenderpaşa, Mehmet Zahit Kotku was someone who worked hard for knowledge, he had students, he was teaching knowledge. But ours is very different, we don't compromise. It's very strict with us. Let's take the issue of modesty, for example, Efendi Hazretleri never accepted the wearing of a ferace or pardüse as it is mentioned in the religious texts. He would say that what is mentioned in the verse is the çarşaf. For instance, when looking at it in general, Efendi Hazretleri was also very supportive of educating girls. He was the one who supported the education of women and girls the most, but he says, 'I looked at four books, and I couldn't find a single book that approves of mixed-gender education.

However, a new trend has emerged within the community regarding education, one that was not evident in earlier research: (T4) self-criticism for relying on memorization-based and repetitive education. The criticism comes from younger members of the İsmailağa community regarding its education system—particularly its emphasis on memorization—highlights a shift in perspectives within the community. This critique is most evident among those who have experienced both traditional medrese education and government school systems. These younger disciples often note that the community's education system relies heavily on repetition and memorization. Their comparative experience with government schools has led some to question the efficacy of this method and advocate for a revised curriculum, though they face challenges in proposing changes given the deep-rooted nature of memorization in the community's educational framework. However, it is crucial to note that this criticism targets

the methods rather than the content. Kader (41) for instance, argues that the community “has a lot of memorization and repetition, and I think those need to be corrected. They need to be improved. I think we need a better system, maybe more contemplation, otherwise children just memorize without any understanding.”

This growing dissatisfaction signals a potential challenge to the status quo and suggests internal pressures for reform to better align with contemporary educational standards and address the needs of the new generation. Evidence of this shift is reflected in the decreasing number of students in *medreses*, which has become a growing concern. In response, the community has begun to accept distant learning arrangements, such as attending government schools on weekends while still participating in medrese education. This marks a departure from previous policies, where distant learning was prohibited, and students were either compelled to secretly attend government schools or forego *medrese* entirely.

The dissatisfaction with the memorization-based education system among younger members of the İsmailağa community reflects the impact of modernization on traditional institutions. The younger generation, exposed to modern pedagogical methods in government schools, advocates for a curriculum that incorporates critical thinking and practical skills, aligning with broader trends in educational modernization. The education system relies heavily on memorization, and the curriculum remains unchanged since its inception. Second years repeated the first-year education for the first couple months of the second year. And Updates to the books are typically conducted by community members and involve minimal alterations. Women often limit themselves to reading only community-approved books and tend to read minimally post-graduation.

Unlike the Meşveret community, which prioritises moral education and enforces gender segregation in educational settings post-puberty, the İskenderpaşa community advocates for the integration of modern educational principles for all members, irrespective of gender. The Meşveret community’s stance aligns with conservative gender role theory, which posits that gender-specific educational experiences reinforce traditional societal roles. Similarly, the İsmailağa community acknowledges the importance of modern education but maintains rigid segregation in both educational environments and curricula, reflecting a more traditional view of gender roles within educational frameworks.

On the other hand, the İsmailağa community's emphasis on Islamic education, particularly the association of status with *medrese* and *hafiz* education, creates a stark juxtaposition to İskenderpaşa's focus on modern education. While İskenderpaşa prioritizes formal education and intellectual achievements in modern fields as a form of cultural capital,

İsmailağa places a higher value on religious scholarship and memorization of the Quran. This divergence in educational priorities reflects the distinct ways each community constructs social status and identity, with İsmailağa rooting its hierarchy in religious knowledge and piety, in contrast to İskenderpaşa's emphasis on academic and professional accomplishments.

These similarities and differences all indicate the ways in which women's identities are formed in the respective communities. As mentioned at the beginning of the chapter, these sufi women's identity formation and modes of subjection are closely related to their conception of an ideal woman (as well as an ideal community). This is, however, only one side of the coin – the other is the perception of ideal men, which is the topic of the next chapter.

CHAPTER IV

MODES OF SUBJECTION: DISCURSIVE CONSTRUCTION OF AN IDEAL MAN

Construction of women's identity is closely related to the image of an ideal man in their mind because identity is inseparable from the need or desire for recognition, and recognition requires an "other." This is also true for the formation of selves, as Cooley's (1988) looking-glass self concept suggests. Goffman similarly stressed the role of social interactions in the construction and maintenance of selves in everyday settings. Foucault's (1975) emphasis on the close link between the subject formation (or "subjection") and the internalization of powerful discourses and institutional arrangements shaping oneself also indicates the same phenomenon: the self "needs" an other to define itself. Thus, the idealized male identity becomes part and parcel of the sufi women's identity formation in the communities studied in this dissertation. The following tables summarize my findings about the discursive strategies and techniques indicating the ways these women construe different qualities of male identity in an idealized manner. Each table is constructed, as usual, based on the community the participants belong to.

Table 7: Main themes, discursive strategies (S's) and techniques (T's) of the ideal man by *Īsmailaġa* disciples.

THE ĪSMAĪLAĠA COMMUNITY		
THEME	DISCURSIVE STRATEGIES	DISCURSIVE TECHNIQUES
BREAD-WINNER	S1: Promoting a family centred identity and traditional gender roles.	T1: Adhering to long-standing gender expectations: men as "breadwinner" and women as "homemaker" T2: Emphasizing men's role in aiding in religious teachings.
QAWWAM	S2: Emphasizing men's superior status.	T1: Establishing protection as men's duty T2: Valuing leadership as a foundational trait for men, both within the family and in society at large. T3: Emphasizing men's religious responsibility over women. T4: Stressing men's objectivity and rationality over women's sensitivity.

Table 8: Main themes, discursive strategies (S's) and techniques (T's) of the ideal man by İskenderpaşa disciples.

THE İSKENDERPAŞA COMMUNITY		
THEME	DISCURSIVE STRATEGIES	DISCURSIVE TECHNIQUES
BREAD-WINNER	S1: Promoting a family centred identity and traditional gender roles.	T1: Adhering to long-standing gender expectations: men as "breadwinner" and women as "homemaker" T2: Establishing fatherhood as a fundamental role for men.
BIOLOGY	S2: Affirming the intrinsic connection between men's identity and their biological makeup.	T1: Establishing protection as men's duty. T2: Valuing leadership as a foundational trait for men.
SACRIFICE	S3: Emphasizing the value of self-sacrifice as a core principle of manhood.	T1: Prioritizing the family over individual interests or desires. T2: Associating men's leadership with familial responsibility.

Table 9: Main themes, discursive strategies (S's) and techniques (T's) of the ideal man by *Meşveret* disciples.

