Wardrobes of Turkish-Dutch women: The multiple meanings and aesthetics of Muslim dress

Ünal, R.A.

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CHAPTER TWO: THE ÇARŞAF

In the Dutch-Turkish tesettür scene, women consistently depict the çarşaf as the most radical covering style. The çarşaf is a strongly marked form of Muslim garb; it produces the most heightened visibility. Today’s çarşaf is a two-piece outfit consisting of a long, loose skirt and a short cloak covering the upper part of the body. The çarşaf is usually black, or occasionally another dark, subdued color, though lighter çarşafs may be worn in summer. Although the number of women who adopt the çarşaf as their outdoor tesettür is very small in the Netherlands and in Turkey, there is a proliferation of çarşaf models on the tesettür market. In the last few years, highly stylish and expensive çarşafs have emerged in various colors. A number of different styles of çarşaf can be found in the wardrobes of my interlocutors: torbalı (baggy), sosyete (classy), which includes a cape, Sultan başı (the Sultana’s head), those patterned with polka dots, and other subtle variations.

In this chapter, I present the stories of five women who have adopted çarşaf as their outdoor tesettür. Their personal reflections on çarşaf as a sartorial practice contest the most common depiction of the çarşaf as a timeless, pure and radical form of tesettür. This idealization of çarşaf as the most dedicated form of tesettür also stands in contrast to the shifting meanings and styles of çarşaf, both in political discourses and in everyday life since the mid-19th Century. The next section, then, begins with a historical detour by tracing the genealogy of the çarşaf in Turkey. It begins in Ottoman times, when the çarşaf was first introduced, before discussing the turn to çarşaf fashions and attempts to ban the çarşaf.

To elaborate on contemporary çarşaf stories, I will portray one particular religious community, the İsmailağa cemaati from Istanbul, and discuss their reflections on çarşaf as a religious obligation. Background information on the İsmailağa community is key to this

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22 In some of the literature on Muslim women’s dress, a third piece is included in çarşaf style. This item is called peçe, a face-veil that is typically black in color. In the contemporary Turkish-Dutch tesettür scene, the peçe is very rare. Throughout my fieldwork between 2007 and 2011, I attended many religious community gatherings, but I only saw such a face-veil once. Furthermore, I only encountered a black peçe in one wardrobe that I examined; it had been brought back from the hajj (the pilgrimage to Mecca during the month of Dhu al-Hijjah that Muslims are obligated to make once during their lifetimes if able) as a souvenir.

23 Çarşaf is originally an Arabic word that means “sheet” (bed sheet) in both Arabic and Turkish.
discussion because all of the çarşaf stories in this section involve women who are or have been linked to this community. The association between the İsmailağa community and the torbalı çarşaf is particularly strong; as one of my interlocutors notes, “çarşaf belongs to the school of that cemaat.” More generally, women who wear çarşaf in the Netherlands are well aware of the strong association between the çarşaf and this community, even if they are not necessarily active members of it. In the last section of the chapter, I will discuss how my interlocutors first began to wear çarşaf, how various categories of others (family, men, members of religious communities and the public at large) react to women who wear the çarşaf, and the ways in which women themselves deal with these reactions and perceptions by expressing their love for çarşaf, and developing particular, individualized styles.

1. The Çarşaf in Ottoman and Republican Times

Break with the Empire: the Shift from Imperial Ferace to Çarşaf

Tracing the shifting styles and meanings of çarşaf is a massive endeavor. The force of Turkey’s modernization project and the hegemonic nation-state ideologies of this period often frame the earlier literature (Taşçıoğlu 1958; Koçu 1969; Sevin 1973; Tuğlacı 1984). Only a few studies have described changing patterns in clothing, from the beginning of the Ottoman westernization reforms during the Tanzimat Era to the Republican period. These studies have generally linked sartorial changes to a linear process of modernization. Rather than tracing commonalities and continuities, historiography in general has given more significance to ruptures. From such a linear perspective, the çarşaf is destined to disappear. This story line predicts the complete abandonment of the çarşaf, first in the cities and then in rural areas, while ignoring the stories of the women who have continued to wear this form of tesettür. Moreover, this genre suggests that contemporary çarşaf stories have no place or meaning, other than as mere instances of “radical Islamism.” Thus, this body of literature denies the ambiguities and contradictions of çarşaf wearing that have characterized the practice historically.

Before the headscarf controversy in Turkey, the çarşaf played a central role in framing debates over development, modernity and the transformation of society from the early
westernization reforms of the Ottomans to the Kemalist Turkish state (Mahir 2005). Regulations concerning the çarşaf were mostly related to changing dynamics of power and politics. For instance, the sultan would occasionally ban wearing the çarşaf for security reasons, only to lift the ban again when çarşaf producers complained that they would go bankrupt because poor women could not afford the more expensive imperial outdoor garments known as ferace. However, these regulations were, at most, partially implemented by state institutions, and a large number of women did not abide by them.

In general, women’s clothing was not very different from that of men in the Ottoman Empire. Ottoman women wore şalvar (baggy trousers) and gömlek (long-sleeved shirts) with layered coats (entari, kaftan) and cepken (short jackets) (Micklewright 2000). Often, the difference between genders was marked by ornaments and colors. The common form of Ottoman women’s outdoor clothing was a combination of the ferace (a full-length coat) and yaşmak (scarf), mostly in black, purple or red colors (Üçel-Aybet 2003; Koçu 1969). With the rising mass fashion industry in the 19th Century, and the partial adoption of a western dress code, gender-specific items of clothing began to reshape the Ottoman dress scene. The earliest photographs that show Ottoman women in European dress date back to the 1870s and 1880s (Jirousek 2000).

Historically, fashion was an elite phenomenon that gradually spread to other segments of the population. Affluent women in Istanbul were highly influential in setting new sartorial trends and introducing new fashions into mainstream Ottoman clothing (Vaka [1923] 2003; Sakaoğlu 1987; Işın 1999). Unfortunately, we know very little about the sartorial preferences of provincial and pious Muslim women during the Ottoman era. The literature on Ottoman dress mostly includes and relies on the accounts and letters of European travelers and diplomats and the paintings of European artists (Ellison [1915] 2009; Akman 2011). These Europeans focused mostly on Istanbul, and the preferences of elite Istanbul women were described as leading imperial trends, which were later adopted by women in Anatolian towns (Koçu 1969).

24 Abdulhamid II (1842-1918) banned the ferace for ordinary women in 1889; only women of the palace were allowed to continue to wear it. As a result, the presence of çarşaf and peçe significantly increased on the streets of Istanbul. The anonymity of çarşaf was seen as a threat. With the use of the peçe, covering the face when wearing a çarşaf produced a sort of anonymity for the çarşaf wearer; in other words, it provided a kind of invisibility. There were an increasing number of speculations about spies and enemies of the Sultan who could carry out their plans under the guise of çarşaf. Thereafter, women were only allowed to wear çarşaf on deserted streets or when they went to social house gatherings (Akkent and Franger 1987).
Both ferace and çarşaf were subject to various attempts at regulation. The Ottoman sultans not only produced regulations about their shape and color, but also regulated how, where and when one could wear them. Beginning in the era of Sultan Selim III (1789-1807), women started to wear colorful feraces different from the conventional feraces of the Empire, a trend that displayed the successful adoption of new Western consumption patterns (Jirousek 2000; Mahir 2005). Women’s clothing had a larger impact on society as the concurrently changing economic, social, and political character of the Empire led to the emergence of new dress codes. Increasing competition among women in order to achieve a novel presence in Ottoman public spaces was not only a sign of changing consumption patterns and Western influences in fashion; perhaps more importantly, it was also a sign of new social and economic inequalities within Ottoman society.

Çarşaf as a National Fashion

In the early 1850s, the black çarşaf made its first appearance in Istanbul. It was a distinct, gendered outdoor garment for women. Originating in Syria, this early form of çarşaf was a one-piece garment that covered the wearer from head to toe. The wife of the governor of Syria, Suphi Paşa, first introduced the one-piece çarşaf style to Muslim women in Istanbul (Aktaş 2005). Çarşaf fashions in Istanbul were the manifestation of a cultural-civilizational break within the empire. The çarşaf was promoted as a modern, national outfit for women (Toprak 1998; Çakır 2011); this advocacy changed the long tradition of wearing ferace. Since then, the çarşaf has represented different understandings of the aesthetics, piety and modesty of Muslim women.

With the emergence of art-nouveau style dresses, especially in Istanbul, the çarşaf was reintroduced in 1892 as a fashionable garment. This represented a shift from Imperial to Art Nouveau styles in fashion (Toprak 1998). Feraces with low-cut-sleeves (düşük omuz modaşı) had nicely matched with Imperial fashions for a very long time, but they lost their popularity with the appearance of puffy-sleeved (leg o’mutton sleeves) dresses of the Art Nouveau style (Sevin 1973). The loose, long, black çarşaf covered the body’s entire figure, at least according to a particular understanding of tesettür; moreover, the çarşaf hid the new sartorial preferences of women, their primarily western garments, which were the manifestations of
newly emerging inequalities and differences within society. Gradually, the çarşaf itself took on a form similar to that of these dresses.

Changing fashions in women’s clothing were seen as a sign of progress. In a number of women’s journals, several critical essays raised the issue of the çarşaf as a part of the larger debate over modernization and westernization throughout the last century of the Ottoman Empire. Conservative segments of society expressed strong reactions against the increasing numbers of fashionable, çarşaflı women, and promoted former styles of ferace and yaşmak against the new çarşaf fashions. The Istanbul police began to interfere with women in çarşaf. In addition to their pistols, Istanbul police officers started to carry scissors; when they saw women in çarşaf, they cut their skirts and cloaks. However, as Toprak describes, fashion prevailed over state repression, and the ferace and yaşmak disappeared from the Ottoman public scene within two years. (Toprak 1998; Sevin 1973) Regardless of the prohibitions of Abdulhamid II (reigned 1876 to 1909), the majority of women continued to adopt fashionable çarşaf designs. The typical outdoor outfit at that time was a cloak with a black veil, and the fashionable çarşaf increasingly replaced feraces in large areas.

