

**IBN HALDUN UNIVERSITY
ALLIANCE OF CIVILIZATIONS INSTITUTE
DEPARTMENT OF CIVILIZATION STUDIES**

MASTER THESIS

**AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF WOMEN'S
INVOLVEMENT IN NEW AGE SPIRITUALITY IN
TURKEY**

FATEMAH MASHAEL

THESIS SUPERVISOR: DR. ÖNDER KÜÇÜKURAL

ISTANBUL, 2020

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by

FATEMAH MASHAEL

**A thesis submitted to the Alliance of Civilizations Institute in partial
fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of
Civilization Studies**

THESIS SUPERVISOR: DR. ÖNDER KÜÇÜKURAL

ISTANBUL, 2020

ONAY SAYFASI

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İmza:

ÖZ

TÜRKİYE’DE KADINLARIN YENİ ÇAĞ SPİRİTÜELLİĞİNE KATILIMI ÜZERİNE BİR ARAŞTIRMA ÇALIŞMASI

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Yeni çağ spiritüelliğine ve özellikle bu akımlarda karşılaştığımız cinsiyetler arası uçurum bir çok araştırmacının ilgisini çekmektedir. Bu çalışma bu fenomen içerisindeki kadın hakimiyetinin dinamiklerini daha detaylı araştırma ve açıklama çabasının girişimiyle ortaya çıkmıştır. Türkiye’de kadınlar spiritüel arayışların bütünlükçü ortamında (*holistic milieu*) (Heelas ve Woodhead, 2005) erkekleri sayıca geride bırakmakta ve hem katılımcı hem de uygulayıcı olarak son derece aktif bir pozisyonda bulunmaktadır. Yapılan yarı yapılandırılmış derinlemesine görüşmelere ve katılımcı gözlemlere göre bu çalışma, ‘Yeni Çağ’ spiritüelliğinin yeni bir kültür, arayış ve hatta bir emek pazarı olarak kadınlara imkan ve tecrübe tanıdığını göstermektedir. Bu imkan ve tecrübeler onları ‘içsel olarak’ özgürleştirmekte ve güçlendirmektedir. Bu tez aynı zamanda Yeni Çağ spiritüelliğinin ‘eril’ ve ‘organize olmuş’ dinlerin tersine ‘dişil’ ve ‘doğaçlanmış’ bir dinselliğin tezahürü olduğunu ileri sürmektedir. Yeni Çağ Spiritüelliği kadınların ifade tercihlerine ve modlarına uygun düşen bir dişil spiritüellik olmasının yanı sıra kadınların öznel spiritüel tecrübelerine de öncelik tanımaktadır. Yeni Çağ spiritüelliği dişil değerlere ve niteliklere öncelik veren ataerkillik sonrası (*post-patriarchal*) bir paradigmadır. Bu bakış açısıyla tezim hem kadınların Yeni Çağ spiritüelliğiyle olan tecrübeleri konusundaki anlayışımıza hem de bir bütün olarak Yeni Çağ spiritüelliği hakkındaki bakış açımıza katkıda bulunmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Dişil, Dişil Spiritüelliği, İçsel olarak güçlenme, Kadın deneyimleri, Türkiye, Yeni Çağ Spiritüelliği

ABSTRACT

AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF WOMEN'S INVOLVEMENT IN NEW AGE SPIRITUALITY IN TURKEY

Mashaël, Fatemah

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Increasing attention is being paid generally to New Age spirituality and precisely to the gender gap that exists within it. This study attempts to explore and explain further the dynamics behind the preponderance of women within this phenomenon. In Turkey, women outnumber men in the 'holistic milieu' (Heelas and Woodhead, 2005) and are highly active both as participants and as practitioners. Based on interviews and participant observation the study shows that 'New Age' as a culture, a spirituality and even as a labour market provides women with experiences and opportunities which liberate and 'innerly' empower them. This thesis also claims that New Age spirituality is a manifestation of a 'feminine' 'improvised' religiosity which contrasts with 'masculine' 'organized' religions. New Age spirituality is a feminine spirituality which fits women's preferences and modes of expression while also giving primacy to their subjective spiritual experiences. It is a post-patriarchal paradigm which gives precedence to feminine values and qualities. Through this perspective my thesis not only contributes to our understanding of women's experiences in New Age spirituality but also to our perspective on New Age spirituality as a whole.

Keywords: Feminine Spirituality, Inner-Empowerment, New Age spirituality, Turkey, The Feminine, Women Experiences

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Fatemah Mashael
Istanbul, 2020

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LIST OF INTERVIEWEES

Date of Interview	Nickname	Age	Occupation	Based in
2nd May 2019	Canan	40	Massage Therapist and Bones for Life Practitioner	Muğla
4th May 2019	Dicle	52	Transformational Breathing Therapist	Antalya
14th May 2019	Duygu	42	Gong and Sound healing Practitioner and Skinner Releasing Technique Practitioner	Antalya
13th June 2019	Havva	33	Shamanistic Healer	Istanbul
24th June 2019	Feride	45	Writer and Circle Facilitator, Woman Circle Host	Muğla
28th June 2019	Sevgi	37	Practicing Psychotherapist, Art Therapist and Circle Facilitator	Muğla
30th July	Nazlı	34	Sound Healing Therapist	Istanbul
9th August - 18th October 2010	Selin	30	Writer, Translator and Circle Facilitator	Istanbul
18th September 2019	Sezin	42	Somatic Experiencing Practitioner and Woman Circle Facilitator	Izmir
8th October 2019	Merve	48	Meditation Teacher, Sound Healing Practitioner	Nevşehir
20th October 2019	Mehtap	39	Writer and Woman Circle Facilitator	Istanbul
23rd October 2019	Irem	42	Yoga Instructor and Woman only Retreat Organizer	Muğla

INTRODUCTION

Motivation and Standpoint

I have a vivid memory of the day my mother decidedly declared to us that she will no longer buy dairy products, white flour, and white sugar nor let soft drinks enter through our door. She was going to change our whole diet from refined, processed and genetically modified to whole, organic and balanced. We were going to eat Macrobiotics. This was all because she had been watching Mariam Nour¹. Mariam Nour is the woman who has made available and accessible a good portion of 'New Age' practices and teachings to the Arab world. Despite being harshly criticized for all the 'heretical' content she shared on TV my mother did not buy into all the criticism and brought the world of Mariam Nour into ours. Amongst many things, Mariam Nour followed a Japanese diet called Macrobiotics. One thing she never tired from repeating on her show is a three word statement "Body. Mind. Soul". To reach the state of a balanced mind and a peaceful soul we had to start with cleansing and respecting our body. At the time, seventeen years old and graduating school I struggled due to some health issues both physically and psychologically and out of mere curiosity I spent time discovering Macrobiotics. Let's say it was my first encounter with New Age culture despite not having any awareness of this phenomenon at the time. What I did is that I was translating to my mother, from English to Arabic, an essential book on Macrobiotics called *The Cure is in The Kitchen*² since she was not going to find a cure elsewhere, definitely not in traditional medicine. Aside from this diet being quasi vegan and not allowing any consumption of refined foods, I learned that foods have an energy type one that is *yin* and the other *yang* and that a balanced meal of these two energies balances out the body and heals it of all "dis-ease".

With my mother, not only have we healed our physical issues but we also experienced the influence on our mental, emotional and even spiritual state. From that point onwards, my mother and I delved into the sea of New Age alternative practices to fulfil

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mariam_Nour

² Sherry A. Rogers (1991), *The Cure is in the Kitchen*, Prestige Pubs

a variety of needs and in order to reach a better understanding of our own bodies, minds and emotions. Our first experience was motivated purely by a desire to improve our health and ended up transforming our entire perception of health and nutrition from one that is limited and flat to one that is *holistic*.