THE MEŞVERET COMMUNITY		
THEME	DISCURSIVE STRATEGIES	DISCURSIVE TECHNIQUES
BREAD-WINNER	S1: Promoting a family centered identity and traditional gender roles	T1: Adhering to long-standing gender expectations: men as "breadwinner" and women as "homemaker" T2: Establishing fatherhood as a fundamental role for men. T3: Emphasizing men's role in aiding in religious teachings.
BIOLOGY	S2: Affirming the intrinsic connection between men's identity and their biological makeup.	T1: Establishing protection as men's duty. T2: Valuing leadership as a foundational trait for men.
SACRIFICE	S3: Emphasizing the value of self-sacrifice as a core principle of manhood.	T1: Prioritizing the family over individual interests or desires. T2: Associating men's leadership with familial responsibility.

4.1. Constructing the Ideal Male Archetype

In my exploration of identity formation among women in different communities, I have primarily focused on how women define themselves in relation to both conservative and secular counterparts, emphasizing the importance of community and religious interpretations of gender roles. However, it is also crucial to recognize that women frequently define themselves not only in relation to other women but also in relation to men. The self, as mentioned, is interdependent with the "other," meaning that identity is constructed through the process of defining both oneself and the other. Women from these communities often articulate their identities not solely in opposition to men but also in a complementary relationship with them. A recurring theme in the interviews was the perception that men and women are mutually beneficial and necessary for the proper functioning of society and family. The attributes assigned to women correspond to complementary attributes in men, suggesting that the roles of men and women are not inherently conflicting but are balanced in such a way that each gender's strengths and weaknesses complement the other. This perspective highlights the idea that men and women are created with specific roles that are interdependent, reinforcing the notion of gender complementarity as essential to social cohesion rather than as a source of tension.

The ideal man, as described by members across the three communities, carried remarkably similar themes and discursive strategies, as reflected in the above tables. The primary expectation was that an ideal man is a "breadwinner" and an active disciple of the community's values. Most women defined the ideal man as the sole provider who supports his family through economic means, while also offering protection and demonstrating self-sacrifice. Traditional gender roles were particularly emphasized in the Meşveret and İskenderpaşa communities. However, the İsmailağa community placed greater emphasis on religious aspects that shape male identity. Interestingly, the only community where men were involved in household chores was the Meşveret community, which prioritized the family unit and the creation of a stable, loving home to raise faithful children. Most women also described women as being more intelligent and productive than men, a notion that was particularly prominent in the İskenderpaşa community but carried across all communities. While the ideal man reflected traditional gender roles, some variations were observed, both general and specific to each community. Nevertheless, men were primarily characterized as breadwinners, while women were seen as homemakers.

The recurring theme of traditional gender roles across three communities suggest that these roles are deeply embedded within the habituses of the members of each group, reinforcing

a shared understanding of the ideal male that transcends individual differences. This shared understanding is not merely a passive reflection of tradition but an active process of identity construction, where community members internalize and maintain these gender roles through daily practices, rituals, and discourses. These roles are not static but are continuously negotiated and reaffirmed within the social spaces these communities inhabit (Bourdieu, 1990).

4.2. Sustaining Traditional Gender Roles: Men as Providers, Women as Homemakers ***İsmailağa, İskenderpaşa and Meşveret: (S1) Promoting a family centred identity and traditional gender roles.***

The breadwinner theme is prominent across all communities, with slight variations. (T1) Adhering to traditional gender roles—men as "breadwinners" and women as "homemakers"—is central to how women define the ideal man. The emphasis on men taking financial responsibility for the family is consistently highlighted. In the İsmailağa community, this is reinforced by religious teachings, which clearly define men as providers and women as caregivers. Kader (41), for instance, states that modern women try to take on male roles causing a decay in the family institution, the roles should rather be clearly drawn between the two genders.

I believe it's a cultural marriage. The man fulfils his role as a man, and the woman fulfils her role as a woman; that's how it should be. Why should I try to take on my spouse's responsibilities, and why should my spouse take on mine? Why should my spouse take care of the children while I work? Or why should my spouse clean the kitchen while I try to install curtain rods with a drill? Everyone should do their part according to their strength.

Additionally, strict gender segregation rules prevent women from working with men, further solidifying the need for male financial support. In this sense the primary role of the women in the economic situation is not to place a burden on men but to effectively manage and utilize available resources to meet the needs of the family. The division of roles between men and women is clearly emphasized, with a particular focus on the notion that men's responsibilities are significantly greater, as reflected in their *qawwam* status. This status, rooted in Islamic teachings, positions men as protectors and maintainers of their families. Men are required to provide for their households, promote faith through the practice of *amr bil ma'ruf* (enjoining what is right), and ensure the religious and moral education of their children (T2: Emphasizing men's role in aiding in religious teachings). This framework reinforces the distinct yet complementary roles within the family structure. The İsmailağa community argues that

since religion indicates that the education of the children is entrusted to the men the ideal men participate in moral and religious education of the children. Yet, the members often suggested that men are now rarely involved with children's education; rather it falls on to the women. However, the ideal man was depicted as the educator in the family.

Nurcan (51) was asked the following question: "How would you describe an "Ideal Man"? Do you think there is a distinction between men and women in Islam? If so, what kind of distinction is it?" and she responded with reference to both Islamic teachings and the nature and men and women:

In my opinion, in Islam, the distinction between men and women is as I've explained, related to obligations and responsibilities. Generally speaking, in terms of adhering to commands and prohibitions, avoiding sins, and fulfilling duties, there is no difference. Because Allah does not differentiate. He doesn't say that men shouldn't commit adultery, but women can, or that women shouldn't drink alcohol, but men can. There's no such thing. For example, He doesn't say that only young men can drink, while older men can't, or that married people can do things that single people can't. There is no such distinction in Islam. However, there are places where a woman, due to her nature, should stay in the background, and places where she should be in the forefront. For example, in child-rearing, Islam doesn't give the primary responsibility to the father. It places the mother at the forefront of raising children, while the father is positioned more as an authority figure, right? The father is not detailed in this role. These kinds of differences exist, but when you look at the general picture, there's no such thing as men being allowed to enter certain places and women being barred, or vice versa. The general rules are the same for both genders.

Take the example of the Treaty of Hudaibiyyah. Even there, Prophet Muhammad consulted with Umm Salama. When no one was listening to him about sacrificing the animals, the Prophet was deeply saddened. But Umm Salama suggested that he lead by example—go out, sacrifice the animal, and shave his head. She said the others would follow him. And that's exactly what happened. A woman solved the situation. This shows that women's words are heard and valued. In family life, there is no difference either. But in the broader public context, while men take the lead, women remain somewhat in the background. This is what Islam prescribes. Allah doesn't want that. Allah doesn't want you to work in an environment where you're interacting with men in inappropriate ways, sharing the same space, or doing things together. If you're not a

believer, then it's a different story. There are many professions a woman can have. For instance, a woman can be an interior designer. If while working, she doesn't have to interact with men in a way that violates Islamic guidelines—although in many cases she will—it's permissible. Let's say you're a doctor. If you're working at a hospital like Çapa (a hospital in Istanbul) and performing surgeries, you can't say, 'I'll only operate on women,' because that's not how things work. However, Islam doesn't object to you treating patients under those circumstances. Islam allows it, but the issue arises with the type of communication and relationships that develop, especially with those in authority, such as the head surgeon. That's where problems occur, in the hierarchical relationships and the social dynamics involved.