Tango Çarşaf in the Years of Occupation

During the early years of the Second Constitutional Era (1908-1922), the one-piece çarşaf turned into a two-piece garment, which was similar in appearance to today’s çarşaf. It had a wide-cut cloak or cape covering the upper part of the body to the waist, and a full-length loose skirt. The loose-fitting çarşaf (a combination of a wide cloak and skirt) disappeared. Slim-fitting overcoats or western suits (jacket and skirt combinations), called tayyör (derived from the French word tailleur) became the fashionable style of outdoor garments for elite women in Ottoman cities. These new styles were also labeled as çarşaf. New çarşaf models had tight, short skirts; fashionable designs even had slits, because women could not move easily in them otherwise. The new style of the period was called the “Tango Çarşaf” (Taşçıoğlu 1958: 52-54). Çarşaf fashion also included new accessories, such as parasols in matching colors, which were used to hide women’s faces beneath transparent veils (Şeni 199: 32).

The fashions of Russian and European women influenced Ottoman women’s clothing during the years of the occupation (1918-1923). These women introduced western fashions and promoted western styles, thereby transforming the sartorial practices of women in
Ottoman public spaces. Elite women adopted these fashions widely; Paris and London fashions become visibly influential in Ottoman women’s dress styles. In the following years, the çarşaf became increasingly adapted to a western style of outdoor clothing. Its shape became tighter and shorter, and it began to be worn with accessories, including Russian furs, brought by Romanov women who escaped the Bolshevik Revolution (1917) and fled to Istanbul (Toprak 1998) These Russian women also introduced a new type of headgear made of tulle fabric, which they used instead of hats. “Russian head” (Rus başı) styles were worn by Ottoman women in combination with a variety of outdoor garments (Mahir 2005). Fashionable adaptations of outdoor tesettür to western trends sparked new, even more controversial debates over westernizing reforms. These debates raised questions about morality, religion and nationalism, along with changing understandings of tesettür, and western ideas of femininity and beauty.

Figure 1 Çarşaf models in the magazine İnci, no. 2 (1 March 1919) published in 1998, Tombak.
A women’s magazine published in March 1919 included an illustration of fashionable çarşaf models with tight, three-quarter skirts and fur trimmings that looked like western outfits. As we see in the photograph below, these figures bear no resemblance to what is worn as çarşaf today. The figure on the left side wears something that looks like a fashionable winter overcoat. This çarşaf was decorated with furs around the neck and the edge of the sleeves. Big glassy buttons and a belt right below the chest gave the 20th-century Ottoman çarşaf the shape of an overcoat, while the small details and ornaments became new status markers for Ottoman women.

As we can see in this example, differences between the Ottoman çarşaf and western fashions disappeared before the term “çarşaf” was given up. The çarşaf became the favored style of outdoor dress for the next generation of women who moved into modern, urban public space. Later, such styles would be called manto (overcoat) or tayyör rather than çarşaf. It is important to note here that these fashionable çarşaf models of the early 20th Century bear a resemblance to contemporary Turkish tesettür fashions. However, these fashions are no longer called çarşaf; rather, they are known as kap (see the chapter on the overcoat for more on these fashions).

The desire for fashion amongst women was highly criticized in many periodicals and journals of the period. Authors in these periodicals wrote negatively about the strangeness of the new çarşaf, criticizing it as something that was mostly attractive to a certain category of morally decadent, uncultivated women. Achieving acceptance for this new aesthetics in women’s clothing required both persistence and quite a lot of time. Criticism of the transformation of women’s clothing as an indication of moral decay took the practices and meanings of covered clothing of the past for granted as ideal and correct forms. This argument mirrors in reverse the ideological construction of a linear, homogenizing concept of progress, through which modernizers imagine the future.

Women’s clothing achieved a state-controlled institutional form with the establishment of sewing schools. Sewing schools (Biçki Dikiş Kursları) became increasingly popular beginning in the 1910’s. In these schools, women not only learned western fashions, they were also exposed to the modern notion of the nuclear family. Furthermore, they were taught new domestic tasks and household management in these contexts (Aktaş 2005).

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25 See Mahir 2005 for a detailed analysis of women’s periodicals and journals during the occupation years and an account of reactions on the part of elite Ottoman intellectuals to changing styles of clothing, especially the çarşaf.
institutes continued to play a significant role in the lives of Republican women. They functioned as alternative educational institutions for young women who could not continue formal state education.

Campaigns against the Çarşaf

The pace of transformations in women’s clothing, not only in terms of aesthetics but also in the processes of production and consumption, increased during the early years of the Turkish Republic. There was no place for the çarşaf in the project of “wardrobe modernization.” Ironically, given the relative novelty of the style itself, a break with the çarşaf also implied a desired departure from the Ottoman roots of the young secularizing nation. Sewing schools promoted a new dress code, and they quickly responded to the increasing demand for western styles of clothing. The professional tailoring skills that women learned in these schools produced a visible difference between the new fashions and former home-tailored clothes.

In the early years of the Republic, a large number of provincial women were able to fashion new styles of dress in modern public spaces, especially due to the contributions of women who had graduated from sewing schools in smaller Anatolian towns. The Turkish Women’s Association also played a significant role in shaping public opinion and reactions to the çarşaf. Their concerns were similar to those of some Ottoman feminists; they promoted “national fashion” and campaigned for the ultimate abolition of the çarşaf. In their accounts, the çarşaf, with its full-length, loose covering form, became a symbol of backwardness and ignorance. While the fashionable model of çarşaf turned into a combination of jacket and skirt, and became the new dress code for the women of the Republic, the old-fashioned çarşaf was seen as an undesirable remnant of the Ottoman past, which denoted the poverty and provinciality of the women who still wore it. Elite and educated women of the Republic were strongly opposed to the presence of the old-fashioned çarşaf.

In March 1956, three female MPs proposed a legal prohibition on the çarşaf in Turkish Parliament. Although this proposal did not pass, the Turkish Women’s Association continued to sponsor several campaigns against the çarşaf. (Aktaş 2005: 279-280). Like other indicators of the modern secular nation-building project, the new public visibility of women was seen as part of the state’s civilizing mission. The ostensible aim of this civilizing project was to educate those women who only continued to wear çarşaf because they could not afford an
overcoat, and the campaigns of the Turkish Women’s Association tried to find ways to produce inexpensive overcoats for a large number of women.

The elite circles of the Republic actively took part in the formation of public opinion against the public presence of the çarşaf. Although the ready-made textile sector was still under-developed, students of the Girls’ Institutes (Kız Enstitüleri) propagated the new dress code (Cindoğlu and Toktaş 2002; Akşit 2005). Students at these institutes produced elegant yet inexpensive overcoat models, and wearing an overcoat as an outdoor garment became highly popular and trendy among many women; the following chapter on overcoats will explore this trend through ethnographic accounts. In order to provide overcoats to a larger number of women, students from the Girls’ Institutes consulted and contracted with local textile producers and storeowners to manufacture and sell overcoats at reasonable prices. They also organized campaigns to educate women to adopt more fashionable and westernized forms of outdoor garments.

After the military coup in 1960,26 the Mustafa Kemal Foundation, a prominent civil society organization founded during the Republican period, organized several campaigns against the çarşaf. Educated, urban women (who were considered more modern) were mobilized and participated in these campaigns, in which they donated their overcoats to poor, provincial women who could not afford to buy such garments themselves. Although these campaigns may appear to be part of a homogenization project, aimed at creating a new, equal appearance for the citizens of the nation-state, they deepened the gap between urban and rural areas. The çarşaf gradually came to be categorized as traditional rural attire, although it was not yet “radically Islamic.”

Although no legal prohibition against the çarşaf was enacted at this time, there was a common perception that wearing the çarşaf was illegal. One needed to be very strong to wear the çarşaf and to appear in public spaces where the çarşaf was seen as a threat. According to the secular worldview, the çarşaf was a threat to the secular Turkish state. This paranoia legitimized the social exclusion of çarşaf wearers. Since this time, çarşaf wearers have stood out in Turkey. The possibility that the anonymity of the çarşaf might be used for criminal purposes produced feelings of anxiety and disgust about this particular style of dress

26 The first military intervention in the Republican era, the coup of 1960, dissolved the Parliament and outlawed the Democrat Party (DP). The DP first won elections in 1950, thereby ending the one party period of the early Republic. The DP received much of its support due to its liberal attitude toward Islam. For instance, the DP pushed through legislation allowing the call to prayer (ezan) to be voiced in Arabic again; the language of the call to prayer had been switched to Turkish from Arabic as part of the reforms of the early Republic.
throughout the Republican years. The word çarşaf itself is commonly used as a metaphor in everyday discussions about corruption, burglary, kidnapping, fraud, prostitution, and so forth. Çarşaf wearers were well aware of the fact that they may be seen as potential criminals. The police were able to approach them on the streets without a good reason and ask for their identity papers, as if their mere appearance was a crime. The double fear of çarşaf as both as a threat to the secular republic and as a means of criminality marked the presence of çarşaf wearers in public space, and excluded them in a different way than other forms of tesettür.

In the 1970s, çarşaf wearers were stigmatized as supporters of the Ayatollah Khomeini and the Iranian Revolution in the Turkish secular imaginary. Such stigmatization ignored and erased the fact that the çarşaf had once been a national garment, a modern outfit, produced in various colors and embellished with furs and other ornamentation. Turkish politics targeted the çarşaf as a threat to the secular state. The çarşaf was more dangerous than other types of headscarf because it was seen as a symbol of “radical” Islamism. This depiction rejected and suppressed the long history of the çarşaf and women’s experiences of it.