Having been brought up in the cosmopolitan city of Abu Dhabi, I grew up interacting and coexisting with people from different countries and cultures. Many of the so-called 'new age' teachings and practices were already present in town and surprisingly enough not so far from where I lived. A popular Indian New Age movement called Art of Living³ was hosting its courses and activities next door. At the time, being taken over by an overwhelming depression, it took only a flyer advertising a 'Happiness Course' to turn my life around. It was a one week long course which was open only for women. There we learned a breathing technique called *Sudarshan Kriya*⁴ which was described by our teacher in the course as an 'inner bath'. The purpose of the course was for us to learn this powerful technique, to learn meditation and yoga and to familiarize ourselves with the wisdom of Sri Sri, the 'holy master' whose picture was kept hung on the wall and was decorated with jasmine flowers. In harmony with his teachings about oneness, unconditional love and giving, we were invited to take part in a series of activities that would bring us the closest possible to experiencing these values. One activity that had such a strong impact on me was when we were asked to split into partners, sit down comfortably facing each other and gaze meditatively into each other's eyes until the predetermined time was up. I partnered up with an Indian Hindu woman with whom I did not make so much contact throughout the course.

The practice was accompanied with meditation music and with the voice of our teacher guiding us through the experience. In that moment of looking deep into her eyes I have experienced a glimpse of what I believed to be *oneness* with others. I looked into her eyes and I was able to see her as she is without all the labels, prejudices and ideas that my mind was sketching about her. In that moment, we were both human beings beyond

³ It is an Indian organization founded in 1981 by humanitarian and spiritual leader Sri Sri Ravi Shankar. Official website: <https://www.artofliving.org/global/home>

⁴ Sudarshan Kriya incorporates specific natural rhythms of the breath which harmonize the body, mind and emotions. This unique breathing technique eliminates stress, fatigue and negative emotions such as anger, frustration and depression, leaving you calm yet energized, focused yet relaxed. <https://www.artofliving.org/tr-en/what-sudarshan-kriya>.

our social roles and identities and beyond the differences that create separation. In my experience I believed what tied us together was this immanent divine presence that flows through us. As I shared my experience with the group afterwards, I was moved to tears. Every single woman in the group was moved by this intense practice. This is only one example of all the retreats, workshops and events during which such collective experiences of connection take place and during which the participant is encouraged to treat other participants from his or her heart, to trust, love and honor the other beyond social identifications. This experience as well as many others that followed had a considerable impact on my relationship with myself and others and on my entire experience of spirituality. In the following years my journey into New Age spirituality intensified as I delved further into New Age reads and practices. I read through the popular teachings and works of Carlos Castaneda, Osho, Caroline Myss, Eckhart Tolle, Wayne Dyer and Esther Hicks.

I believe sharing my personal experiences in New Age spirituality is crucial to bringing awareness to the relevance and impact of this phenomenon on individuals. As a researcher who has fully experienced it from within this has influenced my approach to the topic. Had I not undergone an experience with New Age spirituality myself, it would have been impossible for me to approach the experiences of the many women I met in Turkey. As I started researching women's stories I came to the realization that I ended up studying my own experience as well. This realization fueled the engine of this exploratory qualitative study and made it possible.

The Subject Matter and Core Arguments

The aim of this exploratory study is approaching women's involvement in New Age spirituality through the examples of women who are in spiritual seeking that I encountered in Turkey. It attempts to explore and explain further the dynamics behind the preponderance of women within this phenomenon and show that the 'feminine' nature of the phenomenon of New Age spirituality particularly resonates with and appeals to a woman's experience of spirituality.

In *Sociology of Spirituality* British sociologists Kieran Flanagan and Peter C. Jupp (2007) identified three characteristics of contemporary spirituality. It is perceived primarily as a force, secondly as a source of self-empowerment and expressiveness and finally as a spirituality that is democratized and available to all. Approached from the standpoint of gender, a woman's first steps into New Age spirituality can be imagined as an act of leaving behind the common traditional and patriarchal ways of thinking, believing and being in society. This leaving should not be understood as an act of rebellion or bitter rejection but as an entering into a new paradigm which contrasts the old one. For instance, this leaving is exemplified by the act of leaving the father's house, quitting a mainstream corporate job, renouncing on traditional heroic medicine in favor of an alternative holistic approach to health, and of choosing to believe freely beyond organized structures. Indeed, this 'new' spirituality offers women what is arguably lacking in 'traditional' organized religions. New Age as a culture, a spirituality and even as a labor market provides women with experiences and opportunities which liberate and 'innerly' empower them in ways that common culture, organized religions and corporate jobs would not. Accordingly, I argue that this paradigm shift in women's worldview proves that New Age spirituality is a woman-friendly spirituality which fits and values women's preferences and modes of expression while also giving primacy to their subjective spiritual experiences. It is a post-patriarchal paradigm which gives precedence to feminine values and qualities.

'Experience' is a defining feature of New Age spirituality and it lies at its heart. As a source of self-empowerment and expressiveness, it gives primacy to experiences and the expression of them. The notion of 'inner-authority' is part and parcel of the 'subjective' experience which highly characterizes a feminine approach to spirituality and which takes part in the packaged ideas within New Age spirituality. Both the notions of 'self-empowerment' and 'inner-authority' which women claim to have are notions that propose a new understanding of empowerment which goes beyond feminism. Women's involvement in this new spirituality marks in a way a feminine preference for spontaneity over structure, the inner over the outer, the horizontal over the vertical and the feminine over the masculine (Sointu and Woodhead, 2008: 273; Houtman and Aupers, 2008:112; Keshet and Simchai, 2014: 81).

New Age spirituality is often regarded as a ‘transient feature of culture’ (Trzebiatowska and Bruce, 2012: 69) which is incapable of facing and transforming the tragedies of our modern culture and society. However, looked at from an ‘organic’ perspective, as a phenomenon it marks a cultural shift. Georg Simmel, in his writings on religion, has foreseen that the structure and the form of religion would dissolve in favor of a subjective religiosity without object (McCole, 2005: 34). New Age spirituality is a manifestation of this new subjective religiosity. It is the content surviving without the form and the feminine without the masculine. In conjunction with this theory, in New Age spiritual teachings, this shift has been theorized to be the outcome of a cosmic energetic shift from the masculine energy to the feminine energy; one that announces the perpetual rise of feminine consciousness and the return of the ‘feminine’. Consequently, the ultimate observation is that the New Age is a feminine age and the new spirituality is a feminine spirituality of which the practices resonate with women’s feminine sensibilities. Thus, it appeals and attracts the attention of more women than men and fits women’s gender experience of spirituality more intensely than men.

My research topic was stimulated by the literature on New Age spirituality and the way a study of its dynamics and characteristics could pave the way to a more profound understanding of women’s involvement in it. My study will be an exploration of the aforementioned observations. I will investigate women’s engagement in New Age practices by making use of the accounts of women that I have encountered during my field work in Turkey.

In this thesis, I will shed light on the interplay between gender and spirituality by exploring the gender gap within New Age spirituality. By providing an array of examples from interviews, I will explore the various ways New Age spirituality has appealed to women by fulfilling certain needs in women’s lives. The examples will clarify how their involvement marks a paradigm shift in their worldview which has brought them a sense of self-empowerment that was the outcome of an experience of healing, of an acquired sense of agency in the ‘holistic milieu’, and of a transformed post-patriarchal femininity which is both expressive and relational. I will subsequently show New Age spirituality’s appeal to women through its emphasis on ‘experience’

and 'inner-authority'. These notions appeal much more to a woman's experience of spirituality. I will broaden our view on New Age spirituality by exploring how it could be the manifestation of a feminine spirituality which propagates feminine values and inspires women to redefine femininity beyond patriarchal modes of thinking. I will also show, based on the accounts of the women in Turkey, how the emergence of New Age spirituality and its high appeal to women is believed to be linked to a cosmic energetic shift from the masculine to the feminine energy. A deep analysis of my interlocutors' discourses will reveal how the narrative of 'the feminine' within New Age has equipped women with essentialist assumptions that served strategically in their personal transformation and empowerment.