The same theme is carried out through all three communities. For example, participants from the Meşveret community emphasize men's role as breadwinners as well by emphasizing that women are unable to work within mixed gender environments, thus it is both biologically and religiously more suited for women to take on "female roles". Thus, the community (S1) promotes a family centred identity and traditional gender roles for ideal men and women. However, Meşveret as mentioned before, is solely focused on the family unit, there are differences in emphasis and the application. The family promotes a "helpful" husband as the ideal men. Thus, although the discursive technique of (T1: Adhering to long-standing gender expectations: men as "breadwinner" and women as "homemaker") is still prominent, the application is uncommon. When members of the community were asked whether their husbands helped out at home, most responded affirmatively. However, when queried about the specific chores their husbands regularly performed, many mentioned tasks typically associated with female roles, such as cleaning and cooking. The roles were still defined as female roles, and the chores performed by their husbands were generally viewed as "helping out." Nonetheless, Meşveret members reported the highest incidence of males assisting with household tasks. Almost all interviewees from this community noted that men, particularly the younger generation, were involved in various household chores.

Furthermore, the Meşveret community (T2) depicts fatherhood as a fundamental role for men. In this context, both men and women are predominantly defined through their roles within the family unit. Consequently, fatherhood becomes essential for being regarded as an ideal man, paralleling the significance of ideal womanhood, as Sare (47) suggests: "Just as motherhood is important, fatherhood is just as significant, in my opinion. If a woman's most noble duty is motherhood, then a man's is fatherhood."

The highest duty of a man is fatherhood. In terms of an ideal Muslim man, his primary responsibility is to provide for his family. This includes working to support them financially, ensuring their well-being, and attending to their needs for the sake of Allah. For example, he would read them *Risale-i Nur* and lead by example. Mothers are sometimes too soft, so there needs to be a balance. While there are societal duties as well, the focus here is on family responsibilities. (Neslihan, 26)

This perspective implies that both men and women are considered to fully realize their identities only through parenthood. Similarly, the *Meşveret* community (T3) underscores the importance of men's involvement in religious teachings. For example, Aysun (45) was asked: what is the highest duty of a man and what do you think is the primary duty of an ideal Muslim man? She indicated that the main duties of men were to provide for their family and teach their children. "Women are very compassionate, while men, in my opinion, should be more disciplinary and instructive. Especially in terms of religious education, I believe children should receive it primarily from their fathers."

This emphasis on fatherhood and religious contribution highlights how gender roles are deeply embedded within the familial and religious frameworks of the community, reflecting a broader pattern of role definition and expectation. Both claims of fatherhood as a fundamental role and men's involvement in religious teachings for children had also practical equivalence as men were reported to take on educational duties of their children and value fatherhood. Members are constantly encouraged within the community to marry and to raise children, a theme often promoted by Said Nursi himself:

The refuge and, in a sense, the paradise and small world of a human being, especially a Muslim, is family life." (24th Lema, 2nd Point). "In the worldly life of humankind, the most comprehensive centre and fundamental source of happiness, a paradise, a refuge, is family life. Every home is a small world. (9th Şuara).

Thus, both men and women are expected to fully discover their identities through parenthood. This discursive technique implies that one's identity is lacking without fulfilling these familial roles. In fact, Hafsa (33) draws from Said Nursi's teachings on family bringing out the natural progression in a person.

The master says, 'In a woman, there are two women and one man; in a man, there are two men and one child.' He explains that the 'man' in the woman exists so she can protect herself until she gets married. That's why women fully find their true nature

after marriage. As for why there's a 'child' in the man, this part is more of my own interpretation. Before marriage, a man's dominant role is as a son. After marriage, he starts acting more like a parent to his own parents, meeting their needs, and leaving behind his childhood. The master says that when a couple marries, the 'man' in the woman and the 'child' in the man switch places. The woman becomes a mother, understanding the language of children, while the man fully embraces his masculinity and finds his true nature. I really like this explanation. It clarifies both human nature and the place of marriage. I also use it to explain the concept of compassion in women. Compassion is inherently present in women, and when a child comes to a woman, it fully reinforces this. I feel that God bestowed the vein of compassion in women, so using compassion to explain a woman's nature could be a beautiful approach.

The İskenderpaşa community follows the same theme and indicates that an ideal man provides for his family and (T2) establishes fatherhood as a fundamental role for men. However, for İskenderpaşa members-, the aspect of fatherhood is not fully realized. Although respondents often identified fatherhood as the most important role for men, they frequently reported that men do not actively participate in child-rearing. This discrepancy highlights a gap between the idealized role of fatherhood and its practical implementation within the community. On the other hand, unlike the Meşveret community, İskenderpaşa women emphasize the role of men as "educators" primarily through their role modelling rather than through conventional teachings. (This difference may stem from the fact that the İskenderpaşa members on average have much higher education than the female members of Meşveret, who are in a greater need of their husbands' skill to provide education for their children.) For instance, in terms of instilling the habit of prayer in children, men's roles are most frequently highlighted. They are expected to lead prayers and ensure that children acquire this practice, thereby serving as exemplars of religious duties. Both Sare (47) and Aylin (30) argue that raising children and providing for the family is the most important characteristic when describing an ideal man.

In marriage, raising children is not solely a woman's responsibility; it is a task recognized as a fundamental duty of the father according to Islamic jurisprudence. However, due to a lack of awareness about this responsibility, it often seems as if it is primarily the woman's duty. I believe that a woman can indeed create a harmonious family environment and raise her children well, provided that this task is not carried out unilaterally.

In marriage, the primary responsibility for supporting the family financially is assigned to the man. According to our religion, a man should ideally secure a good income, a stable job, or a respectable profession to ensure that his family is financially independent and not reliant on others. Additionally, to prepare his family for the hereafter, he must perform the five daily prayers and serve as a role model. If he notices deficiencies in his wife's or children's practice of Islam—whether in performing prayers or reading the Quran—it is his duty to address and correct these shortcomings. For instance, a father should be able to encourage his daughter by saying, "You used to read the Quran beautifully; let's refresh our practice by reading it again to uplift our spirits." Such a role is crucial for providing the necessary spiritual guidance and support within the family.