When evaluating the çarşaf today, this long history, which began in the 1850s, must be taken into account. The çarşaf has been adapted to different fashions and understandings of tesettür, and women continue to endow it with different, shifting meanings. While the one-piece çarşaf of the 1850s is now associated with an “Arab” style, in the 1890s the same çarşaf was refashioned within the context of emergent, western sartorial aesthetics. Later, in the 1910s, this çarşaf was complimented and ornamented with Russian fur fashions. The black, loose çarşaf was seen as something to be completely discarded during the early years of the Republic. The campaigns to abolish the wearing of çarşaf as a part of the project of “wardrobe modernization” reveal the strong antipathy to the çarşaf that existed in the 1930s and 1940s. Due to the success of this public antagonism, by the 1950s and 1960s the çarşaf had come to signify rural poverty and the traditional Ottoman past from which the modern Turkish nation-state sought to distance itself. From the 1980s onwards, the çarşaf was seen as the most austere outfit and the manifestation of “fundamentalist Islamism.” At this same time, one particular religious community rose to prominence with its large number of çarşaf wears.
2. Torbalı Çarşaf

The İsmailağa Community

The İsmailağa community is based at the İsmailağa Mosque in Istanbul, in the neighborhood of Çarşamba, located in the district of Fatih. The İsmailağa Mosque was originally built in the 18th century. According to 19th Century Ottoman census records, Fatih as a neighborhood was characterized by the strong presence of non-Muslim minorities (Shaw 1979). The Istanbul earthquake in 1894 seriously damaged the İsmailağa Mosque, and for a long time thereafter it was only used as a marketplace. The mosque was renovated in 1952 under the leadership of Sheikh Ali Haydar Efendi, who appointed Mahmut Ustaosmanoğlu as the imam of the mosque in 1954. Mahmut Ustaosmanoğlu is still the spiritual leader of İsmailağa community (a sub-branch of the influential Naqshbandi Sufi order, or tarikat); among his disciples, he is also known as Mahmut Efendi Hazretleri. His disciples can be recognized by their distinctive clothing, especially in and around the district of Fatih: men usually wear long cloaks and grow large beards, while women disciples wear the black çarşaf. This particular style of çarşaf is known as the baggy (torbalı), çarşaf or the İsmailağa style. The streets of Çarşamba are full of çarşaf producers, and Fatih has a unique atmosphere among all of the neighborhoods of Istanbul, with its large number of çarşaf wearers. In the 1980s and especially during the process following the “soft coup” of 28 February 1997, Fatih and the community were considered to be a “threat” and, therefore, became the focus of heated political debates.

Today, both practicing and non-practicing Muslims in Istanbul portray Fatih as different from other neighborhoods (Navaro-Yashin 2002b; Walton 2010); as one tesettürlü woman said, “Fatih is like a little Iran.” Çarşaf wearers have heightened visibility in public space in general, but Fatih is perhaps the only location where wearing çarşaf is actually less conspicuous. In contrast to the strong impression of Fatih as a very conservative neighborhood, the crowd of Fatih is in fact more diverse than that of any other neighborhood.

27 Belge describes Fatih as historically a densely-populated non-Muslim neighborhood of Istanbul (2000: 145).
in Istanbul, particularly due to the presence of çarşaf wearers. On a sunny day, one can see women wearing very exposed garments, including mini-skirts and strapless shirts, and women tourists wearing face-veils (mostly from the Arab Gulf countries) walking alongside çarşaf wearers and shopping on the main street surrounded by classy stores of well-known brands. Tesettür producers and non-tesettür companies alike compete to occupy the most crowded corners of Fatih’s streets. Besides new stores, small, old-fashioned stores continue to sell various items, from clothing to books, which are of particular interest to members of the community. Most çarşaf producers are located along the narrow streets of Çarşamba. For the Turkish-Dutch women whom I interviewed for this research, Fatih is above all a shopping destination, and online stores of sellers from Faith and the nearby area of Unkapanı are promising addresses at which to find different styles of çarşaf, ranging from old-fashioned, black, baggy çarşaf to fashionable çarşaf styles in different colors.

Figure 2 Çarşaf stores in Fatih and Meryem’s torbalı çarşaf in the Netherlands.
Çarşaf as a Community Garment

Tracing the history of the çarşaf illustrates that the transformation of tesettür is an ongoing, continuous process. Yet, in contrast to the predictions of Turkey’s modernization project, this process is not linear. Women constantly adapt seemingly similar styles to different understandings of tesettür and trends in shifting and multiple ways. The remainder of this chapter focuses on contemporary çarşaf stories, which reveal the ambiguities and contradictions of wearing çarşaf in the Netherlands. The following section briefly describes one particular community of Turkish-Dutch çarşaf wearers, and relates the interpretations and reflections of community members about outdoor tesettür and çarşaf on their official community websites. This is particularly significant because all of the narrators of çarşaf stories in the following section adopted the çarşaf style during their education at Quranic boarding schools affiliated with the İslamağa community, and most of them put çarşaf on for the first time in a ritualistic manner at these schools. The mottoes of the community are “Çarşaf is farz (an obligation)” and “çarşaf is the honor of religion.” In the teachings of the community, the çarşaf is promoted as the most “authentic,” “timeless” and “pure” form of outdoor tesettür. Even women who are no longer part of this community, and actively participate in the activities of other communities as hocas (religious teachers), still enjoy the presence and appearance of the çarşaf, despite its stigmatization and marked visibility in both the Netherlands and Turkey.

The İslamağa community shares a particular interpretation of what tesettür means based on specific passages of the Qur’an. In their understanding, çarşaf is the only style of dress that fits the term “jilbab” in the Surah Nur 28 of the Qur’an. They strictly exclude other forms of equally covering tesettür styles, for instance, the pardösü combined with a large scarf. Moreover, performing proper outdoor tesettür is not only about wearing a loosely-covering çarşaf, but also about using other accessories in a proper way. Women from the

28 “And tell the believing women to reduce [some] of their vision and guard their private parts and not expose their adornment except that which [necessarily] appears thereof and to wrap [a portion of] their headcovers over their chests and not expose their adornment except to their husbands, their fathers, their husbands’ fathers, their sons, their husbands’ sons, their brothers, their brothers’ sons, their sisters’ sons, their women, that which their right hands possess, or those male attendants having no physical desire, or children who are not yet aware of the private aspects of women. And let them not stamp their feet to make known what they conceal of their adornment. And turn to Allah in repentance, all of you, O believers, that you might succeed.” Sahih International retrieved from http://quran.com/24/31 on 17.04.2012.
community are careful to carry handbags rather than shoulder bags, which risk highlighting the contours of the upper part of the body. Meticulously formed çarşaf is highlight the level of devotion of some community members.

In Mahmut Efendi’s sermons, the çarşaf and the beard are not only a particular style of appearance but also concepts that emphasize a pious understanding of the world and a person’s relationship to God. On the website of the İsmailağa community, the çarşaf is a significant topic; it appears regularly in the statements of Mahmut Efendi and is discussed on the forums. His depiction of çarşaf not only points to a higher level of devotion, it also articulates a critical stance toward modern lifestyles and fashions. In his words:

Those who cannot recognize the difference between mümin (the believer) and infidel do not know the difference between overcoat and çarşaf.  

He describes çarşaf as “the badge of religion” (“çarşaf dinin nişanıdır”). According to his interpretation, wearing çarşaf is a direct means of showing a female believer’s lack of care for and interest in the material world. While wearing çarşaf is promoted for women on the community's website, it also is a topic of debate. The well-known saying of Mahmut Efendi above sparked a heated debate among the followers of the site. The claim that “çarşaf is the honor of religion” engendered a strong disagreement between two men (posted on 06 October 2008) in a forum. One of them describes the çarşaf as the ideal form of tesettür by referring to the sayings of Mahmut Efendi. Through this idealized, celebratory depiction of çarşaf, he emphasizes the çarşaf wearer’s modesty and her detachment from and indifference to the material world, based on her disciplined self. According to his view, the çarşaf wearer is in this world but not of it, as a well-known Sufi saying states.

In the discussion, the first participant relates an historical account in which he refers to the experiences of women from previous generations: “If we could ask our grandmothers a hundred years ago, they would have said, ‘When we go out we preferred to look older even though we were very young’.” His account refers to a certain notion of modesty in which women devalue their most precious quality, their youth. His portrayal of çarşaf is a romantic one that situates the çarşaf in a narrative as a sign of modesty and morality; this romantic idea of the çarşaf is distilled from its long and compound history.

The other contributor to the forum opposes the idea that çarşaf is the only correct form of tesettür. Although all of the women in his family wear çarşaf, he also accepts other forms of well-covering tesettür as correct forms of outdoor dress. In his eyes, judging different forms of tesettür is itself contrary to a pious understanding of modesty. In his eyes, only God knows whether a particular tesettür is correct or not. He writes the following to support his stance in the discussion of Mahmut Efendi’s claim that “çarşaf is the honor of religion”:

Have I said anything against the çarşaf? How I could speak against it? Thanks be to God (hamdolsun) all of the women in my family wear çarşaf. You can’t understand my objection, because of your own prejudices. Shall we call a sister who wears a pardösü, which covers her entire body with a big headscarf that covers her shoulders, wrong? This is basically what the ‘jilbab’ is. To say that çarşaf is the badge of religion is to say that there is no way other than çarşaf. Who can dare to say this? All of the millions of women who don’t wear çarşaf are in error? How can someone claim this? Well, those who wear çarşaf today, they wear it because of the words of their Efendi, in order to show their membership in his cemaat. They even interfered with the form of çarşaf in our cemaat. ‘Don’t wear a two-piece çarşaf, it should be one piece, do not wear peçeli çarşaf, tie it under your chin with a pin,’ etc… They made these sorts of arguments.30

In contrast to the contentions of the male contributors to this forum, however, çarşaf cannot simply be seen as a mediator or signifier of religious modesty or a disciplined will. Even if wearing çarşaf indicates affiliation with a certain community, the increasing diversity of çarşaf fashions blurs this association.

3. The Çarşaf in the Netherlands

Çarşaflı women were the most difficult group to reach during my research. This was not only because of their very small number, but also because they tend to be highly respected women, sometimes even preachers, in their circles. As a result, they have busy lives full of religious teaching and services. Without Hanne’s help, it would not have been possible to collect the personal stories of these women that I narrate in this chapter. Hanne was the first çarşaflı woman with whom I had a close encounter in my life. Hanne and I live very near to each other in Turkey, yet I do not know whether we would have met and become such good friends in Turkey itself. I still notice how our presence together (walking arm in arm) attracts a lot of

surprised attention on the part of people on the street in both Turkey and the Netherlands. We were able to establish a good relationship on the basis of our shared longing for home. We also shared a similar sense of humor, and the process of remembering and mutually sharing stories of our lives back home in Turkey helped us to establish an even stronger rapport. As I got to know her better, I came to recognize my own assumptions about the çarşaf. Our intimate conversations always helped me to confront my own prejudices.