Research Questions and Theoretical Framework

The main research question that started the engine of this exploratory study and that has been with me ever since I became involved myself, as a woman, in New Age spirituality, is: why more women? This same question kept coming up during my field work as I participated in New Age retreats and workshops around Turkey. Why are women outnumbering men? And what is the appeal New Age spirituality has on women? Put differently, what makes New Age spirituality a woman-friendly spirituality? Further reflection on these questions has engendered many questions touching upon the link between spirituality and gender. What does it offer that traditional religions today cannot directly provide? What are the different ways New Age spirituality responds to the physical, psychological and spiritual needs of women? How does it foster in them a sense of self-empowerment and transform their worldview?

At some point, I decided to look at the nature of New Age spirituality, what are the core ideas at its center which speak to a woman's experience of spirituality more than it does to a man? Ultimately, as I delved into the literature on New Age spirituality I noticed a consensus over the fact that it is a 'diffuse' 'holistic' and 'fuzzy' spirituality. What struck me is that, in a book about the 'Return of the Feminine', I had found synonymous adjectives used to describe the 'feminine' consciousness or a 'feminine' approach to the sacred. The research question that emerged from there was: To what extent can we consider New Age spirituality to be a feminine spirituality? How does

the lean towards subjective religiosity and spirituality constitute the lean towards a feminine spirituality?

An exploratory approach towards answering these questions has informed the contents of this thesis. I attempted to find answers to these questions by studying the inner dynamics of my participants' words and experiences in New Age spirituality. The testimonies that I collected, despite being limited to a few women, have provided insight into the world of New Age spirituality and women's experience in it.

Before delving into my theoretical framework, I would like to bring my reader's awareness to the complexity of the phenomenon at hand. We live in a very distinctive era in the history of spirituality, one can neither simply give a conclusive totalizing definition of what spirituality is, nor grasp its multiple facets and dimensions through the lens of one theory (Flanagan and Jupp, 2007: 10) The issue here is not the lack of definitions and theorizations but the proliferation of them (Bender, 2010: 5). In my study I have exceedingly benefited from the literature on contemporary spirituality. Within it, there is a multitude, not only of definitions, but also of labels, approaches, theorizations and various studies all of which are attempting to make sense of the fuzzy notion of spirituality and its practice. I have made use of these contributions in my research by assembling a bricolage of approaches which I found crucial for exploring and analyzing the data I have collected. For Chapter 1, Kieran Flanagan and Peter C. Jupp's *Sociology of Spirituality* has proven very instructive for this study. It contains a wealth of knowledge and contributions which helped in making sense of the complex phenomenon of New Age spirituality. As well as the contributions of British sociologist Paul Heelas on New Age spiritualities (Heelas, 1998; 2005; 2008). The contributions of Linda Woodhead, Eva Sointu, Catherine Keller and Chia Longman amongst others have informed my observations on the topic of gender and spirituality. My perspective on feminine spirituality in Chapter 2 has been shaped by David Ray Griffin's *Spirituality and Society: Postmodern Visions*. The way postmodern spirituality is envisioned in this book by various postmodern thinkers has informed my perspective on the feminine nature of contemporary spirituality. Equally Ivan Varga's analysis of the phenomenon through Georg Simmel's writings on subjective religiosity has further informed my perspective. Along with these works, works of sociologists

and feminists as well as popular authors such as Llewellyn Vaughen Lee, Marianna Krull, Karlyn Crowley and Clarissa Pinkola Estes amongst many others have contributed to my study.

‘New Age’ Spirituality

“much like religion or experience, spirituality is bedeviled not by a lack of definitions but by an almost endless proliferation of them” (Bender, 2010: 5)

New Age spirituality is a polyvalent term which should not be defined as a homogenous entity at all. In other words it could not be viewed as a movement. New Age is a diffuse and fuzzy phenomenon which has been called anything from ‘alternative’ to ‘holistic’ and has been associated with psychotherapeutic change, wellbeing and health, and spiritual growth amongst many things. (Sutcliffe, 2003: 1-10). ‘New Age’ as a construct changes meaning according to individuals and it is no longer tightly linked to religion. My decision to opt for this term was for the simple fact that it carries within it the totality of packaged ideas that are associated with contemporary spirituality such as the individual spiritual quest, the need for healing and interconnectedness (Bowman, 1999: 182). In the following chapters I have used the term ‘New Age’ interchangeably with ‘contemporary’ as well as ‘alternative’ spirituality. While ‘New Age’ remains the most popular way of referring to this era’s particular approach to spirituality, in the literature, the phenomenon has had different appellations that aim at pointing out its most distinct character of being diffuse and de-institutionalized. For instance, Christopher Patridge in *The Reenchantment of the West* (2005) has coined the term ‘Occulture’ to “include a vast spectrum of beliefs and practices sourced by Eastern spirituality, Paganism, Spiritualism, Theosophy, alternative science and medicine, popular psychology, and a range of beliefs emanating out of a general interest in the paranormal.” (p. 4) Similarly, Robert. C Fuller, in his study of New Age spirituality in the United States, referred to it as ‘unchurched religion’. (Fuller, 2001). Religion is being decomposed in favor of a formation of “bricolages”. Practices of bricolage are those that include a multitude of beliefs and practices coming together to address psychical, psychological and spiritual needs of individuals. (Garnoussi, 2013: 63-64) This notion of ‘bricolage’ implies a

profound change in the nature and even function of religion in today's modern society. New Age spirituality addresses not only the seeker's quest for meaning but also for healing. The potential to heal increases through the exploration of all so called alternative wellbeing practices and resources available on the 'spiritual marketplace' (Van Hove, 1999). Such practices, according to Garnoussi, are slipping from the domain of religion to that of psychology. The phenomenon of 'bricolage' emphasized by Garnoussi is a natural consequence of the globalized spiritual commodification which offers the seeker an abundance of beliefs and practices to adopt from (Garnoussi, 2013: 63). The notion of the 'self'. The self which faces the complexities, difficulties and challenges of modern life is in need of cures and solutions to find better modes of living and being (Rose, 1999: 219). According to Rose, the preoccupation with the self in modern times is due to a feeling of helplessness and insecurity of individuals in industrial capitalistic societies. The lack of a 'positive culture' and of a collective positive community leaves individuals with a sense of overwhelming insecurity which makes the turn towards the self a natural outcome. He argues that "therapy is a method of learning how to endure the loneliness of a culture without faith" (Rose, 1999: 220). Moreover, modern individuals' modes of conduct are influenced by the consumerist ethic which grants them the freedom to make their own choices among available alternatives in the sea of markets. They make their own choices freely within New Age culture and are not restricted by religious obligation (Rose, 1999: 231).

One of the packaged ideas of New Age spirituality is the idea of seeking or questing. A spiritual seeker is one that embarks on a spiritual journey, whether intentionally or not, in search of meaning, purpose or healing. The spiritual seeker journeys outside organized religions and certainly has no confidence in the latter's capacity to fulfil his or her needs. (Flanagan and Jupp, 2007: 6).

New Age seekers do not view religion as a fixed thing and their religious beliefs are constantly subject to change (Fuller, 2001: 7). This polarization exists not only in the minds of the spiritual seeker but also in the academic literature. There exists a schism between the conception of religion and that of spirituality (Hill et al, 2000: 58). It is a polarization which puts religion in a negative light and spirituality in a positive one.

The spiritual seeker, in the case of this study, a woman, would simply opt for a life of journeying, of spiritual experiences and of endless freedoms beyond dogmatized religions. New Age spirituality appeals to her in ways that organized religions cannot.