4.3. Biological Determinants: Maintaining Gender Roles Based on Biological Foundations

İskenderpaşa and Meşveret: Affirming the intrinsic connection between men's identity and their biological makeup.

Another emphasis in defining an ideal man is placed on biological aspects, similar to the emphasis on women's biological characteristics. Both the İskenderpaşa and Meşveret communities highlight men's biological attributes that complement those of women. These attributes are seen as essential in areas where women are perceived to be less effective, thereby attributing specific roles and responsibilities to men based on their biological makeup. However, in the İsmailağa community these attributes are associated with men's *Qawwam* status which emphasis both biological but also religious aspects as well.

Both techniques mentioned for this strategy was the same for the İskenderpaşa and the Meşveret communities: (T1) establishing protection as men's duty and (T2) valuing leadership as a foundational trait for men. The biological make-up of men as described by the community suggested that women are naïve and delicate, and men possess qualities that correspond to these attributes such as protection and strength; affirming the belief that men are bestowed with the role of protectors, safeguarding their families, communities, and the values they hold dear. This ensures that men and women attributed complement each other, that the two sexes fulfil roles that complete each other. In both cases that ensures men's place as a leader in social and family life. For example, when asked whether women can take on political positions, they have often stated that, leading is not in the nature of women, that she should be a follower. Thus, a leadership position was an attribute describing men while a follower was suited more for

women. However, in the Meşveret community there is a strong consensus among the members about any political involvement in both genders indicating that the un-Islamic nature of politics is believed to corrupt the soul. For instance, when asked, how do you view women being involved in politics? Merve (31) responded by stating that:

I question whether it is really necessary. Women are emotional, they are not as objective as men. And is politics something that is left to us? Right now, it is not needed, but it might be in the future. It's not forbidden, but currently, it is not necessary. It is not suitable for women's nature. And why would she if there is men who is capable by nature to do it. No. A woman should manage the politics of the home.

Thus, both men and women are expected to 'maintain' and 'Islamically preserve' their families. The same theme is realized in the İskenderpaşa community. Although women are encouraged to actively work outside the home in part-time jobs they are still discouraged from pursuing politics as well, as they are valued as delicate and naïve, as was the case in the Meşveret community. While men have more flexibility in their choices and activities, there are certain limits placed on women due to expectations of modesty such as working in a mixed environment or pursuing a political career or becoming executives in Diyanet. For instance, men are encouraged to actively engage in politics and assume leadership roles, while women are often expected to remain in the background. When asked how they viewed women's involvement in politics, Hacer (26) answered with reference to the "masculine" nature of politics:

I believe we need to get a fatwa from a very knowledgeable scholar. Sometimes I see that some women work very effectively. They may have a broader vision and possibly be more compassionate and understanding. I wonder if a woman doing that job would create any shortcomings. However, as I mentioned, the issue with politics is that it can bring challenges, such as problems with observing modesty or difficulties in gender relations, which might deviate from Islamic principles. That concerns me. Otherwise, I believe there are people who could do a great job. If it is decreed for someone to take on that role, then they must fulfil it. But as I said, politics is a field that is currently dangerous and more suited for men. It might lead women into situations that deviate from Sharia. I am very cautious about this in my own life and work, and it makes me think deeply about politics as well.

Members of both communities define a home-centred woman and moving beyond these parameters are often seen as transgression, as it implies changing the nature of women and lose

their femininity by taking on male attributes. Participant responses emphasized the idea that men are created superior to women, that women should remain “one step behind” men, and that women are weak, delicate, and of a gentle nature, are highlighted. In the Meşveret community, taqwa is frequently described in terms of observing to traditional gender roles, with women acting based on their feminine nature and men according to their masculine nature. This understanding of piety reinforces the conception that each gender has specific, divinely ordained roles and responsibilities as well, with taqwa being achieved through the fulfilment of these roles in alignment with one’s natural disposition. Irem (27) underlines this perspective:

There are also differences. I believe there are distinctions between men and women in certain matters. For example, a woman should not be as brave or courageous as a man. If a woman has courage, it is considered a bad trait, bad morality. I have that bad trait. I have fought and worked with many people in places like Yüksekova. Why? Because it’s like you start becoming like a man when you spend a lot of time outside. Over time, you become more comfortable, like a man, which shouldn’t happen. A woman should hold herself back a bit. I personally haven’t been very successful in this regard, to be honest. But as I said, when traits that should be in a man appear in a woman, sometimes it causes problems. And the same goes for when traits typical of a woman appear in a man. It’s not about equality; rather, it should be approached with justice. The woman’s responsibilities are clear, and the man’s responsibilities are clear. The man is primarily responsible for providing, while the woman should preserve herself, avoid sinful acts, and raise her children. I believe she should also develop herself in other worldly matters, but within the permissible boundaries, whether she works or grows in other ways. A woman's responsibilities are clear, and a man's responsibilities are clear. When I observe a woman doing tasks that require strength, tasks typically suited for a man, she struggles a lot, doesn’t she? Likewise, when a man, who is less detail-oriented than a woman, attempts tasks that require fine thinking and attention to detail, he often misses things. This is where the need for help arises. I believe men and women are meant to complement each other. It's as if God created them in a way that they need one another. If each one claimed, "I can do everything by myself," there wouldn't be a mutually supportive relationship between them. That's why, as I said, a woman's role is different, and a man's role is different. Equality exists only in terms of sin and accountability. In the afterlife, there will be no difference in how we are questioned, but when it comes to responsibilities, we are not created equal in terms of our nature.

I believe that women are really good at things like organizing and handling details. Men, on the other hand, are better at management and leadership roles, and if they complement each other, they can succeed. However, because qualities like compassion and mercy are more prominent in women, they tend to fall behind men in management. Women are naturally created as physically weaker, and they need to live under the compassion and authority of a man. Whether it's at home or outside, I say, for example, there are some women who say, 'I want to work, I want to stand on my own two feet,' right? But when you work, you still fall under the control of men, it doesn't change. You do what they want, and you already act according to someone else's will. Like, I have to do what my boss says, or for example, a teacher says, 'My wife doesn't bring me tea at home, but she'll go and serve tea to teachers outside,' for example. So I think about this. We are dependent and need to be under someone's authority. Because we are physically weak, I have experienced a lot of this. I have really felt the difficulties of being alone. As I said, I no longer ask anyone for help. Why? Because I try to handle everything myself, but we are in need. Things come up at home, things need to be carried, and strength is required. We are weak by nature and more sensitive. For example, when a student says something bad, men might not care much, but we get hurt. I'm very sensitive, I don't know. If I hear a curse from a student, it upsets me a lot. I think about it even in the evening. Men are more relaxed and tougher in such matters, while women are more delicate, more sensitive. So, it's more fitting for women to stay at home, as it suits their nature. And for men, it's more appropriate to be out working. If I ever get married, I will withdraw a bit from social life.