Figure 3 Çarşaf wearers in the Netherlands.
A Common Story: Quranic Boarding Schools

The çarşaf wearers I discuss in this study share similar stories about first adopting çarşaf at one of the Quranic boarding schools of İsmailağa community. Even if these women no longer follow the teachings of the İsmailağa community and do not share their austere interpretation of çarşaf as the only acceptable form of outdoor tesettür, they nonetheless continue to wear çarşaf. Some of them were born in the Netherlands, while others immigrated later in life; all of them, however, have been students in the İsmailağa Quranic schools. While some of them wear more fashionable, alternative styles of çarşaf, others have continued to wear the community style for different reasons.

Among my interlocutors, only one young woman, who called herself Meryem in our interviews, wears what she calls the İsmailağa çarşafi. She adopted this çarşaf style in one of the Quranic boarding schools where she studied for two years. Even if there are several equally covering styles of outdoor attire, Meryem emphasized that there is a clear distinction between other forms of tesettür and çarşaf for community members. According to the community, there is only one form of outdoor dress for Muslim women, and that is the çarşaf. As Meryem says: “they do not even say tesettür is farz (obligatory), they say çarşaf is farz.”

As mentioned earlier, memories of time spent at one of the boarding schools occupy a significant place in the çarşaf stories. The Quranic boarding schools of the İsmailağa community have created an alternative for families that shun public education because of its cost or its secularity. Because they are boarding schools, these institutions form a viable alternative for families both in Turkey and in the Netherlands. Migrant families send their daughters to these schools, which are often located near relatives who can pay close attention to their children. In these schools, students memorize parts of the Quran and learn the basic principles of Islam. Simultaneously, they help to run the school and graduate as certificated hocas. Some of the volunteers have continued to stay at the schools and have taken on administrative roles in addition to religious teaching.

Poverty is one of the principal reasons that families send their daughters to Quranic boarding schools. These schools are not entirely free, but they cost less than a secular public education. In addition, they free families from some of their responsibilities, thereby allowing parents to work hard to make a living and provide a better future for their children. Moreover,
these schools also provide an alternative education for children from families that are critical or suspicious of modern secular education. Quranic schools constitute an alternative social circle and public space in which young women feel empowered by using and developing different skills, even if they are regarded as an “Other,” a marker of alterity, in modern secular public spaces. They give young girls the ability to create their own networks, through which they become visible and respected on the basis of their çarşaf.

Selcen comes from a poor family. She wanted to continue her education at an İmam Hatip School, where she could get a degree that would allow her to further her education as a theology student at a university in Turkey. However, her father wanted her to pursue a religious education in a Quranic boarding school with her sisters. He was a much-respected imam in the İsmailağa community. Selcen admires her father as a trustworthy, wise imam. She seeks her father’s approval in the same manner as his followers, who seek his advice on worldly and personal matters. Her father promised her that she would receive his full support in her future academic aspirations. She remembers the conversation that she had with her father in the following way:

(He said) ‘My daughter listen, I will indeed search and send you to a place where you will be able to learn Arabic and Turkish very well. I am behind you; this is a Muslim country, in the future when the headscarf issue is solved, I will support you pursuing a diploma.’ And then my journey to Istanbul began; I was ten years old. And my education started in a boarding school.

Leaving home to go Istanbul, where she studied in a Quranic School, was not easy for Selcen because she was very young at the time. Her time at the boarding school began in a working class, suburban district of Istanbul. The boarding school was very demanding. Together with her friends at the school, Selcen worked hard to become a wise, learned woman; she describes her time in the “medrese life” nostalgically by referring to the Arabic word “medrese” (school; in this context, an Islamic school):

In the beginning, it was very difficult because I knew that I would be studying there for ten years. Well, you make an agreement before you start. The curriculum lasts for a maximum of ten years, and then it depends on your will,

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31 İmam Hatip Schools were originally established as religious vocational state schools. For quite some time, they have been an important alternative for the children of pious families who prefer to pursue a religious education rather than follow the official curriculum of secular Turkish state education. While these schools aimed at training mosque functionaries, the majority of graduates from these schools have other professional careers and ambitions. The enrollment of İmam Hatip graduates in Turkish universities (other than in theology departments) was subject to different regulations that put them at a disadvantage in the national university entrance exam (Ozugür 2012). For female İmam Hatip graduates in tesettür, the situation was impossible, due to the prohibition on headscarves at universities. They could only further their education abroad. For a detailed study of İmam Hatip graduates and their professional networks in Europe. See Çağlar, forthcoming.
you may continue if you want. [But you might also work there, right?] I began to take on some responsibility after six years, for instance, I began an internship. I took classes in *tefsir* (Quranic commentary), *fıkıh* (Islamic legal reasoning), and *hادis* (the sayings and deeds of the Prophet Muhammad) from well-known thinkers in Turkey, I had my education in the core.

Selcen sought answers to all of the possible questions that people might ask her in the future. A wise *hoca* has to be informed about as many subjects as possible, in order to be able to advise other women at any time, at least in religious matters. *Hocas* are well aware that they act as role models for young women in many different ways. Women consult with them and ask for their advice on almost anything. A young pregnant woman can approach a *hoca* and ask for a name for her baby, a student may ask for support to adjust her relationship with her parents, or a young woman might ask for help when she first falls in love with a man of whom her parents would disapprove.

Hanne also comes from a large, poor family. As she describes below, her family was not especially pious. Hanne was a student in a Quranic boarding school, although not for as long a period as Selcen. As we spoke about her first days in the boarding school, Hanne remembered how she felt when she put a headscarf on for the first time, a few years ago, in order to go to a mosque; she changed her route to the mosque to hide from acquaintances because she was embarrassed. Nevertheless, she was passionate to find God. Her first days in the school were challenging, not only because she had left home but also because she was encountering a new set of practices and a different way of life.

I was distant from the headscarf, I didn’t wear one, but then we went to this *cemaat*. For the first time in my life, I saw a meal served on a table on the floor; in our home, we do not eat on the floor, we do not eat from the same plate, we do not sit on the floor. We sat on a *sedir* (a kind of traditional sofa). I saw those loose dresses, I felt so strange there. I was sitting on the floor and wearing a loose dress, it looked spooky. I remember the first time I ate on the floor, some of the girls made fun of me. I was only able to eat salad because salad is the only dish that we eat from the same plate in my home…my family does not know the proper way to eat, nor did I. We are Muslim, but this was the first time that I encountered a truly Islamic way of life and people who follow it.

Hanne considers life in a Quranic school as an alternative, possibly more adventurous environment in which to learn Islam, even if, as a city girl, she did not fit in immediately to life at the Quranic School. She later continued her religious education in her neighborhood and became an active member in the youth organization of the leading political party in Turkey during that period, the Welfare Party (*Refah Partisi*). Following the “soft coup” of 28
February 1997, both the Quranic School that Hanne attended and the Welfare Party as a whole were closed down. This was a turning point in her life: from then onward, as an active young Muslim woman, she began to feel imprisoned at home.

Adopting the Çarşaf in Boarding Schools

Adopting the çarşaf is often akin to an initiation ceremony in Quranic boarding schools. Nihal, a young female tesettür producer in Turkey, discussed this ritualistic aspect of adopting çarşaf as we walked around Fatih in the summer of 2011. Students at the Quranic boarding school in her neighborhood come to her and ask her to sew their first çarşaf. When students come to pick out their first çarşaf, they do not put them on when they leave her atelier. They ask for bags and put their çarşafs in them, after which they patiently wait for the day of the ceremony through which they will become a çarşaflı hoca. The decision to put on the çarşaf also requires a long process of negotiation with friends, relatives and family members.

In contrast to Selcen and Hanne, Şevval and Meryem grew up in the Netherlands. Şevval is thirty-four years old and Meryem is twenty-two years old; they are both Turkish-Dutch çarşaf wearers. Şevval’s family came to the Netherlands when she was a small child. Meryem was born in a small Dutch city. Both of them were educated in the Netherlands. Like other çarşaf wearers who participated in this study, at one point they attended boarding schools affiliated with the İsmailağa community in Turkey. Since then, they have continued their service ashocas in Milli Görüş mosques in the Netherlands. Their affiliation with the İsmailağa community is rather vague; they occasionally listen to audio sohbets (theological conversations) and follow discussions available on the Internet. However, they no longer receive direct instruction from the sheikh or teach for the community.

Şevval’s journey in pursuit of her questions about Islam began when she was sixteen. At this time, she realized that it was not possible to obtain satisfying answers to her questions from her parents and relatives around her. In her view, her parents live religion as a “tradition”. In other words, her parents lacked a systematic understanding of Islam, which can

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32 The 28 February process was an unarmed military intervention in Turkey that resulted in the dismantling of the Welfare Party coalition government. It mostly targeted women wearing recognizably Muslim dress. During this period, the headscarf ban was strictly implemented at universities. Some universities established “persuasion rooms” at their gates where women were pressured to remove their headscarves.
only be achieved and cultivated through Islamic knowledge. In the early 1990s, she returned to Turkey. Her relatives helped her find a boarding school, where she studied for four years in order to acquire a proper, thorough mode of Islamic knowledge. When she left the Netherlands, she had many questions about the headscarf and religiously inspired clothing.

I never put on an overcoat when I was at school (in the Netherlands). I wore whatever I wanted to wear. I did not wear my headscarf properly, I took it on and off. I was not conscious before I went to Turkey. When I asked about the headscarf, I always got the same answer: ‘You must cover, otherwise it is a sin.’ I was never satisfied with this answer. When I came back to Turkey, I heard about the cemaat. In the beginning, I could not decide whether I should go to a regular school or to one of the schools of an Islamic foundation. [A boarding school?] Yes, like boarding school where you get an Islamic education, a spiritually nourishing place. [Is this community often associated with çarşaf?] Yes, the İsmailağa community. I enjoyed being there spiritually. That’s why I decided to stay for four years. There, they always discussed tesettür, but I never thought that they were sufficiently conscious about it. However, I liked the çarşaf.

For some young women like Şevval, the atmosphere of the boarding schools seemed more spiritually nourishing than other schools, such as the İmam Hatip schools. To some extent, girls in these boarding schools not only learn Islam and become teachers; they also experience and share a certain interpretation of religious life with others. In this interpretation, çarşaf is the only proper mode of outdoor tesettür.