Women's Involvement

When speaking of spiritual seekers, of New Agers and generally of individuals who participate in New Age practices and culture, the gender which is highly present both as participant and practitioner is the female gender. Women more than men are appealed by the realm of the 'alternative' and by the experience of 'inner-spirituality' (Heelas, 1998: 257). British sociologists Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead, after having conducted research in the city of Kendal to explore the phenomenon of holistic spirituality, they found that more than 80 per cent of participants were female. (Woodhead in Flanagan and Jupp 2007: 115) Similarly, the most recent research project on spiritual searching in Turkey has proved that more women show interest in alternative spirituality than men⁵. Having worked in this initiative myself, I noticed that women outnumbered men in all the retreats and workshops that I attended and were active both as participants and practitioners. According to Fuller, women that are involved in New Age spirituality are more likely than other women "to have a college education, to belong to a white-collar profession, to be liberal in their political views and to have parents who are secular" (Fuller, 2001: 7). This description applies, more or less, to the cases of the women I encountered in Turkey many of whom are middle to upper class women who are well-educated and have liberal political views. Yet in Turkey there are women who have religiously conservative parents and others who have secular parents.

Many scholars have contributed with various theorizations about this puzzling gender gap and about the centrality of gender in the study of spirituality (Rose 2001, Sointu and Woodhead 2008, Trzebiatowska and Bruce 2012, Keshet and Simchai 2014). New Age spirituality, according to American sociologist Nancy Ammerman, liberates women in the way it is perceived as a "reasonably positive and generic category and

⁵ TÜBİTAK: Spiritual Searching in Turkey. *Türkiye'de Spiritüel Arayışlar*

one that each individual can fill with the content of her own choosing”. Spirituality is perceived as a “boundary maintaining device and a source of legitimacy” in opposition to religion and its institutions to which a bag of implausible beliefs are equated (Ammerman, 2013: 51). This new spirituality indeed appeals to both women abroad and in Turkey and is “increasingly treated as a force, a resource of self-empowerment and expressiveness, democratized and available to all.” (Flanagan and Jupp, 2007: 6). More precisely, within New Age culture, women can find a variety of feminist spiritual teachings and practices that uniquely empower women and women’s bodies based on a process of reimagining the divine as ‘feminine’. Feminism is closely tied with New Age culture since it has actively encouraged people back in the 1970s “to explore alternative religious philosophies, especially worship of the goddess” (Fuller, 2001: 95). Both the notions of ‘self-empowerment’ and ‘inner-authority’ which women claim to have are notions that bring into question feminist ideals. Yet, in the context of New Age spirituality, these notions take on an alternative interpretation beyond the social, political and economic arenas where feminists engage in the fight for gender equality. The women of this study speak of an empowerment that is ‘inner’ from within the self and not from an external source such as society, a corporation, or an institution. This notion of ‘self-empowerment’ as well as ‘inner-authority’ is derived from my fieldwork and is entirely different from the notion of empowerment within popular feminist discourse. My thesis does not explore women’s involvement from a feminist perspective since my own participants did not want to identify with feminism or be associated with it as a movement. For the majority of them, they associated feminism with activism and were prone to think of it as a conflict-oriented ideology (Swirsky & Angelone, 2014). Despite this, I did come to understand that they had within their beliefs a set of ideals originating from feminist spirituality. More specifically, ideals which value more personal self-empowerment and less radical social activism.

While the experience of ‘self-empowerment’ for women takes place in the socialization of the self which is central to New Age culture, women are further empowered through practices and rituals which call for reimagining of religious symbols, myths and God-concepts; a reimagining which serves the purpose of valuing and venerating all femininity and feminine values in women.

Eva Sointu and Linda Woodhead in *Spirituality, Gender, and Expressive Selfhood* (2008) have studied the way holistic spirituality can bring about a new 'expressive selfhood' in women's lives. A self that is valued, that is authentic and true. In New Age circles, the self is always encouraged to express itself, to love itself and to trust itself. This concept of expressivism and of 'self-spirituality' is an emancipatory concept which draws in many women "who have struggled to have a self all along" (Crowley, 2011: 3). Along with the expressive selfhood women enjoy a sense of relational selfhood within the holistic milieu (Heelas and Woodhead, 2005). This relational selfhood legitimizes traditional femininity yet subverts it at the same time. For instance, women are seeking to be involved as participants who benefit from the multitude of subjective well-being healing practices emphasizing by such involvement the notion of 'caring for the self' which is a subversion of traditional femininity. Equally, they are involved as active practitioners who aspire to practice what Woodhead calls 'relational care' by offering healing services in the form of 'caring for others' which is a legitimation. Both forms of caring are strongly linked to the traditional notion of femininity. Stuart Rose, in *New Age women: Spearheading the Movement?* (2001), reports in the words of one of her participants that what is happening is a "resurgence of the female principles of caring/nurturing". Indeed, women are finding alternative, more empowering and financially rewarding ways of playing this "feminine" role of both caring for others and more importantly caring for the self (Rose 2001, Sointu and Woodhead 2008). The opportunities the holistic milieu offers in terms of work also appeals to women. It offers "women empowerment lacking in more traditional, patriarchal, and institutionalized religious traditions" (Longman, 2018:3). It is also argued that a strong sense of individuality and empowerment can be the result of not only consuming but working in the holistic milieu where women can work freely and with more agency (Taylor, 2010: 458). Women are leaving mainstream full-time jobs in the corporate world to engage professionally in the holistic milieu.

The literature presents us with various reasons that explain the gender gap and the great appeal New Age spirituality has to women. However, some theorizations downplay all the previous ones. Steve Bruce and Marta Trzebiatowska in *Why Women are more Religious than Men?* (2012) argued, "one simple explanation of the gender gap is that

much New Age activity is promoted by women who aim to recruit other women to pursue what are explicitly presented as women's interests." (Trzebiatowska and Bruce, 2012:71). The analysis of this complex multi-faceted phenomenon through a capitalistic market-based approach reduces all New Age activities to commodities, to 'promoting', 'recruiting' and 'interests'. The end result is for the final observation to be "interest in holistic spirituality is a fashion" (Trzebiatowska and Bruce, 2012: 69). In *Eat, Pray, Love: Producing the Female Neoliberal Spiritual Subject* (2011) Ruth Williams argued that in the New Age culture the neoliberal spiritual subject is most encouraged to do "for herself" is to pursue spiritual enlightenment via consumer practices. (Williams, 2011:616). New Age spirituality is undeniably a market-based spirituality where all wisdom circulates in the global spiritual market, however, the 'reduction to consumption' thesis widely used to interpret the phenomenon makes it impossible to view it as a new form of spirituality which can transform our world (King, 2011). This either/or approach to the phenomenon in the literature leads to the question: is New Age spirituality a transient feature of culture serving capitalism (Trzebiatowska and Bruce, 2012: 69) or a transformed consciousness which transcends the materialism and objectivism of the modern world?

New Age Spirituality: A Feminine Phenomenon?

Contemporary spirituality expresses various features of postmodernity. David Ray Griffin in *Spirituality and Society: Postmodern Visions* (1988), in contrast with modern spirituality, has spoken of a postmodern spirituality that is diffuse and improvised rather than concentrated and organized. It is also a spirituality which focuses on the notions of organicism and holism while also going beyond dualism and materialism. Griffin highlights the features of postmodern spirituality by its opposite. While modern spirituality is "one-sidedly masculine" which rejects the feminine side to divinity, postmodern spirituality embraces it. (Griffin, 1988: 8-15). Georg Simmel 1858–1918, has underlined the fact that structured objective religion will give way to 'subjective religiosity'. That religion will survive in unprecedented form. The form will dissolve while the content will remain. For Simmel, "the perpetuity of religion is guaranteed by its grounding in the structure of interpersonal relations, though now it must survive in a new form, as a purely subjective religiosity without object" (McCole,

2005: 34). Ivan Varga by basing himself on Simmel's theory has attempted to elucidate the phenomenon of New Age spirituality. A Simmelian perspective proposes that New Age spirituality exemplifies a cultural shift marking the 'turn to mysticism' and the primacy of subjective religiosity.