Thus, in both Meşveret and İskenderpaşa communities, men and women are expected to embody certain roles (e.g., men as providers, women as nurturers) although they attribute these differences to biological aspects, these roles are deeply embedded in the collective habitus of the community. From a young age, individuals learn through medreses, and social gatherings and in the family to define women and men in certain conditions, which becomes a second nature. Thus, the unconscious reproduction of established social norms is realized as individuals conform to what is deemed appropriate for their gender within the community's cultural and religious framework.

İsmailağa: (S2) Emphasizing men's superior status.

In the İsmailağa community the same techniques (T1: Establishing protection as men's duty, T2: Valuing leadership as a foundational trait for men, both within the family and in society at large.) are realized but a religious connotation is also stressed.

In terms of lifestyle, though, there are differences between men and women. Their responsibilities and obligations differ. Women should stay one step behind men. Men are leaders, that's what their role is. Men are responsible to take care of their families and provide for them. (Hale, 33)

The value expressed over men's protection and leadership qualities is also prominent in İsmailağa alongside men's objectivity and rationality over women's sensitivity which is closely related to the notion of Qawwam that (T3) emphasizes men's religious responsibility over women. Men are often perceived as morally, characteristically, and physically strong, which contributes to their depiction as natural leaders. While men are often encouraged to be politically active and take on leadership roles within the community women are expected to remain in the background. The notion of "qawwām" mentioned in the Quran, Al-Baqarah 2:128 and An-Nisa 4:34 is interpreted by the community as indicating a degree of superiority over the status of women. The medreses for instance provide more education for men indicating and throughout the sohbet men are emphasized as smarter and women are always encouraged to obey the wisdom of men. Furthermore, the notion of qawwām is also emphasized as a more of a responsibility, an obligation to spend time and resources for his family to live conformably, so most women argue men's roles within the family is much more complex and stressing than a women's. Kevser (43), for instance, states that:

I believe there is a distinction between men and women, rooted in their creation. Men are created as 'kavvam' (caretakers) while women are designed with delicate, sensitive thoughts. These roles cannot be in competition because our nature is not suited for it. Women and men have different attributes that complement each other, and this distinction is inherent rather than a matter of capability. For example, even in schools, female teachers are not selected if they have personal issues or disputes; their emotions might affect their professional demeanour. On the other hand, male teachers are expected to maintain their composure regardless of personal challenges. Women, being more emotionally expressive, show their happiness and sadness more visibly, and while there may be differences, these can be seen as beneficial.

Women are created to be more emotional, and their involvement in consultations is highly desirable. However, when it comes to decision-making, women and men should be consulted separately to avoid confusion. Women, driven by their emotions, might influence decisions differently than men, who are generally more rational, logical, and objective. Women should definitely be part of the consultation process, but decisions should be made with separate considerations for each gender's perspectives.

Another strategy deployed by both İskenderpaşa and Meşveret members is the emphasis placed on self-sacrifice for men (which will be discussed below). This strategy is not stressed in the İsmailağa community. This is primary related to the notion of "*qawwam*". In İsmailağa men are viewed as the objective, rational and leaders within the community. Furthermore, the concept of prostration to men, which was mentioned in the previous chapter, does not accept any criticism towards male authority. The community's supreme leader stressed this boldly:

Even though transporting stones from a red mountain to a black mountain, and from a black mountain to a red mountain, is a futile and difficult task, the fact that a woman should obey her husband even in such a proposal indicates that she should also obey his commands in other matters. The different colours of the mountains mentioned in the hadith are meant to indicate the distance between the mountains (Ustaosmanoğlu, 1991: 2/633-634).

Likewise, Işık stresses women's obedience in marriage in the community. In the context of marriage, it is emphasized that a woman should unconditionally obey her husband in almost every aspect, to the extent that she should not attend her father's funeral without her husband's permission. The husband is said to have the right to discipline his wife through physical means if necessary, and the acceptance of a woman's religious practices is believed to be contingent upon her first praying for her husband. This perspective reflects a view where the woman's value is measured by the low dowry, early marriage, and immediate motherhood, indicating that the community's interpretation of religious texts sees women not as independent individuals but as dependent and subordinate to their husbands.

In his talks about a husband's rights, Ustaosmanoğlu insists that a woman must comply with her husband's legitimate demands or risk being deemed sinful.

Don't say 'buy this, buy that.' Be like the old ladies. When your husband goes to work, you should say, 'May Allah be pleased with you; don't ever think of spending on

forbidden things for the sake of my children's sustenance.' Now, you might buy a lantern, but where would you find such a woman? You should even offer moral support to your husband, saying 'Don't be upset; we can manage with Egyptian bread. (Ustaosmanoğlu, 2018: 257-260).

Furthermore, it is stated that if a woman does not meet any of her husband's rightful requests, her prayers will not be accepted. (Işık, 2018, p. 288) Thus, the dominance and submission are closely associated with the male figure leaving obedience and self-sacrifice to women. In this context, discourses around masculinity, authority, and submission contribute to how these practices are justified and normalized within a community.

For example, the man is making a sacrifice. He works outside all day. Isn't this a form of sacrifice? I mean, he is definitely working hard outside all day for you. There is no better option than this. You are spending the money however you want, so you have to comply. Of course, aside from any misuse, he is financially supporting your life. He says, 'I will cover everything for you,' which is a very nice thing. Someone is working all day for you. When you stay at home, you are seen as making a sacrifice. I think this is quite unreasonable. If he is making a sacrifice, why aren't you making one as well? We also need to look at the leadership and management there. Yes, he is a leader, but his responsibilities are greater. He needs to serve us, make our lives easier. By looking at it from this perspective, I think we can comply with things more easily. (Yaren, 36)

As mentioned in earlier chapters, the mode of subjection refers to the way in which the individual establishes her/his relation to the rule and recognizes herself as obliged to put it into practice (Foucault, 1985: 27). In other words, the mode of subjection involves how individuals relate to rules and recognize their obligations to adhere to them. It reflects the processes through which individuals internalize and perform the norms and expectations imposed upon them, thereby shaping their identities and actions in relation to those norms. The expectation that women should unconditionally obey their husbands and prioritize their needs (even over attending significant events like a parent's funeral) can be seen as a mechanism through which women internalize the norms of subjection. This internalization shapes how women view their roles and duties within the marriage. Women recognize themselves as obliged to adhere to these rules, thus subjecting themselves to their husbands' authority. Furthermore, the requirement that a woman's religious practices are contingent upon her compliance with her husband's demands illustrates how the rules governing women's behaviour are performed. Women not only follow these expectations but also integrate them into their self-identity, perceiving their

worth and religious acceptance as dependent on their obedience. The notion that non-compliance with a husband's requests leads to sinfulness and unacceptable religious practices exemplifies how these norms create a sense of obligation and fear of punishment. Women navigate their compliance within this framework, striving to align their actions with these rules to avoid negative repercussions. Hence, they become "subjects" in the double sense of the word.