In general, the çarşaf was strongly promoted in the Quranic schools of the İsmailağa community, and the initial occasion on which a young woman put on çarşaf was often festive. Nermin was also a student at a Quranic boarding school in Istanbul. She wore çarşaf for six years. It was not an easy decision for her to take her çarşaf off; she experienced a difficult period emotionally and felt guilty for a long time, in spite of the fact that her mother applauded her at the door of their house when she went outside for the first time without the çarşaf. Her present style is a combination of a long, loose overcoat and a loosely covering headscarf. This outfit is within the limits of Nermin’s understanding of outdoor tesettür, even if its form is different.

Nermin moved to the Netherlands and began to work as a hoca after she married. She does not come from a practicing family, and she only began to attend mosque meetings in her neighborhood at the age of seventeen. Her friends were an important source of inspiration in her desire to lead a pious life. After a year of mosque attendance in the neighborhood with her friends, her teacher suggested that she would continue her studies in a Quranic boarding school. After receiving her hoca degree in three years, she started to work as a teacher at a
different location. In fact, Nermin gradually distanced herself from the community a long time before she moved to the Netherlands.

Nermin uses the metaphor of the fanus (fishbowl) to portray her life and feelings both inside and outside of the Quranic boarding school; for her, being inside the boarding school is like being in a fanus. Although she felt secure and protected there, the school was disconnected from outside world, from the streets of Istanbul. After her graduation, she continued to work as a hoca in Quranic schools of the same community. Throughout the following six years, she spent all of her time teaching and giving sohbets, and she hardly ever saw her parents. Nermin is still glad that she was able to live this sort of life within the community, as she desired at that time. However, she eventually took off her çarşaf after leaving the community. Schools produce a safer environment for çarşaf wearers. They are isolated in a way, and exist at a certain distance from the majority culture, which has completely different ideas about the çarşaf. Outside the community and its boarding schools, Nermin found it very difficult to continue to wear the çarşaf in Turkey.

Adopting the çarşaf is a declaration of one’s strength to bear the burden of heightened visibility and an expression of the promise to cultivate a strong self. However, this promise is difficult to keep. Nermin recalls that the first time that she put on çarşaf with her peers in school was a deeply affecting moment:

We were in the school, it was emotional moment, we put our çarşafs on ceremonially. With your friends, it was such a beautiful moment. There was no problem in the school; there you live in a fanus. Even if you do not want to perform salat (mandatory prayer), you may have to do so, because everybody does, do you understand? Even if you do not want to study, you study because you are in a school with four hundred students, and you live there. Life is easy there; the life you want to live is easy. If you want to live Islam, doing so is easier there. However, once you are outside the fanus, everything changes; life on the street is very different.

In Quranic boarding schools, girls put on their çarşafs for the first time with ceremony. Students bring tailor-made çarşafs to the school in bags and keep them hidden until the time for the ceremony arrives. Putting on çarşaf is a festive moment, a celebration of certain level of commitment and spiritual achievement. Young women who put on the çarşaf not only stand out in a negative sense, they also become more visible as respected and admired hocas in their own circles. Putting on the çarşaf is like a vow to be strong both inside and outside the community, for the rest of their lives.
Outside the Fishbowl ("Fanus"): Çarşaf and its Multiple Publics

Putting on a çarşaf is never easy; it often creates confrontations with others, initially and perhaps most seriously with close relatives. “Are you ready?”; “Can you do it?”; “Think twice before you decide!”; and, “Don’t put it on if you’ll take it off later” are some of the typical reservations expressed by friends and relatives that I repeatedly heard in the narratives of çarşaf wearers. Often, young women confront all of these prejudices and comments from the very moment that they mention their desire to put on çarşaf to their parents. The effect of çarşaf is different on strangers than it is on close friends and relatives. I have heard upsetting stories of verbal and physical harassment in both Turkey and the Netherlands. Latecomers who have confronted such harassment in Turkey are often more tolerant of prejudices they encounter in the Netherlands.

One must have a strong personality to be able to wear çarşaf. It is very difficult to bear the heightened visibility and to negotiate different effects that çarşaf has on various people, as well as on the wearer herself. Çarşaf means different things to people from different environments. Its effects are not always negative, since sometimes the çarşaf produces feelings of respect and admiration, yet these sentiments, too, can become a burden for women. There are higher expectations of a çarşaf wearer. They have to act properly because other women in their circles respect them as teachers and committed, pious Muslims. Deciding to adopt çarşaf is also a promise to preserve and cultivate a strong personality.

Selcen comes from a large family; she has five sisters and three brothers. She studied in a Quranic boarding school with her three sisters. Women in Selcen’s family have different styles of tesettür; like Selcen, her mother and younger sister wear çarşaf, while two other younger sisters prefer an overcoat, and the youngest sister does not have a particular outdoor tesettür but does wear a headscarf. Selcen could have adopted another, less conspicuous style, as her father advised her to do. Like other women in this study, she put her çarşaf on during her years at boarding school. At that time, she was thirteen years old. Although Selcen comes from a very pious family, and her father is devoted, respected imam, she still had to convince him that she was strong enough to wear çarşaf. He wondered whether she was ready to live the life of çarşaf wearer, whether she would be able to discipline her nefs (desirous soul). Nevertheless, she chose the most difficult form of tesettür.

Although my father is a hoca, when I told him that I wanted to wear çarşaf, he said ‘I’m nervous about this because you are young. In the future, you may not
like the çarşaf and this will be shameful. You might cause people to think about çarşaf differently, you might have an effect on their lives, and they will think that you can just take it on and off as you please. I want you to wear it in the future, when you are mature enough, when you will be sure about your decision.’ I disagreed, I said ‘No, if you will not buy a çarşaf for me, I will go and buy one for myself.’ At that time, my father bought me a very nice overcoat and a scarf that I liked. Just to make me feel good. He did not buy something cheap or ordinary. I threw them aside, and I bought a çarşaf at half the price of the overcoat and scarf.

Selcen’s father respects and values çarşaf as a pure, perfect form of outdoor tesettür. Yet he wonders whether Selcen will become a role model and represent çarşaf properly. Parents often disagree with their daughter’s decision to wear çarşaf, not necessarily because they disagree that çarşaf is the perfect form of outdoor tesettür, but simply because of its negative effects on others. The marked presence of çarşaf is difficult to live with, not only for its wearers but also for those relatives who do not wish to associate themselves with the garment.

As Selcen repeatedly emphasized throughout the narration of her life story, she savors adversity, and she gets the strength to overcome troubles from her spiritual life. She tries to bring the spiritual and the material worlds together in her life story in a coherent narrative. She attributes great significance to her dreams. They are influential in her everyday life. She decided to pursue a career as a hoca in a boarding school, after which she started her own Quranic school with her sisters. Later, she made a crucial decision concerning her marriage after she had certain dreams. A dream was responsible for bringing her to the Netherlands a year ago. She always consults her father about her dreams. She attributes spiritual significance to her decisions, whether they relate to her everyday life or to future plans. Her dreams function as guides to lead a pious, God-pleasing life.

A çarşaf wearer’s strength and patience are regularly questioned in different encounters. These challenges are a matter of discussion between daughters and parents, and they are an especially important issue to be agreed on during the process of marriage arrangements. After thirteen years, when Selcen wanted to discuss her çarşaf with her fiancé, she encountered reservations quite similar to those that her father had earlier expressed. Her fiancé asked whether she possessed the strength to keep her nefs in control and, therefore, not to change. As he said, “Your çarşaf is an honor for me, but don’t take it off when you come and see the life in the Netherlands!”

Women deal with a wide range of effects that the çarşaf produces on different publics, as the effects of çarşaf and its meaning change from intimate familial contexts to encounters
with strangers on the street. Parents try to persuade their daughters to adopt a less visible style of outdoor *tesettür*, while friends rework their relationships and degrees of intimacy with these young women. Hanne’s account illuminates how a *çarşaf* wearer experiences a transformation of her appearance that gradually affects her relationships with male friends in particular. Her story also emphasizes how the *çarşaf* affected and determined the way that men approach her. The image of *çarşaf* as an “austere” and “radical” style plays a powerful role in transforming the *çarşaf* wearers’ physical closeness to the opposite sex.

When I first covered, my relatives found it very ugly. My mother did not say much, but my father considered my style extreme. In a friendly manner, he tried to explain to me that I do not need to cover in this way. He said that this is not what Islam wants me to do… Furthermore, my male friends began to distance themselves from me; it was a very funny experience, but tough, too. When I first put the headscarf on, they still came near me and asked ‘How are you Hanne? Is everything all right?’ When my headscarf got longer, they only saluted me. When I began to wear ‘*peçe meçe*’ (a face-veil), they passed by without even looking at me (she laughs). I did not say a word, my outfit changed, radically changed, okay, but the person inside it did not. I am the same person. As long as I set my boundaries with men, I do not have a problem.

In a sense, the *çarşaf* limits Hanne’s relationship with her friends gradually and sets certain boundaries, even if she does not think that she needs these boundaries. She describes the change as a radical one that reshaped her environment and relationships, sometimes beyond her own intentions. Her friends no longer treat her as their friend Hanne but as a *çarşaf* wearer; in doing so, they substitute the ideal and pure image of the garment for the individual’s character. Outside the *fanus*, *çarşaf* wearers experience the effects of *çarşaf* differently. Their individual characteristics and relationships become less visible, even with people they know well. They are often marked solely as *çarşaf* wearers.

After more than a decade after taking her *çarşaf* off, Nermin still vividly remembers a shocking encounter with a stranger in Turkey during the 1990s. This encounter marked her experience outside the “*fanus*”:

Wherever you go, everybody looks at you. It was not easy for me. I’ll never forget, once we were walking to the bus stop in Aksaray (an old, relatively modest neighborhood of Istanbul) with my cousin, when a man approached us, grabbed my cousin’s *çarşaf* and pulled it off. He was yelling: ‘How dare you wear this in these times? Who do you think you are?’ We were shocked. We had experienced verbal attacks and abuse many times, but this was first time that someone physically touched us. It was scary; I don’t know, maybe he was drunk. Anyways, when I left the *fanus*, I had some difficult times. It was also okay when I had been a *hoca* for six years, then I was back at my home. There
was always pressure (not only from outside but also from her relatives), and then I started to think about this, to wonder about the negative effects of experiencing such reactions from others. Would this change in time? These sorts of questions occupied me. As I told you, life inside the school and outside it are very different. You feel good at home but when you go outside it’s a challenge. I had very difficult times, and then I decided to buy a black overcoat and scarf.