Building on these views, contemporary spirituality with its 'diffuse', 'holistic' and 'subjective' nature is a spirituality that functions on the basis of a feminine consciousness not a masculine one. Vaughan Lee in *The Return of the Feminine and the World Soul* (2009) believes in the return of 'the feminine' as a universal phenomenon that would bring about a shift in our spirituality and our relation to religion and to the divine. The totality of these views look upon 'New Age' spirituality as a cultural shift, as a new quality of consciousness and as new religiosity which is feminine and prioritizes feminine values and qualities. Based on this reasoning New Age spirituality possibly appeals to women for the simple fact that it is a feminine phenomenon and for this reason they are 'spearheading the movement' (Rose, 2001). This whole exploratory study of women's stories, experiences, discourses and beliefs about femininity brings into questions our understanding of gender and of the feminine/masculine binary in society. In this study, the talks I have had about women's place in society came with criticisms of patriarchy, patriarchal religions and cultures. I observed the tendency to speak of a universal patriarchy and a universal experience of oppression and inequality beyond cultural contexts (Butler, 1999). This conception has gradually lost its credibility in feminist discourses and has been highly criticized. However, parallel to my findings, my participants addressed patriarchy more as a way of perceiving the world that fuels separation while prioritizing masculine qualities over feminine qualities such as sense-perception over intuition and objectivity over subjectivity.

Contextualization: Particularities in Turkey

The 'New Age' as a global trend and culture has had a strong influence on many parts of the world. Globalization, as a feature of contemporary spirituality, explains how people in Turkey are coming into contact with New Age culture and practices. Beatrice Hendrich in *Beyond State Islam: Religiosity and Spirituality in Contemporary Turkey*

(2011) has shed light on the particularities in Turkey. In her view, “the religious landscape of Turkey is part of a globalizing and expanding network and cannot be analyzed in the borders of the nation state exclusively”. She argues that the many middle-class Turkish women, between the age of thirty and fifty, are engaged in a ‘quest for spirituality’ perhaps due to the influence of two popular best-seller ‘new agey’ novels which portray the image of a woman on a quest: *Eat Pray Love* by Elizabeth Gilbert (2006), and *The Forty Rules of Love* by Elif Shafak (2009).

According to my study, many of the women I met were already involved in a quest much earlier than the publication of these two recent novels. In my study, I observed that some came in contact with New Age culture as they traveled or lived in the United States while others came across New Age reads in Turkey. An interesting particularity about the phenomenon in Turkey is that the majority of the women I interviewed had incorporated into their bricolage of beliefs teachings from a contemporary form of Sufism highly influenced by New Age culture. Hendrich argues that this is due to the influence popular New Age culture has had on Sufi orders in Turkey, especially the Mevlevi order (Hendrich, 2011: 7).

Part of women’s interest in New Age spirituality is due to the impact of their society on them. In the context of Turkey patriarchal values still have a strong hold on society through the influence of both political conservatism and religion. More than religious, political and economic patriarchy, women in Turkey struggle because of familial patriarchal values which have not significantly changed since the 1990s. Power structures within the family put women second to men (Engin and Pals, 2018: 404). In Turkish patriarchal culture certain figures of women are loved yet others despised. “Those that are respected are the selfless mother who sacrifices and dedicates her life to the family and the pure submissive woman” (Mehtap, 39, Istanbul). The social construction of femininity gives a weak, self-less and disempowered image of women. “Neither the global trend toward egalitarianism nor the increase in conservatism has changed the level of familial patriarchal attitudes in Turkey over time.” (Engin and Pals, 2018: 404). For this reason, women in Turkey seek to challenge this construction and to redefine it through New Age spirituality.

Research and Methodology

From February 2019 until February 2020 I was engaged in a TÜBİTAK research project on spiritual seeking in Turkey⁶. Working in this project was a wonderful opportunity because it put me in direct contact with a phenomenon that is extremely personal to me and has been part of my life for over 10 years. Having been highly active in New Age practices I thought studying it from an academic framework was going to help me approach it with a new eye. Half way through my traveling and field work, I noticed that the connections and the interviews I was making were mostly with women. This inspired me to study women's engagement in this phenomenon and to turn this into my thesis project.

In-depth Interviews & Active Participant Observation

My research is largely based on in-depth qualitative interviews with 12 women: Mehtap, Selin, Nazlı and Havva, based in Istanbul, Feride, Sevgi, Irem, and Canan, based in Muğla, Duygu and Dicle, based in Antalya, Sezin, based in İzmir, and Merve, based in Nevşehir. Since this is an anonymous research I have given each woman a nickname. Seven of these women are part of the 80 participants that were interviewed in the scope of the TÜBİTAK project. The remaining five I had met afterwards either in workshops or through the help of social media. These women, ranging from 30 to 52 years old, are middle to upper class women who have received a college education and belonged to a white-collar profession. What is particular about them is the fact that they are involved in New Age spirituality both as participants and as practitioners. They are women that are already involved in organizing retreats and workshops, that have mastered certain New Age techniques and practices and that can be considered as leaders, entrepreneurs and also healers in society. I have chosen to analyze their stories due to the intriguing transformation they went through.

⁶ 117K270 no'lu Türkiye'de Spiritüel Arayışlar, TÜBİTAK

Part of my research duty with TÜBİTAK was to cover the interviews and fieldwork in Muğla. With Muğla I ended up exploring further in Antalya and Istanbul for my own research interest on women. The period of the fieldwork approximately took up to 8 months from April to November 2019. My access to participants and places during the research took different turns. Some women I encountered in retreats or workshops where I had interviewed them, others I had met in the retreats but ended up interviewing them sometime later in a cafe or in their homes. Others I interviewed online. My participants answered my questions using a mix of English and Turkish except one participant with whom I conducted the interview fully in Turkish. I have personally translated the Turkish quotations to English and added the originals in the form of footnotes.

When it comes to my active participation in retreats, such retreats are generally only open to participants, for this reason, I fully engaged in the workshops and only took notes on what I observed and experienced during the breaks and after the retreat. I took part in 4 retreat experiences that informed my research: a 5 day long Sufi whirling and body awareness retreat, a one week long spiritual music festival and retreat in Fethiye, a 2 day long shamanistic healing retreat in Izmit and a woman circle in Istanbul.

There is a considerable difference between theorizing about the phenomenon and being completely engaged in it. A big part of my research has been experiential and many of the observations I have made and the questions I have asked were the outcome of my personal experiences in spiritual retreats and workshops around Turkey. Having never participated in retreats for research purposes before and since this was a new challenge for me I worried that I would become too engaged in the retreat experience to the point that I would become incapable as an observer to stand at a distance and observe from the outside. I thought, in the end, if I am left only with the details of my own subjective experience, how do I contribute through it to my research? What carries more relevance, my ideas about the retreat and the participants or my feelings as a participant interacting and being involved fully in the experience? In the following chapters I intend to share detailed accounts of a couple of retreat experiences in the hopes that such examples will bring about an understanding of the profundity and

complexity of the phenomenon at hand. A particular phenomenon that could only be fathomed through *experience*.

In the first pages of this thesis I have deliberately disclosed my own experience in New Age spirituality as part of my methodological preference. The fact that I am involved and aware of New Age ideas and beliefs myself has allowed for me to listen and relate to the experiences of my interviewees. I was in a position where I knew what they were talking about. I was familiar with the New Age authors, techniques or beliefs they shared. This showed me that my personal background and experience as a woman has an impact on the flow of the interviews and on the type of knowledge that is disclosed and revealed. I came to understand the advantage of my position when I realized that all information that is sought would be meaningless if it was not “mediated” by the positionality of the inquirer” (Cerwonka and Malkki, 2007: 26). In qualitative research there is an essentializing tendency which assumes that a researcher who is an insider has better access to knowledge and could conduct more meaningful interactions with his or her research subjects. Yet, much criticism suggests that insiders are ‘inherently biased’ and fail, for the most part, to keep a critical stance (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005:111). Truth must be told, as an insider and throughout my fieldwork as I engaged in multiple experiences, I let myself be carried away by my subjective experience, and however, in order to neutralize myself a little bit and gain a more balanced stance I distanced myself away from the study for a brief time. The distance as well as delving into the research literature on the phenomenon has allowed me to develop a critical stance towards certain aspects.