4.4. The Sacrificial Ideal: Decoding Male Roles Through the Principle of Sacrifice

İskenderpaşa and Meşveret: Emphasizing the value of self-sacrifice as a core principle of manhood.

In both İskenderpaşa and Meşveret communities, the self-sacrifice strategy is implemented through two key techniques: (T1) prioritizing the family over personal interests or desires, and (T2) associating men's leadership roles to familial responsibilities. Unlike the İsmailağa community, where the focus is more on traditional roles, the former emphasize that men's leadership is closely tied to their financial and familial obligations. This prioritization involves significant self-sacrifice, as men are expected to fulfil their leadership roles by ensuring the well-being and protection of their families. For instance, Ayla (47) a member of the İskenderpaşa community states: "I believe men have greater responsibilities. They should protect their families and earn a halal income. In my opinion, an ideal man is someone who works for his family and prioritizes their needs over his own. That's why I think more sacrifice is expected from them." Furthermore, the same remarks were made by the members of the Meşveret community. Aylin (30) for instance, argues that men are given more responsibility than women.

But a man's guardianship is actually about being the protective and responsible one, which I believe eases the burden on women. We are only responsible for our children within the home, while he is accountable for providing and taking care of the broader responsibilities.

There is therefore a notable emphasis on the notion that men's leadership qualities are intrinsically linked to responsibility. In both communities, leadership is consistently framed not as a marker of superiority but as a role defined by the burden of responsibility. This interpretation aligns with the concept of qawwam, which in these communities is understood as a duty of care and accountability rather than an assertion of dominance or superiority over women. This reflects a distinctive interpretation of religious principles, where traditional views on male leadership are reframed through a lens of responsibility and service, rather than

hierarchical power. Such an understanding highlights the nuanced ways in which religious texts and gender roles are interpreted in each community to shape communal and familial dynamics, reinforcing the idea that leadership is not about privilege but about fulfilling obligations. This perception of ideal men, in turn, reinforces sufi women's self-identification in terms of traditional gender roles.

CHAPTER V CONCLUSION

This dissertation has explored and contrasted the İskenderpaşa, İsmailağa, and Meşveret communities regarding the identity formation and modes of subjection of their female members. The qualitative fieldwork for this research, which involved 15 members from each of the Meşveret and İsmailağa communities and 11 from the İskenderpaşa community, combined semi-structured interviews conducted with them with a discourse analysis of texts authored by the Sheikhs and prominent figures such as hocas of these communities. This approach has provided valuable insights into women's perceptions of the ideal community, ideal women, and ideal men. Additionally, the participant observation, spanning nearly two years, unveiled nuanced details that required significant time and effort but greatly contributed to understanding the communities' structures and intricate dynamics. Through this process, I have sought to uncover the key elements of these women's habitus and examined how they actively constructed their identities within the structural and discursive constraints of their respective communities. The findings reflect a complex interplay of agency and structure, highlighting the ways in which these women negotiate and redefine their roles within the boundaries set by community norms and expectations.

For this research, I drew upon the works of Pierre Bourdieu, Herbert Blumer, and George Herbert Mead. Bourdieu's concepts of habitus, field, and capital have offered a structured framework for the research, while Symbolic Interactionism has provided insight into the everyday practices and interactions within the community, with implications for the subjects' agencies. These theoretical approaches have laid the foundation for analysing sufi women's discursive strategies and modes of subjection, revealing both inherent and socially constructed elements within the community's social structure. Bourdieu's concepts of habitus and symbolic capital were pivotal in describing the formation of women's identities within the communities. Habitus helped to elucidate behaviours and attitudes shaped by the community, serving as a link between the broader environment and individual behaviour. This was essential for understanding how the community influenced individuals while recognizing their capacity for agency. Symbolic capital, on the other hand, illuminated the community's core values, as it represents accumulated labour and is often conferred by the group onto individuals (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 46). For instance, for the members of the İsmailağa community identified strongly with the esteemed profession of *hocalık*, which conferred prestige, social value, and elevated status. Hocas were further stratified based on their educational achievements; those who were

both Arabic and hafız hocas held higher social status than those who specialized in only one area. In the İskenderpaşa community, an individual's level of education was closely linked to their social capital, implying the significance of the NGO activities that are emphasized by the community.

Symbolic Interactionism, the second theoretical framework employed, offered a micro-level perspective to examine the community's daily social interactions. This theory, which emphasizes the use of language and symbols to create and convey meaning, proved invaluable in analyzing the roles within the community especially in regards to gender division and roles. Erving Goffman's dramaturgical analysis was particularly instrumental in understanding the cultural significance of *homemakers and hocalık*. Goffman likened social interactions to a "script" informed by cultural references, and key dramaturgical concepts, including front stage, props, and face were central to this study.

The central argument of this research posits a reciprocal relationship between community discourse and individual conduct. Identities are understood as socially and culturally constructed phenomena, shaped by the socio-cultural environment. This environment fosters adherence to specific norms, which both influence individual behaviour and simultaneously reproduce and sustain communal discourses. Foucault argues that individuals regulate their behaviour based on their interpretation of these cultural norms, internalizing identities shaped by the community. Identity embodies signs and symbols that convey value, making elements visible and understandable to others. The formation of identity is an ongoing process influenced by power relations, shaping behaviours and attitudes. Our self-identity is shaped by these power dynamics and our participation within them. The internalization of norms ensures how individuals perceive themselves and others. Foucault's framework helps us understand identity as a dynamic construct shaped by power relations within social life (Foucault, 1972, 1977; Hall, 2000)

Within this framework I applied Foucauldian approach to further analyse the ideal men, women and community typology depicted by the female members of the selected communities. Discourse is established through discursive strategies to form discursive unity. Foucault describes discourse as a "group of statements which provide a language for talking about – a way of representing the knowledge about – a particular topic at a particular historical moment". "Discourse is about the production of knowledge through language. But... since all social practices entail meaning, and meanings shape and influence what we do – our conduct – all practices have a discursive aspect" (Hall, 1997, p. 44). These discursive practices are formations of particular episteme, thus with discursive formations, meanings are discovered.