Wearing çarşaf produces very mixed and contradictory feelings for the wearer: sometimes it is the source of self-confidence and pride, and sometimes it causes disappointment and embarrassment. It can trigger both admiration and harassment from others. Hanne also describes the different feelings that the çarşaf produces outside the fanus:

When I first put it on, I covered my face, as well as my hands with gloves. It covered me up to my eyebrows. I could hardly see below my eyes, it was difficult to walk; I bumped into walls that were shorter than me. It took a while to get used to. I was walking on the streets of city center, when I came across a mirror—I saw myself and said ‘Aaaa! (Surprise!)’ I used to walk down the middle of the most popular street of the city…as the edge of my headscarf fluttered, it felt as if I was waving the flag of the jihad.

There is no other tesettür garment that produces such strong and contradictory effects. Wearing this particular outdoor garment, to which many people react so negatively, can also empower its wearer. To some extent, it marks her visibility more than any other garment. Being marked in such a way stimulates a different sensorial, bodily and emotional state. The çarşaf mediates and transforms the relationship between the wearer and others; this effect is so strong that women often describe it metaphorically. Sometimes, the effect is depicted as the feeling a fish might have outside of its fishbowl, while at other time this effect is compared to the sensation of walking against the wind. The difficulties of standing out not only produce emotional effects; they also change the feeling and experience of the body itself.

Walking Against the Wind

My interlocutors often employed “rüzgar” (wind) as a metaphor to describe the difficulties that they experience as çarşaf wearers. As a metaphor, wind expresses the strong mediating quality of the çarşaf between the self and others. It also indicates the sensorial effect that wearing çarşaf causes. As the eldest of her sisters, Selcen is proud that she has been strong enough to continue to wear çarşaf and has thus become a source of inspiration for her younger sister. This sister also adopted çarşaf; Selcen describes her as a strong person: “The
wind does not shake her.” Selcen emphasizes that wearing çarşaf requires passion and strength, which are both necessary to walk against the wind:

Wearing çarşaf is like trying to walk against a strong wind or in a heavy storm. When you walk in çarşaf, you feel as if it limits your movements. You feel pressures and the judgments of others all the times. It protects you, you feel sheltered under it, as long as you have enough strength to love it. You walk against the wind.

The strong wind is a potent metaphor through which to reflect on the effects of the çarşaf on it wearer and the reactions of others to it. Women’s accounts reveal that çarşaf also illuminates how certain garments produce a sensual effect on their wearers. Hanne also refers to the metaphor of wind in order to describe her feelings when she first adopted çarşaf and went outside. She was somewhat upset when she told me this story because she no longer experiences this emotion. In other words, wearing çarşaf has gradually become an everyday routine for her. The various difficulties that she has faced as a çarşaf wearer have changed in their effects on her; moreover, she has found ways to deal with them. Hanne never thinks of taking her çarşaf off, even if there are other styles that she feels might be more pleasing now if she had adopted them before the çarşaf.
Haha! You should have seen my style, my shoulders were straight, I was strong and fast like the wind, oh my God, it was so different from the way it is now. It was not only about wearing çarşaf, it was more…well! It is no longer like that. Now it is a part of me, I cannot think of myself without it. There is no possibility for me other than the çarşaf.

Meryem is relatively more active and familiar with Dutch social settings than some of the other women I interviewed; she was born and received her education in the Netherlands. However, she does not work, and spends most of her time watching her two small children and organizing her household. Because of her children, she has to be active and social outside of her home. In contrast, other than her time spent with the community, Hanne lives a secluded life at home as a single woman. Her teaching schedule is very strict, and she has to travel from one city to another a few times a week to teach in other community mosques. She has a small old car, which was a gift from the community. Although she had a tough time obtaining a Dutch driving license, she now enjoys the comfort of travelling in her car. She loves her car because it allows her to minimize her encounters with others outside her community. In a sense, while her çarşaf makes her more visible, her car makes her less visible. Unlike Hanne, Meryem has a different impression and experience of the Dutch environment. Meryem enjoys riding her bike through the city, while Hanne avoids using public transportation and feels more comfortable in her private car. While Hanne prefers familiar stores for her shopping and grocery, Meryem tries out different stores, and she takes her kids to the public library or parks on her bike. As she would say, she feels “at home” in the Netherlands.

Hanne experiences the marked visibility of çarşaf more than Meryem. A Dutch language course is one of very few places where she meets people from outside the community. She knows that life outside the community would be very difficult for her:

If I were to spend time in (mainstream social) life, I would receive strong reactions to my outfit. I live an isolated life in the Netherlands; I do not have kids, so I don’t have a social life of that kind. I do not have a professional life either. My work is in and for our community, and I live an honored and privileged life in my community.

As we see above in Hanne’s account, she acknowledges the difficulties involved in wearing the çarşaf, but she does not give it up; however, these difficulties have caused her style to change. After moving to the Netherlands, Hanne gradually adopted a different style of çarşaf. She continues to change the degree of coverage of her cloak around her face as she travels back and forth between the Netherlands and Turkey. She also values her car, which
protects her from the prejudices and reactions of others—metaphorically speaking from the wind.

In Turkey, I cover my face up to the nose. It goes there (up to the nose) automatically (without me noticing). Here people do not mind; they do not look at you. Moreover, here (in the Netherlands) I am often in my car when I am outside. This is also comforting. I feel at home in my car, but in Turkey, on the buses and so forth, you are in social life…

For these reasons, Hanne keeps her face covered up to her nose. Hiding her face a bit more makes her feel more comfortable. There is a wider social network that might judge her negatively in Turkey, and her style attracts attention differently in Turkey than in the Netherlands, often in a more hostile manner. Hanne copes with the effects of çarşaf in Turkey by covering her face more thoroughly and making herself less recognizable. The more visible she becomes in social life and in mainstream circles (other than her network and community), the more difficult it becomes for her to manage the negative effects of the çarşaf. On the other hand, in the Netherlands Hanne feels more comfortable because her encounters with others are limited. Similarly, life is easier for any young, educated Turkish-Dutch woman in çarşaf as long as she remains in within non-professional life and networks. Unfortunately, this does not leave çarşaf wearers many career options, other than being a hoca. Willingly or not, wearing çarşaf limits certain encounters. At the same time, however, it constitutes new, more intimate circles for women, within which they live very busy lives.

Hanne portrays her life as distanced and isolated from mainstream social life. Her role as a çarşaflı hoca empowers her and grants her social status and recognition in a particular social circle, within which other women greatly respect her words and deeds. She thinks that it would be more challenging for her nefs to wear çarşaf if she led a different life. For her students, çarşaf creates limits on those who wear it in a way that enables them to actualize their desired selves. However, çarşaf also poses greater challenges than other forms of outdoor tesettür:

I was never hassled, I never felt embarrassed because of my çarşaf. Yet, I never insisted on çarşaf in my classes or in my sohbet groups to women attendees. Well, I look like a çarşaf wearer, that is how it looks from the outside. When I teach about tesettür, I do not even advise my students; they begin to think about wearing çarşaf because they are influenced by other sources, circles, and people. But this is not necessarily a good way to begin. The most important thing is that you stay within the limits of Islam, you live in a society, and you have a social life here. This will limit you. My social life is within Islam (in religious circles), and I am in my shell, so this is not an obstacle for me. Would I take my çarşaf off if it became an obstacle? No! Nobody should take it off, but çarşaf should not be a starting point either.
[There were people who took it off, right?] That’s true, they did. That is Islam; and this is tesettür…nefs, my dear, that is the nefs!

Hanne also has difficulty being outside the fanus. For her, the Turkish-Dutch religious communities constitute the fishbowl. In the Netherlands, it is relatively easier to deal with obstacles, because çarşaf wearers have a relatively limited social environment. Receiving a diploma in Turkey gives them credibility; they often achieve privileged positions as teachers.

While women struggle to walk against the wind, they also try to create a space for their individuality. This helps women manage the effects of çarşaf and enables them to give çarşaf a new status in the Dutch setting. Women wear different styles of çarşaf, and they customize çarşaf according to their personal tastes and needs, as well as different social contexts.

Figure 5 Different çarşaf styles, colors and patterns.

Contemporary çarşaf wearers try to articulate certain individual statements within the limits of the confined, fixed messages that the çarşaf seems to communicate to others.
Fashioning çarşaf in a creative, unique manner is one way for a woman to express her personal stance and to manage the effects of the çarşaf; the section below, “Love, Care and Çarşaf,” will explore this matter more in detail later. First, however, I offer a few more specific accounts of being a çarsaflı hoca in the Netherlands.

Being a Çarsaflı Hoca in the Netherlands

After receiving a diploma from a boarding school, women become eligible to work as teachers in the different Turkish religious communities. Most religious communities value them as well-trained, pious instructors. They are small in number, so their positions as teachers are quite prestigious. Because of their small numbers in the Netherlands, the çarşaf entails more responsibility and instills a relatively higher status to its wearers than it does in Turkey. At the same time, however, the number of Turkish-Dutch communities that explicitly desire not to be associated with çarşaf is increasing, as Islam becomes a more threatening and controversial subject in Dutch politics. Therefore, coping with the negative image of the çarşaf has become more challenging for çarşaf wearers in the Netherlands.

An increasing number of çarsaflı hocas have adopted other styles of tesettür (usually a combination of a long, loose-fitting overcoat with a headscarf) in the last decade. The reason for this change is not only the Dutch political climate, which is becoming increasingly hostile towards Muslims, but also the demanding expectations of women’s own networks, because people’s perception of the çarşaf as a sign of a higher level of commitment and spirituality is very difficult to cope with. It burdens the wearers with a great responsibility, as well as increasing their visibility in close circles. Generally, these women would hesitate to identify themselves with such responsibility, because they are aware of the weakness and difficulties that they have negotiated; they are therefore reluctant to take on the authority, knowledge and responsibilities that are expected of a çarsaflı hoca.