Moreover, the fact that I was active as a participant in the retreats my participants hosted or attended granted me the opportunity to bond and connect with them and to end up interviewing them from a place of friendship and trust. The way the women confided in me was a door-opener to the inner world of each one of them. In each encounter, I would forget my role as a researcher and I would feel more like their friend and as ‘one of them’ and not as one who was ‘studying them’. With no exceptions, all the women I encountered met my research topic with astounding enthusiasm. They were extremely intrigued by this research initiative about women’s stories and wanted to contribute to it with the best of their ability. Merve has described our ‘interview’ as

a fair exchange saying that “there is an exchange between you and I. I am not supporting you only. By talking to you I am getting closer to myself. You are giving me the space to open up.” (Merve, 48, Nevşehir). Many have simply thanked me for having listened to them and having guided them through a journey back into their lives and their past.

As I was collecting the data for the project I was working in, I made sure in the beginning to ask each and every question on the list, yet somehow my interviews became less and less structured and more like a conversation. Eventually, I had to make some modifications to the list of questions I used for the interviews in order to bring out more of the particularity of a woman’s experience. The following questions were the ones that I used to guide the interviews:

- What triggered the spiritual seeking? Has there been a ‘turning point’ that put you on the path of spirituality?
- How is your relation to organized religion?
- What were the New Age practices which deeply influenced and transformed your worldview and your life?
- Why do you think there are more women involved?

Naturally my interviews were slowly turning into a life story type of interview. I usually started the interview with a general question asking them about themselves. This helped reveal so much about their childhoods, families, education, jobs, worldviews and their religious and political views. After this general enquiry I would ask about a ‘turning point’ in their lives which put them in contact with New Age practices. The majority had lived through critical episodes that triggered their spiritual quests. Some could not recall having this ‘turning point’ experience yet they were able to remember moments where they felt absolute desperation and meaninglessness. This question in particular would trigger so many memories about their journey and many women ended up just telling me the whole story of how they became what they are today. Each one chose a specific kind of plot through which she told her life story. When speaking about the New Age practice that brought them healing or meaning, many linked this involvement to a feeling of deep dissatisfaction with society,

patriarchy, religion and the corporate environment. The stories they deliberately chose to include revealed to me their position towards organized religion and in the context of Turkey the religion of Islam. When asked about women's involvement they shared various theorizations that revealed to me the way they think of their own spirituality as women and the way they believe New Age spirituality to be a new consciousness triggering women's awakening and awareness. These questions have helped reveal to me the intricate reasons for women's engagement in this phenomenon.

For the analysis of the transcribed interviews, Atlas Ti facilitated the process. Applying grounded theory through the use of Atlas Ti has simplified the process of analysis and of discovering the emerging patterns in the data. As I read the interviews I tried not to impose the themes I had in mind on them but to adopt the aspects my participants emphasized in their experience in New Age spirituality.

Structure of the Thesis

In Chapter 1, by providing an array of examples from interviews, I will explore the various ways New Age spirituality has appealed to women by fulfilling certain needs in their lives. The examples will clarify how their involvement resulted in a paradigm shift in their worldview which was the outcome of an experience of finding meaning, of healing and of acquiring a sense of agency in the 'holistic milieu'. I will support this part with photos taken in retreats organized by the women I interviewed as well as an account of a personal experience in a shamanistic healing weekend retreat. Following that, in Chapter 2, by drawing on the way my participants portrayed and viewed organized religions, I will show how they perceived New Age spirituality to be a 'woman-friendly' spirituality which gives primacy to their subjective 'experiences'. Subsequently I will show how New Age spirituality appeals to women due to its emphasis on 'experience' and 'inner-authority', all of which are notions which speak to a woman's experience of spirituality and innerly empowers her.

This serves to prepare the grounds for Chapter 3 in which I will explore how New Age spirituality could be the manifestation of a feminine spirituality which propagates feminine values and inspires women to redefine femininity beyond patriarchal modes

of thinking. I will also show, based on the accounts of women in Turkey, how the emergence of New Age spirituality and its high appeal to women is believed to be linked to a cosmic energetic shift from the masculine to the feminine energy. A deep analysis of my interlocutors' discourses will reveal how the narrative of 'the feminine' within New Age has equipped women with essentialist assumptions that strategically served their personal transformation, empowerment and encouraged them to be of service to other women. I will share an account from my own experience in a woman circle in Istanbul during which I was able to observe this development.



1. NEW AGE SPIRITUALITY: A ‘WOMAN-FRIENDLY’ SPIRITUALITY

In this chapter, by providing an array of examples from interviews, I will explore the various ways New Age spirituality has appealed to women by fulfilling certain needs in their lives. The examples will clarify how their involvement resulted in a paradigm shift in their worldview which was the outcome of an experience of finding meaning, of healing and of acquiring a sense of agency in the ‘holistic milieu’. I will support this part with photos taken in retreats organized by the women I interviewed as well as an account of a personal experience in a shamanistic healing weekend retreat. Following that, by drawing on the way my participants portrayed and viewed organized religions, I will show how they perceived New Age spirituality to be a ‘woman-friendly’ spirituality which gives primacy to their subjective ‘experiences’. Subsequently I will show how New Age spirituality appeals to women due to its emphasis on ‘experience’ and ‘inner-authority’ all of which are notions which speak to a woman’s experience of spirituality and innerly empowers her.

1.1 Quests for Meaning and Healing

The fact that the women of this study had shared with me the most personal parts of their stories has helped reveal the complexities of their quests and shed light on the unexpected intriguing turns in their life plots. In their discourse, these “quests” were not always described as ‘spiritual’. More than ‘spirituality’ it was, in their words, finding ‘meaning’ and reaching ‘healing’ potential. For some women childhood and early experiences of suffering (of abuse, violence, loss and disease) have triggered the need to question their worldview, life choices, lifestyles and socio-cultural norms. For others, their quests started after reaching feelings of deep dissatisfaction and meaninglessness engendered by various reasons. The women I encountered share similar New Age beliefs and practices yet they had different motivations and needs that were fulfilled. In this chapter, what deserves our attention is how these women constructed their narrative around episodes of deep suffering and the different ways various New Age teachings and practices responded to their needs in a way that ultimately brought about a transformation in their worldview, in their value system

and in their identity. In the process of interviewing I always asked my interlocutors about a critical event or a phase which caused a disruption in their life. For many, the plot of the story revolves around what is known as the ‘turning point’, the point where the questing becomes inevitable. It is the turning point, emphasized in the life stories of my participants, which helps bring clarity to their motivations for involving in alternative spirituality. The motivations to become involved in New Age practices varied from a need for meaning, for healing or for an alternative profession and lifestyle. Sometimes a combination of all three together.