These strategies can be further divided into "discursive techniques," a concept introduced by Nurullah Ardiç (2012:35). This term refers to specific subsets of strategies that contribute to the distinct identity formation within the community while also offering additional categorization for discursive strategies. These discursive strategies and techniques play a significant role in shaping the subject formation. Through my research of semi-structured interviews, gathering and written sources including the Sohbet of prominent members and more importantly Sheiks, I have outlined several discursive strategies and techniques for each community that made up each of the empirical chapters within this research. Furthermore, themes and sub-themes further aided in understanding the larger and over all coding of the research. The emphasis on an idealized community was essential, given its impact on shaping women's identities, as women primarily socialized within their own community. This also ensured that women regarded the aspects of their community "ideal" in reference to other communities. Thus, the ideal community reflected aspects that set apart each community from the other.

For the ideal community according to the members of the İsmailağa, the research has revealed six strategies and sixteen techniques --at least one for each strategy. The key discursive strategies and techniques used by the İsmailağa community to emphasise its religious identity and distinguish itself from other Islamic communities revolved around the community's strong commitment to medreses, adherence to Sharia and Sunnah, emphasis on Tasawwuf, preservation of traditional values, and missionary work. Medrese education is highlighted as the foundation of the community, with an emphasis on the authenticity of the curriculum and criticism of other communities for lacking a similar focus. The community also upholds an orthodox perspective on Sharia and Sunnah, particularly highlighting the significance of gender segregation and proper attire as markers of religious adherence. Tasawwuf is portrayed as a central factor of spirituality and self-care, while the preservation of traditional values is expressed through a commitment to resisting modernity. The community further distinguishes itself through its missionary work, emphasizing its role in "commanding the right and forbidding the wrong"(emir bi'l-ma'rûf nehiy ani'l-münker). The İsmailağa community often criticized other communities by arguing that they have compromised by allowing modern aspects into their community, such as failing to wear the *çarşaf* or sending girls to school. The prevailing view within the community emphasizes adhering to the tradition of the medrese, as established by the Ottoman Empire, whose religious life is considered the ultimate model of Islamic practice. Furthermore, the medrese/kurs serves as an institution within the community that legitimizes the existing power structures by reinforcing and

reproducing hierarchical dynamics. At the same time, it offers members the opportunity to deepen their religious knowledge, benefiting not only themselves but also the broader community.

The research identified seven strategies and seventeen techniques underpinning the ideal community typology within the Meşveret community. Commitment to the RNK and rationalism fundamentally shapes both moral and religious behaviours in the Meşveret community. Central to their practice is the daily reading of the RNK, a ritual that integrates the text's teachings into everyday life. Unlike the other communities, Meşveret de-emphasizes hierarchical structures and positions itself as more egalitarian in religious practice, placing a stronger emphasis on rationalism and intellectual engagement than on strict adherence to ritual. This community deliberately distances itself from Sufism, deeming it obsolete in today's context, which allows for a more pragmatic and relevant approach to modern life. By rejecting the ritualism seen in other Islamic communities, Meşveret fosters a seemingly more inclusive and adaptable interpretation of Islam. A key focus of the RNK text is its timeless relevance, with the community asserting that its teachings will continue to provide guidance to contemporary Muslims, making it central to their vision of Islam's role in the modern world.

The İskenderpaşa community on the other hand, through its implementation of six strategies and fourteen techniques, outlines a vision of an "ideal community." Central to this vision is a pronounced emphasis on education and progress, which the community views as essential for both individual and collective advancement. The interviews conducted with female community members reveal that a majority hold higher education degrees, reflecting the community's strong commitment to intellectual development. Education is seen not only as a fundamental requirement for personal growth but also as a critical factor in enabling the community to thrive in contemporary society. Furthermore, the community frequently critiques other communities for their insufficient focus on education, positioning it as a key differentiator. A second defining characteristic of the İskenderpaşa community is its ability to establish a progressive outlook, which it attributes largely to the integration of contemporary technology and practices. This integration, however, is contingent upon the community's emphasis on education and progress. The community views progress as a defining feature of a 21st-century community, with particular attention given to the incorporation of modern communication technologies and economic strategies. This capacity for modernization, while promoting the effective navigation of contemporary societal demands, is balanced with a conscious effort to preserve traditional structures. This dual approach allows the community to maintain cultural continuity while engaging with the evolving landscape of the modern world.

The İskenderpaşa community also conceptualizes itself both as a *tekke* and a *waqf*. By combining *tasawwuf* with *waqf*, reflected as intense NGO activities, the community seeks to create an idealized model that combines traditional with the modern. *Tasawwuf* is positioned as the foundational spiritual pillar, grounding the community's identity and practices. However, the focus within the community has shifted from traditional Sufi rituals to broader social welfare initiatives. While Sufi practices are acknowledged, the community prioritizes the fostering of social welfare through involvement in charitable projects, aiming to contribute to the well-being of both members and the broader society.

The "ideal woman" typology within the communities has revealed results that largely align with the ideals of the community, though with few distinctions each community emphasise similar aspects. Research has revealed three discursive strategies and thirteen techniques for the Meşveret community. The most prominent theme was the focus on the family unit, which serves as the core of identity formation for both men and women. The community's focus on raising faithful children shapes the roles and responsibilities of individuals within the household. Women, in particular, primarily define themselves in relation to their roles as homemakers, with their contributions to family life being central to their sense of identity. While this emphasis on family roles parallels other communities, there are notable differences in how these roles are conceptualized. In terms of gender, Meşveret promotes equality through intellectual engagement, but this is paired with a clear division of roles between the sexes. Women's education, although acknowledged, is not prioritized; their primary responsibility remains in the home, where child-rearing and maintaining familial obligations take precedence. Moreover, the community holds a critical stance towards conservative women who exhibit behaviours akin to secular women, as well as those who deviate from traditional values, reinforcing a commitment to preserving its distinct interpretation of gender roles within a religious framework.

The ideal women typology in İsmailağa has revealed four strategies and sixteen techniques. The İsmailağa community presents women primarily as homemakers, deeply rooted in traditional roles of motherhood and child-rearing. The home is described as the central domain of women, reinforcing the notion that their primary role is to support the family structure from within the domestic sphere. Women's subordination to men is stressed, with discourses emphasizing women's delicate nature and the importance of obedience to male authority. Modern practices, such as consumerism or participation in public life, are often portrayed as weaknesses of faith for women. Also central to the women's identity is the *çarşaf*. It is not merely viewed as a physical garment but as an essential part of a woman's religious

and cultural identity, symbolizing modesty, taqwa, and submission to Islamic values. It is portrayed as a source of pride, with women in the community encouraged to embrace the *çarşaf* as a key marker of their identity. The İsmailağa community emphasizes the importance of medrese education for women but criticizes external religious schools such as İmam Hatip and İlahiyat for providing insufficient or impure knowledge. Despite their emphasis on education, the focus is on a curriculum rooted in memorization and traditional teachings, reinforcing women's roles. Men, on the other hand, are positioned as breadwinners and religious leaders. The concept of Qawwam—men's protective and authoritative role—is central to the community's discursive strategies, reinforcing male superiority in both public and private spheres. Leadership, rationality, and objectivity are highlighted as key masculine traits, with men bearing the responsibility of guiding women spiritually. *Hocas* (both male and female) occupy a highly visible position in the community, garnering significant attention due to the nature of their role. With their moral integrity and wisdom frequently emphasized in *sohbets*, *kurs*, and reminders from sheikhs, *hocas* are regarded as ideal Muslims and exemplary role models. Consequently, they are expected to maintain impeccable conduct when performing on the "front stage" through their actions and demeanor, embodying the community's ideals of piety and moral excellence.