The association of the çarşaf with perfection, purity and devotion puts pressure on teachers because they are role models for their students. More specifically, it limits their ability to express their subjectivity as individuals. To some extent, the conspicuous image of the çarsaflı teacher erases both the individual strengths and weaknesses of the person in the eyes of others. In the accounts of young Turkish-Dutch women, the students of these hocas, the çarşaf was not considered to be a proper outfit; rather, it was seen as an obstacle to their
desired futures. Although most of them take for granted the notion that the çarşaf is the most devout and pure form of covering, they still cannot imagine themselves wearing it. The ability to wear the çarşaf indicates a higher commitment to living a pious life. Ideally, the çarşaf is a means to and symbol for the triumph of the inner self over worldly desires. With the decreasing number of çarşaf wearers, this ideal image has become even stronger. In the eyes of practicing young Muslim women, it is a garment that only teachers are fit to wear. Moreover, most of the Turkish-Dutch religious communities do not like to associate themselves with the çarşaf, even if they deeply respect çarşaf wearers. In their opinion, the çarşaf does not fit into Dutch public space, and they consider it to be a negative representation of Turkish-Dutch women.

As teachers, çarşaf wearers hesitate to promote çarşaf as an ideal form of outdoor tesettür. They give great value to modest, covering styles of tesettür and discuss the significance of outdoor tesettür with their students. Rather than promoting çarşaf as an ideal form of outdoor tesettür, they also explain the burden of the çarşaf. For instance, Hanne confessed that she would adopt an equally covering but different style of tesettür if she were to make her choice now. However, she would never consider giving the çarşaf up, as she feels that her çarşaf is a promise given both to God and to those people who questioned her strength when she first put on her çarşaf. Like other teachers whom I interviewed, she openly tells her students about the difficulties of çarşaf and mentions the possibility of wearing other, equally covering styles.

As a fashionable çarşaflı hoca, Şevval told me that she has become frustrated with idealization of the çarşaf as a pure and perfect marker of religious commitment within the tesettür scene. Beyond her visual appearance, a çarşaf wearer’s words and actions are also taken for granted as pious and spiritually fulfilling. After nearly twenty years wearing a çarşaf, Şevval explains how she feels limited in her çarşaf because of the expectations of others:

I am fed up with the meanings that people attribute to the çarşaf. They expect many things from you because you wear çarşaf. They want you to behave in a certain way, to be the person they imagine. [What do they want from you?] I told you, they think I lead the life of a nun, and they expect me to always be serious and spiritual. When I join a social gathering, they only want me to preach. That’s ridiculous. Everywhere I go, they immediately assume that I will talk about something religious. You cannot do that for twenty-four hours. I can talk about food and drink, too, and I can talk about furniture, clothing and fashion. I get so bored.
Figure 6 Şevval’s wardrobe: the inside of her wardrobe, including her favorite dress combined with a matching silk scarf for indoor use, her çarşaf patterned with polka-dots, and her dark red shoes and handbag, which match well with her dark blue çarşaf.

In a similar way, Hanne also complains about the image of the çarşaflı hoca, particularly in the Netherlands. In her early years in the Turkish-Dutch community, she had a difficult time, as some women from the community found her manners improper. They expected her to be a calm, serious person under her çarşaf. However, she kept surprising her students with her worldview and behavior. Her students like to spend time with her because she is a fun person. They feel very close to Hanne and discuss their problems with her, even if they know that she will not always agree with them. Hanne does not hesitate to talk about her weaknesses and mistakes in front of her students. From her perspective, she came to the Netherlands not because she already knows so much, but rather to learn together with her friends and students. Even if other members of her community criticize her, she continues to challenge the existing image of the teacher:

They say: ‘Aaa hocam!! Do you dance?’ Yes, I can dance, if you want me to… What is wrong with that? They think that I was teleported from somewhere in space. That is what they think when they see a practicing Muslim. They think that they cannot be like such a person. When I first came here, my students had a very strong image of what the hocas should be like: a hoca does not talk or
laugh, does not dance or have fun. Like a robot, she comes and sits with her head down and prays, with her rosary in her hands. This is the image of a hoca in their minds. They see that I play volleyball, I play football…when we go to the playground, I am the one who is ready for the most dangerous games. Everybody says ‘Aaa did you see the hoca?’ I was treated like an alien. I felt free to break that taboo. If it is not shameful for you to do these things, then it is not shameful for me, either. People think that they can do certain things, but the hoca cannot. That is absurd. There is not an extra part in Quran for me saying that some things are forbidden for hocas, but not forbidden for you!

The choice of çarşaf creates challenges and raises prejudices. In contrast to the privileged status as a committed person and ideal model that one achieves by wearing çarşaf, the çarşaf, due to its strong association with the İsmailağa community, can also be a hindrance in the process of being accepted by other religious communities. Şevval is still sympathetic to the İsmailağa community, even if she does not attend its meetings or regularly follow its teachings. Şevval’s account illustrates the difficulty of finding a place as a çarşaf wearer within the religious communities in the Netherlands:

Yes, I am attached to a specific community, but I am also on my own. I am an individual; I am open to everybody. I go to the Diyanet mosque, but I am open to all communities, and yet they do not want to embrace us because we are çarşaflı. There is always a prejudice. I can be everywhere, as long as I feel comfortable, but it takes long time for them to embrace us.

Şevval volunteered as a teacher for different Turkish religious communities in the Netherlands, including Milli Görüş and Diyanet. However, she has found these communities challenging and limited for a çarşaflı hoca. The Dutch government does not recognize her teaching certificate, which she received from a boarding school in Turkey. She seeks alternatives to continue her professional life as a teacher in the Netherlands. At the time of our interview, she was planning to apply to an Islamic Theology department in order to get a degree from a Dutch university. Only then will she be able to get what she calls a “real job” in the Netherlands.

Like other hocas in the Netherlands, Şevval is especially interested in obtaining a Dutch degree, because only such a degree will allow her to expand her opportunities and achieve a better status in a larger, more transnational network. With this degree, coping with the reactions of members of the Turkish religious communities to her çarşaf would be easier. Over the last few years, attending Arabic and religious classes at higher educational institutions has become very important for the hocas. While educated Dutch women continue their education in Dutch at universities, late-comers like Hanne try to improve their knowledge and skills at higher educational institutions. Beyond the general challenges of
being a çarşaf wearer, Şevval’s knowledge and status has also been challenged by the new generation of hocas with Islamic theology degrees.

Choosing the most strict, devout form of tesettür and dedicating most of their time to volunteer within religious circles no longer guarantee a çarşafi woman’s acceptance by the Turkish-Dutch community or in a wider public. Newly established hierarchies in this transnational field also require women to seek certification from secular Dutch institutions for their accreditation and status as teachers. Only with such certification are they able to expand their networks and, thereby, possibly carve out a new place for the çarşaf in the Turkish-Dutch religious community.

Love, Care and Çarşaf

Love is one of the most common themes in çarşaf stories. As I discussed throughout the previous sections, wearing çarşaf in modern, secular public space conspicuously marks the wearer and affects her sense of self and her relationships with others. These women not only have a strongly marked presence in public space, but also within their intimate networks. Wearing çarşaf requires the cultivation of a disciplined self so that women can keep their promise to be strong enough to wear çarşaf and “walk against the wind,” even outside their communities. This strength is crucial to living outside the metaphorical fanus. However, wearing çarşaf is not only about the chaste work of discipline; it is also about cultivating affection, intimacy and love for the garment itself. Merely “liking” (beğenmek) the çarşaf is insufficient; women need to invest love and care in their çarşaf in order to withstand the negative effects of wearing it and to cope with its privileged status. This, above all, distinguishes the çarşaf from other forms of outdoor tesettür.

The heightened visibility of the çarşaf affects not only the wearer, but her friends, family and relatives as well. In most contexts, the çarşaf is an object of disgust and threat; it therefore affects emotional relationships with others in the çarşaf wearer’s life. As I will explore below in more detail, wearing çarşaf becomes a very important issue in marriage arrangements. Friends, relatives and future husbands also need to have enough strength to embrace the presence of the çarşaf wearer. In order to be able to continue wearing çarşaf, women seek love and respect from others in their close environment. Women try to make their çarşaf more personal and intimate; by doing so, they transform an object of disdain and
distaste into a lovable object for others. The respect and support of loved ones and a çarşaf wearer’s intimate bond with the çarşaf itself are both crucial to dealing with the effects of the çarşaf’s visibility.

Figure 7 Accessories often combined with çarşaf from the women’s wardrobes: a poncho to wear over the çarşaf during winter, indoor scarves, jewelry, a pair of leather shoes, and bags.

Investing care and love in one’s çarşaf is also a way to highlight individual differences between oneself and other çarşaf wearers. Being meticulous and affectionate toward one’s çarşaf is very important, as Selcen’s account below illustrates. She pays great attention to her çarşaf, and she sincerely cares for her appearance because she is a çarşaf wearer. Because Selcen is sensitive to all of the negative effects that attend the marked visibility and cliché of the çarşaf, fashioning a personal style is particularly important to her:

People think of çarşaf as polluted, muddy and ugly in color. True, the black color fades quickly (from the sun); I don’t like this. I do not like perfume but I always wash my çarşaf with a nice-smelling detergent and softener so that it’s clean and sweet-smelling when I put it on. I have heard clichés about the
çarşaf since I was girl. People think about çarşaf negatively, they see it differently. They do everything they can to throw dirt at the çarşaf. When I wear my çarşaf, people in the town recognize that it is me. I match my shoes with my bag, I wear a ring in the same tone of color, and so on...my eyes are sensitive to the sun, so I wear sunglasses. When I walk outside like this, people say ‘Aaa...such a caring (gentle) çarşaflı woman!’

Clichés about the çarşaf, which Selcen mentions in the quote above, are not only expressions of disgust; some of these feelings also involve hatred. In contrast to the interpretation of çarşaf as a “simple” and “pure” form of outdoor tesettür, the majority perceives çarşaf as “extreme” and “polluting” because its presence undermines the idealized notion of modern, secular public space. By contrast, in women’s accounts the çarşaf is an object of love. Women relate to their çarşafs through an investment of love and care; the value of this love returns to the wearer, while the çarşaf achieves an individualized style.

The çarşaf produces such a strongly marked visibility that the wearer sometimes feels less visible as individual. In the midst of all of the negative and affirmative effects that çarşaf wearers deal with, the individual wearer herself may disappear. By converting and adjusting their çarşafs to best suit their personal understandings of comfort and taste, çarşaf wearers mark their personal distinction. By individualizing their çarşafs according to their personal style, women feel more comfortable and visible as a person, instead of being identified merely as a hoca or a member of particular religious community.