1.1.1. Searching for Meaning

When my father harassed me I was 15 years old I think... it happened at night as I was waking up. After that somehow I started turning into this quiet calm person. I mean I did not tell anyone. My elder sister knew but like what is this? Why did this happen? With this I started becoming angry at my father and I started fighting with him. *After a while the need to search started by itself (...) I was searching and reading.* But to tell the truth I thought why did this happen?? I was looking for an apology. Why would Allah make someone live through something like this? “Forgive me I am sorry” I was looking for an apology from Allah.⁷

The fact that there will not be any apology because there was no crime. That both sides are playing roles and that I, before I came to life, I had accepted this role and my father had accepted his role and that we both are playing a scene and that this play was necessary to my spiritual fulfilment and how it taught me forgiveness and if my father wasn't there I wouldn't have been able to play this scene by myself. Plays cannot be performed by one person. There is no film which can be done with one performance. *For me to realize this it was through Kryon series. Through it I internalized these meanings and saw things from another perspective. Kryon was always on my mind*⁸

(Dicle, 52, Antalya)

⁷ Original in Turkish: Babam beni taciz edince..15 yaşında falandım zannedersem gece uyandığımda..sonra daha böyle sessiz sakin böyle bir kişiye dönüşmeye başladım yani kimseye anlatmadım anneme falana söylemedim. Büyük ablam biliyordu ama hani bu nedir neyi böyledir işte bir dönem babama kızmaya babamla kavga etmeye başladım bir dönem sonra eeh işte araştırmaya başlama ihtiyacı kendiliğinden (...) *Bir şey arayıp okuyordum.* Ama daha doğrusu diyordum niye böyle!? Bir özür arıyordum..yani Allah bir yerde niye bunu insanlara yaşatır.. “affedersiniz özür dilerim” yani Allah’tan bir özür arıyordum. (Dicle, 52, Antalya)

⁸ Original in Turkish: Bir özür olamayacağını çünkü bir suçluğunun olmadığını her iki tarafında sadece oyuncu olduğunu ve bu dünyaya gelmeden önce benim bu rolü kabul ettiğimi babamın da bu rolü kabul ettiğini ve ikimizin bir oyun sahnelediğini ve bu oyunun benim ruhsal tekamülüm için gerekli olduğunu ve bana başıslamayı öğrettiğini ve babam olmasaydı ben tek başıma bu oyunu oynayamazdım oyunlar tek taraflı oynanılmaz hiç bir film tek taraflı bir performansla olmaz..bunları idrak etmem tam olarak idrak etmemin kaynağı Kryon serisidir tam olarak bunları içselleştirmem ve bunları başka bir bakış açısından görmem. Hep Kryon serisi aklımdaydı... (Dicle, 52, Antalya)

I was not searching [for] anything else than fun before I became a mother. So I was introduced to Clarissa and she was the mother that I needed at the time because she was... she was talking about everything that I didn't hear until that time. I did not know anything of what she talked about... “Listen to your inner voice” “you have power in you” eeh “when you fall you can get up and rise, you can rise again despite the fall and despite your wounds”. “Do not say ‘trauma’ then sit and cry about it all your life, you have power” She says throughout the book. “No matter how much you struggle and no matter how much tribulation falls upon you, you have in you a solid essence and by relying on it you can always stand up on your feet.” She says... And if you do not then you would not know what life is and you would live in the shadow. *These found so much meaning in me. Everything she says and all the tales.*⁹

(Mehtap, 39, Istanbul)

There is a tendency in the research literature to approach New Age spirituality through the lens of consumerism. The New Age seeker is brilliantly portrayed as a consumer shopping in the ‘spiritual marketplace’ of experiences (Van Hove, 1999). The efficacy of New Age spirituality is determined based on its capacity to meet the subject's “self-perceived 'needs' and desires” (Bridger, 2001: 12). My female participants do conform to this consumerist ethic yet a deeper look into the meanings they have found in New Age teachings can make a difference in our approach to the phenomenon. Paul Heelas, back in 1998, shared his concern about the need for more research on the effectiveness of New Age practices and on how much they can make a difference in people’s lives. (Heelas, 1998: 259). The search for meaning expressed by my interlocutors is much more than a ‘desire for consumption’, it springs from a place of urgency and necessity to make sense of life’s circumstances and situations and to view the sacred wisdom behind them. Cases of non-religious spiritual seeking impose on social scientists of religion to broaden their conception of the sacred by approaching it beyond the parameters of religion. Back in 1999 N. J. Demerath wrote on the sacred as ‘quest’

⁹ Original in Turkish: Hiç bilmiyordum ne hakkında bahsediyordu..iç sesini dinle..sende kuvvet var..eeh..düştüğün zaman kalkabilirsin ve yükselebilirsin düştüğün yerden yarıdan yükselebilirsin yani travma deyip bütün ömrün boyunca oturup ağlama buna bu senin gücün olacak diye diyor bütün kitap boyunca. Ne kadar sıkıyorsan sıkış başına ne gelirse gelsin senin içinde sağlam bir öz var ve o öze dayanarak her zaman ayağa kalkabilirsin diyor ve eğer kalkmazsan o zaman yaşam hiç sürmemiş olacaksın hayatının gölgesinde yaşayacaksın. Bunlar benim içimde çok anlam buldular söylediği her şey masallarla beraber (Mehtap, 39, Istanbul)

affirming by doing so the significance of studying the phenomenon of spiritual seeking as a sacred experience (Demerath, 1999: 5). Indeed, just like Demerath, my participants were always willing to bring out the sacred dimension of their quests and to show how they transformed them.

For instance, the episode of harassment that Dicle has narrated was followed by a series of confused feelings that naturally pushed her to search. In her search she came across a cosmic explanation to this incident in a book titled *The Journey Home* by an American New Age channeler and influential author called Lee Carroll¹⁰. *The Journey Home* or its Turkish equivalent *Yuvaya Yolculuk* is the 5th book of a series of books called Kryon which consists of channelings from beyond the veil. This book in particular embodies all of the practical living principles of Kryon and it has found its way into Dicle's life contributing to a considerable shift in her worldview. In the above statement and in other parts of her interview Dicle considers the teachings of Kryon to have guided her and helped her forgive her father completely. Her 'consumption' of a New Age book has allowed her to see things 'from another perspective' which has served her spiritual fulfilment. She went from seeking an apology to a complete awareness of the wisdom behind her story. The New Age teaching that she encountered answered her questions and opened her eyes to a holistic worldview.

While Dicle was able to forgive her father through Kryon, Mehtap, a journalist living in Istanbul, found herself the ideal mother in Clarissa Pinkola Estes. Clarissa Estes is a Jungian analyst who is considered to be an eco-feminist New Age author. The huge success of her book, *Women Who Run with the Wolves*, has reached Turkey where more than 30 editions have already been published. Mehtap's story is another example of how New Age teachings have the capacity to fulfil the needs of those that search for meaning. Mehtap lost her mother at a very early age. In her story, she puts the emphasis on the lacking "feminine presence" in her life. She described the sense of being alone and not being supported properly by her friends and family. She identifies the major turning point in her life when she became a mother and put emphasis on this

¹⁰ Lee Carroll is the author of sixteen books in metaphysics and spirituality. For 25 years he has been channeling "Kryon" which he described as an angelic loving entity from the Source (or "Central Sun") who has been with the Earth since the beginning and belongs to the same "Family" of Archangel Michael.

essential lack in her life by saying “a motherless mother, what a poor thing”. For this reason Mehtap’s quest was initially for an ideal mother yet it took an unexpected turn when she encountered a whole world of values in this New Age read which shifted her perspective in a way that empowered her as a woman. Today she brings women together in circles to collectively reflect on the inner meanings of Clarissa’s tales. Both Dicle and Mehtap found in New Age teachings meanings and answers that spoke to their needs. They both shed light on the way these teachings made a difference in their lives and introduced them to an alternative holistic worldview. Not only did they find meaning but they also experienced a sense of psychological and spiritual well-being.

The previous two examples emphasize one aspect of women’s seeking in New Age spirituality. In many cases, women’s quests were triggered by a need for meaning, in others the purpose of the quest was to heal. The existing teachings and techniques of alternative healing in New Age spirituality intend to heal individuals in a holistic way. In the following part, I will analyze examples of women whose encounter with the New Age was the outcome of a healing experience. I will explore how they sought ‘alternative’ healing when ‘traditional’ ‘mainstream’ medicine could not provide them with the healing they so urgently needed.