In contrast to İsmailağa, the İskenderpaşa community accepts more flexibility regarding women's roles. While homemaking remains a priority, women are also encouraged to pursue part-time employment or education as long as it complements their domestic responsibilities. This community recognizes the dual role of women, balancing family obligations with professional aspirations, reflecting a more modern approach to gender roles. Education is a key priority in the İskenderpaşa community, and it is promoted for both genders. The community emphasizes the importance of lifelong learning and intellectual growth, downplaying the rigid gender-based hierarchy that is more prominent in other communities. However, while education is strongly advocated, the traditional gender roles within the family, such as women's roles as nurturers and men's roles as breadwinners, are still maintained.

While the İsmailağa community emphasizes a more rigid adherence to traditional gender roles, focusing on women's obedience, modesty, and subordination, the İskenderpaşa and Meşveret communities allow for more adaptability, particularly in relation to women's roles. İskenderpaşa's approach to dual roles for women as homemakers and career seekers tries to balance tradition and contemporary life, while Meşveret's focus on RNK and egalitarianism challenges both traditional hierarchies and modern secular influences. Meşveret, also

minimizes the role of Tasawwuf, focusing more on the rational and textual aspects of religious life.

In sum, the discursive strategies in these communities reflect varying degrees of engagement with modernity, gender equality, and Islamic tradition. The İsmailağa remains the most traditional, reinforcing rigid gender roles and a strict adherence to Islamic practices, while İskenderpaşa and Meşveret offer more flexible approaches, blending traditional values with modernity and promoting intellectual and spiritual growth.

5.1. Limitations and Suggestions for Further Research

One way in which this dissertation could be expanded is including new themes that could function as an element of identity formation for the sufi women. In particular, I would like for future studies to explore the status and perception of community leaders (sheikhs) by these women, and the impact of the image of an ideal sheikh on their self-understanding and identity formation. This study could also be expanded with the inclusion of other Turkish religious communities, such as the Süleymancılar, Erenköy, and other Nurcu groups. This would make the observations and arguments presented here more meaningful by confirming and/or challenging them. The original design of the research included an examination of the Süleymancılar community, which stands as a unique intersection between the Meşveret and İskenderpaşa communities. However, due to the rejection of participation by twelve members of the community and the time constraints that prevented further efforts to engage with them, the inclusion of this group was not possible within the scope of the current study. Had the highly conservative Süleymancılar community been incorporated into the research, it would have provided valuable insights into the nuances of how communities that blend elements of traditional and modern values—such as those seen in both the Meşveret and İskenderpaşa communities. Including the Süleymancılar community would have enriched the study by offering a comparative perspective, allowing for a more comprehensive exploration of how different communities negotiate their identities and values in the contemporary world. While the exclusion of this community is a limitation of the present research, it remains an important area for future study, one that could further illuminate the complex dynamics at play in contemporary Turkish religious communities.

Moreover, this research could have included as a major topic men's identity formation and subjectification in the three communities studied, which unfortunately was not possible due to time constraints and limitations on access into these communities – as a female researcher I could not have enough access to their male members. Understanding the discursive and practical contours of the male members of these communities could provide a valuable

counterpart to the analyses presented here, which would allow a more comprehensive and nuanced account of these processes. Understanding how male members of the İskenderpaşa, Süleymancılar, and Meşveret communities navigate their identities—especially in relation to the overarching themes of modernity, tradition, and education—would contribute a crucial dimension to the study of gender dynamics within these groups. While the research has largely focused on the ways in which women are socialized, empowered, and positioned within the spiritual, social, and educational spheres, a parallel investigation into men's roles would illuminate how these processes differ or align based on gender. This could shed light on how masculinity is constructed, how it intersects with spirituality and social responsibility, and how men's roles in the family, community, and society are shaped by both religious and communal forces as well as structural factors. Moreover, an analysis of men's subjectification—how they come to understand and enact their roles in these communities—would allow for a deeper exploration of the discursive and practical aspects of identity formation.

Finally, a comparative analysis between Turkey-based Sufi communities and those located in other parts of the Muslim world—and even in the West—would offer valuable insights into the broader dynamics of Sufi identity and practice. Such cross-regional studies could illuminate how local socio-political contexts, cultural traditions, and historical trajectories shape the formation of Sufi communities, as well as the self-conception and identity of their male and female members. Moreover, the inclusion of Western Sufi communities in such studies would add an important layer of analysis, as these communities often navigate a complex intersection of traditional Islamic spirituality and modern secular contexts. How do members of these communities reconcile their spiritual practices with Western cultural norms, and how does this shape their identities? Are gender roles in Western Sufi communities more fluid, or do they replicate traditional structures found in their counterparts in the Muslim world?

By comparing and contrasting the İsmailağa, İskenderpaşa and Meşveret communities, therefore, the present research hopes to contribute to the sociology and anthropology of religion in general, and the study of contemporary Islamic-sufi communities and life in Turkey in particular. These communities, each with its own unique blend of tradition and modernity, offer a rich field for exploring how religious groups adapt to and negotiate within the socio-political and cultural contexts of modern Turkey. By examining their practices, identity formation, and community dynamics, this study provides a detailed look at how contemporary Sufi orders and non-Sufi communities operate within a rapidly changing society, revealing the ways in which they maintain religious and social coherence while engaging with modern challenges. My study might also provide some insights into the understanding of (new) religious movements,

thereby modestly contributing to the social movements literature. For traditionalist religious movements trying to navigate the uneasy waters of the contemporary (relatively secularized) world are an important topic within this literature. From a theoretical perspective, this study applies the Bourdieusian framework and Symbolic Interactionism, alongside the Discourse Analysis method inspired by Foucault (1972) and Ardiç (2012), to understand the formation of religious identities and the discursive practices that shape these communities. It thus contributes to the understanding of the important concepts of habitus, the self, cultural and social capital, and identity formation also presenting an application of the Discourse Analysis method to the Turkish-Islamic context, thereby representing a hopefully nuanced account of the interplay between discourse and action. I hope that it might be helpful methodologically and theoretically for future researchers on Sufi communities and religious movements generally, contributing to the growing body of literature on contemporary religion and identity.

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