Love and care are the commonly repeated themes in contemporary accounts of the çarşaf. By talking about the çarşaf in terms of love, women find a new ground on which to establish an intimate and personal bond with their çarşafs. In this respect, the accounts of çarşaf wearers are quite different from the accounts of other tesettürlü women in this research; çarşaf wearers portrayed their tesettür as something that can only be worn with love.

My love for çarşaf started when I was only four years old, when I used to go to a mosque on the weekends. There were imams teaching in the mosques before, but there were no female hocas then. The imam at the mosque had daughters, who came here as ‘tourists’ in the beginning. When I first saw them, I adored them. They were çarşaflı. That is how my love for çarşaf started. That is how I fell in love with the çarşaf.

Advancement in one’s spiritual life nourishes one’s love and care for the çarşaf. Reciprocally, this love endows çarşaf wearers with the patience and strength necessary to manage the negative effects of çarşaf. Selcen’s love of çarşaf derives from her passion and strength in overcoming difficulties. She sees her çarşaf as an important aspect of her personality, and she receives compliments from people around her:
I always loved my çarşaf, I never stumbled. I never said ‘Aaa I wish I did not wear it, aaa I need to look beautiful to this or that person, my çarşaf is an obstacle.’ I didn’t hesitate about it for a moment. As I advanced in my spiritual life, I heard compliments from the people around me: ‘How happy you are, it is very nice that you do not allow your nefs to control you in such times.’

Through their words and deeds, women try to transform the negative effects of çarşaf on others. While tesettür wearers in general often repeat that they see their tesettür as a form of worship that they practice to please God, çarşaf wearers invest more love and care in their particular style of tesettür than the wearers of other styles do. Other pious women admire the strength of these women, even if they do not consider çarşaf comfortable or suitable to their own understanding of tesettür.

Although the çarşaf has been adapted to current fashion trends, the image of çarşaf as “traditional,” “ideal,” and “radical” distances wearers from the here-and-now, as if they do not belong in the present time. Friendships between çarşaf wearers and women who wear less covering or even non-tesettür styles surprise many people, as such relationships undermine the linear understanding of modernity, which predicts the complete disappearance of the çarşaf and religious dress in general. Selcen describes how much she enjoys being together with a friend who dresses very differently than she does. This friend is uncovered and often wears very attractive, fashionable outfits, but she nevertheless likes Selcen’s strongly-marked company:

You know what I like the most? I have a friend; she married and went to Sweden. I tell her often that I really like to walk with her arm in arm and I want to do this more often. People see that a woman in çarşaf and a fully uncovered (tamamıyla açık) woman can be together, they can be arm in arm. They can be genuine friends like any other two people.

Between parties of an arranged marriage, çarşaf often becomes an especially important matter to agree upon. Expecting respect and affection from others becomes particularly crucial when a possible marriage is on the table. Marriages bring two different families with different backgrounds together; these families do not necessarily share the same feelings and thoughts about the çarşaf. The attitudes of family-in-laws towards çarşaf may become a hindrance for the couple. Some families prefer not to have a çarşaf wearer as a daughter-in-law. Sometimes the young couple, and particularly the groom, has to deal with the groom’s family’s unwillingness and reservations. On the other hand, husbands may also prefer not to associate themselves with such a marked presence.

Even many practicing young Muslim men think that life with a çarşaf wearer would be difficult. During initial conversations about marriage, a young man might try to determine
whether his future wife will change her style of tesettür. As a thirty-six-year old single woman, Hanne wants to marry and start her own family in the Netherlands. However, it has been very difficult to find somebody who will accept her çarşaf. It would be easy if she was willing to marry with someone from the İsmailağa community, but she does not share their worldview. She finds it difficult to get along with members of the community; as she would say, “In their eyes, I am someone who has lost the way (of religion), in my eyes they are puritan (bağnaz).” Several attempts at arranged marriage failed at the very first encounter because of Hanne’s çarşaf. Even though candidates knew that she wore the çarşaf, they thought they could convince her to change her style. They tried to make sure that she would at least be willing to wear less austere and covered outfits.

In addition to her strong personality, many potential grooms find Hanne’s çarşaf very difficult to embrace. Finding the right candidate for marriage can be very difficult unless one limits oneself to certain communities with a particular, common understanding of tesettür. Wearing çarşaf has become a hindrance for other kinds of love in Hanne’s life:

Men are not comfortable with my outfit, especially Muslim men (that is to say, men from religious circles). For fanatics, my outfit is a guarantee. They take it
for granted. [What do you mean by fanatic?] Tarikat ehli, (pious men from Sufi orders), those who want to live precisely according to Islam. For them I am the only fish in the sea. I am attractive only because I wear proper tesettür. More intellectual men, those who have studied theology, those who know the tricks of tesettür, they ask: ‘Why don’t you cover differently? Why don’t you cover like other women?’…hearing this was usually difficult for my nefş. I immediately asked them, ‘Can you walk with me arm in arm? Am I someone that you can be proud of? Am I someone you can walk with?’

As we see in the case of çarşaf, fashioning one’s appearance in a conspicuous way is an important subject in marriage arrangements. The husband of a çarşaf wearer also needs to be prepared to face difficulties; others often perceive his masculinity as more “macho,” “oppressive,” and “authoritative.” These assumptions are part and parcel to the general perception of the çarşaf wearer as more oppressed and more submissive than the wearers of less covering, more colorful styles of tesettür.

Wearing çarşaf is not always hindrance to other forms of love and romantic relationships. The expectations that women have of their future husbands also play an important role. Meryem’s marriage and the role of çarşaf in her story are very different from Hanne’s experiences, which often ended with disappointment. Meryem’s husband is a young Turkish-Dutch man who was already searching for a çarşaflı bride when they first met. Meryem and Yusuf studied in the same college in the Netherlands. Their common friends introduced them, because they expected that Meryem and Yusuf would like each other’s modest appearance. They fell in love at first sight.

Meryem’s romantic story highlights different ideas about and principles of attraction between two pious young people. In this story, her husband attracts her attention with his beard, which he had grown according to the Sunnah (authoritative example) of the Prophet Muhammad, and his trousers, which were folded above his ankles (also according to the Sunnah). Meryem interpreted his beard as a sign of his detachment from worldly notions of beauty, and, therefore, as a reflection of his attachment to the other world. In their relationship, her çarşaf is an object of respect and admiration. Her husband reminds her very often that he felt in love with her when he saw her in her black çarşaf. They both see their respective appearances as a reflection of their inner selves.

I would not marry a man who does not follow the Quran and the Sunnah. I could not marry a standard man. When I first saw my husband, he had a shaved head, he wears baggy trousers and a robe; As I said before, he is handsome, too. Alhamdulillah (God be praised)! We saw each other when we passed each other in school. We liked each other at first sight. His beard attracted my attention. Then I noticed that his trousers were up to his ankles…
Meryem and her husband Yusuf know that they must support each other’s sartorial preferences, because they both wear garments that endow them with a strongly marked visibility in the Dutch setting.

Women will not necessarily break their promise to God and themselves simply because of their partner’s lack of respect and love for the çarşaf. To put it differently, a woman will not give up her çarşaf simply because it might affect her other love relationships. Both members of a couple must have enough strength to deal with the difficulties of such a heightened visibility. “Will you be able to love me with my çarşaf?” remains a crucial question at different stages of life. Although she is an ex-çarşaf wearer, Nermin wants to keep open the possibility that she might wear the çarşaf again in the future. Before accepting her marriage proposal, she explained to her future husband that she wore çarşaf for a long time and asked him to promise not to criticize her if she should decide to wear çarşaf again. She wanted to make sure that her husband would embrace her in çarşaf, too.

Women individualize çarşaf in terms of style, and they invest love and intimacy in their relationship with the çarşaf in order to create a personal bond with it. Even if investing love and care in the çarşaf is a form of idealization, it happens at a more individual level than other forms of idealization. Women are critical of the idealization of çarşaf as demonstrating higher level of religious commitment and as constituting a source of authority. They criticize some çarşaf wearers who let the çarşaf cover their weaknesses and personal traits. Şevval bluntly states that she does not want her çarşaf to conceal her individual qualities or her weaknesses:

The çarşaf should not repress your personality when you wear it, do you understand? Your çarşaf should not get ahead of you (ömine geçmemeli). Women not only adopt the çarşaf, they also take on a certain personality. I don’t know why, but they put pressure on people to acknowledge and respect them. People should love or respect me not because I am a çarşaf wearer, but because I am who I am.

Women distance themselves from the dominant, uniform image of çarşaf through their personal style and aesthetics. The more that their presence is marked, the more women become aware of the judgments of others, both negative and affirmative. In response, they try to mark their difference by investing love and care in the çarşaf.

In the contemporary tesettür scene, an increasing variety of colors (purple, green, navy, etc.) and subtle patterns have become available for çarşaf wearers. New technologies of tailoring such as the “laser cut” (lazer kesim) have affected çarşaf style by introducing plain
yet ornamented edges around the sleeves. For evening parties, çarşaf are produced from shiny fabrics and decorated with Swarovski stones. Fashionable styles of çarşaf have continued to develop, even as the çarşaf has become an increasingly marginal form of outdoor clothing in the Turkish tesettür scene. New, fashionable styles of çarşaf quickly enter the wardrobes of çarşaf wearers in the Netherlands. While it still cannot fully compete with other fashionable tesettür styles, the çarşaf is no longer a matter of uniformity.

As the metaphors of fanus (the fishbowl) and rüzgar (wind) illustrate, the effects of the çarşaf are different than those of other, equally covering outdoor tesettür styles in the Turkish-Dutch tesettür scene. By investing in them with love and care, women turn their çarşaf into lovable objects for others as well. Friends, families, and future husbands should also contribute to this investment, as they also experience the effects of the conspicuous presence of a çarşaf wearer in their lives. The çarşaf strongly marks the wearer and often produces negative and contradictory effects on both the wearer and on others. In order to bear and deal with these difficulties, it is insufficient merely to “like” the çarşaf; women must invest love and labor in their çarşaf and individualize them in order to nourish the strength and patience necessary to living as a çarşaf wearer. The accounts of the women who participated in my research illustrate that love and care become important means that empower women to deal with both the negative effects and privileged status of the çarşaf.