1.1.2. Encountering Holistic Healing

Marion Bowman in *Healing in the Spiritual Marketplace: Consumer, Courses and Credentialism* (1999) has addressed the need for healing in an individual’s spiritual quest (Bowman, 1999: 181-183). He considers the need for healing as the “one striking feature of late 20th-century spirituality”. He commences his article by emphasizing the shift from a need to be saved and save others to a need to be healed and heal others. One cannot address the contemporary quest for spirituality without addressing the healing narrative which lies at its center. What is particularly different about healing in the New Age culture is its ‘holistic’ approach. It is a form of healing which gives equal attention to the body, mind and soul. (Bowman, 1999: 183). An experience of healing from a disease is not solely experienced on the physical level but also on the psychological as well as the spiritual. To further clarify the notion of ‘holistic healing’, we can simply compare it with its opposing notion of ‘heroic healing’. The latter is the product of a patriarchal world view which tries to battle disease once it has manifested

on the physical level, while the latter tries to take into consideration the source of disease in earlier stages before it has manifested in the body. (Keel, in Gaard, 1993: 258).

This notion of healing implies that individuals are the ones responsible to heal themselves as opposed to the more traditional one which creates dependence on doctors and the medicine industry. This holistic healing, which functions from the standpoint that ‘all is interconnected’, is the concept which paves the way to the proliferation of healing practices which include a variety of native ritualistic practices mixed and merged with modern secular healing methods. This point leads to a better understanding of the centrality of the quest for healing in the discourses of my female participants in Turkey. With no exception, they all deliberately constructed their own bricolages of healing practices and techniques which grant them a sense of well-being and meaning. The following accounts are of two women who have underlined how New Age practices have addressed their need for healing when traditional medicine and therapy have failed to cure them.

At the same time some illness started in my womb area so I was divorcing. I was 35 years old I was very afraid of. Am I really losing my womb? What is happening? *The doctors cannot find anything* it was bleeding bleeding bleeding and I just couldn’t stop bleeding it was really very bad I started to research because you know if it happens in your hips, in your womb area, in your ovulation it means there is a problem in your womanity in your womanhood so I knew that deeply and I started to Google -laughing- of course because you don’t know no resource at all. I come to a woman in India in her website she was talking [about] the divine feminine how are wombs? How energetically they are wounded they are carrying all this old stuff and now it is time to really heal and clear our wombs.

(Sezin, 42, Izmir)

Definitely. I had anxiety attacks. It was. It was harsh. I lived through an intense period of anxiety while I was working in private corporations. It was kind of a burn out, not particularly and I started therapy. I started therapy and after one year and a half my therapist told me that I was in a spiritual quest and that I had to start yoga or meditation.¹¹

¹¹ Original in Turkish: Definitely. I had anxiety attacks. It was..it was harsh. Yoğun bir anksiyete dönemi yaşadım işte çalışırken yani private corporationlarda çalışırken aslında it was kind of a burn out not particularly and I started therapy. Terapiyi başladım ve bir buçuk senenin sonununda terapistim bana daha spiritüel bir arayışta olduğumu yoga ya da meditasyonu başlamak gerektiğini söyledi..ve öyle biraz Art terapiye gidebilirsin dedi işte meditasyon yoga öyle hocamı buldum tamamen tesaadüfan dolayısıyla turning point aslında o (Nazlı, 34, Istanbul)

It was...it was very powerful because it was the moment where I realized that I was not my emotions. We were talking about a fear and in that meditation I had the chance to observe the fear and it was so powerful. It was something that...I was very lost before in the emotions. When I was angry I was lost in anger when I was afraid I was lost in fear and drowning in it as if I am dead. But in that meditation I realized I can still breath while I am afraid I can still breath and I can still feel my body when I am angry and it gave me a power to differentiate myself from what is going on so it was very immediate I had to do it every day I was like wow this is so powerful.

(Nazlı, 34, Istanbul)

The healing Sezin and Nazlı sought is a form of nonmedical healing or what is referred to as spiritual healing (McGuire 1988; L. Jacobs 1989). Within New Age contemporary healing practices there is a vast place given to non-western ritualistic healing practices. With the rise of the women's spirituality movement in North America many women-centered healing rituals were created in hopes of providing women with an inner sense of empowerment and more importantly to help them heal themselves from the wounds of patriarchy. Following a holistic nonmedical approach, these ritualistic practices were consistent with New Age practices and had more to offer than medical practices. For instance, Sezin's desperately seeking for a solution to her severe womb illness brought her in contact with an Indian New Age practitioner who taught her how to activate her womb's energy. Known by the name Sukhvinder Sircar, she identifies as a "yogini of feminine embodiment and as a teacher of the 'Divine Feminine Principle' through bodywork, womb-work & ancestral healing". Sezin was only able to heal her womb when she invited this healer to Turkey and organized for a woman circle in 2013. While so much remains ambiguous about the way the healing took place, the ritualistic practice of the woman circle guided by this Indian mentor has responded to Selin's need for healing. The practice, more than being holistic, is also centered on socializing women's' bodies and helping women claim their inner-power. An analysis of Sezin's healing experience shows how New Age spirituality provides women with alternatives that they could not have found elsewhere. Similarly, Nazlı, a previously successful account director in an advertising company, had to resign from her socially praised position when her health was at risk. Her therapist advised her to experience alternative therapies when antidepressants could not help anymore with her work anxiety. She found healing in a New Age meditation technique which equipped her with powerful tools to deal with her anxiety.

We can observe that healing in New Age spirituality generates in the healed subject the feeling that they are capable of healing themselves and that they can depend on their own power and potential to heal. Contrary to traditional medicine, New Age holistic practices aim at raising an individual's awareness of their own relationship with their bodies and their emotions. In that sense, holistic practices appeal to women in the way they empower them to heal themselves.

1.2. Emancipatory Opportunities in the Holistic Milieu

As we have seen in the previous part, women's involvement in New Age spirituality plays a role in fulfilling their need for healing. Intense experiences of healing from a severe disease whether on the physical or the psychological level have the capacity to change women's attitudes and decisions in life. They end up acquiring a holistic perspective on healing. This coincides with a desire to leave their mainstream occupations, which cause most of their stress and anxiety, and seek more emancipatory positions in the 'holistic milieu'. As they told their stories, my participants put emphasis on their unwillingness to remain involved as a 'cog in the machine' of capitalism. Instead, they are willing to leave their socially prestigious jobs in order to seek professions which give them a sense of personal identity. In their discourses, the corporate world becomes an object of criticism justifying the leap towards alternative professions within New Age spirituality which promises much more than financial gains.

I decided to quit and it took me 8 months to do it because for 8 months...my family is not rich. They cannot support me financially. Like I am quitting and need to pay my rent so I had to calculate I had to save money I had to start sessions first to have more clients before quitting. It was 8 months where I decided to let my business know (...) so after I quitted [quit] I also saved some money (...) so it was a very tough decision but it was so natural I couldn't do it anymore. I couldn't just go to work anymore I felt sick! I remember puking after meetings sometimes. I remember I felt very sick and I hated it so I felt even though if I have to sell lemons in Pazar [market] I will not go to work.

I became a teacher myself and started having my own students and organizing my own retreats (...) I am also organizing my own stuff and I have been traveling a lot.

I never regret the money I am taking and I actually feel some sessions I can charge 10 000 lira really I am not charging it...so and sometimes I reject people I say sorry I am not gonna [going to] have a session with you it is not about money I don't believe that you are here to heal yourself but you are here for someone to heal you...and I don't like doing sessions for people who don't take their responsibilities so *I believe that my sessions are initiations.*

(Nazlı, 34, Istanbul)

For 10 years I worked as a director in Alanya. Since April 2011 until now I am in breathing therapy. I do not do any other work (...) It was not like "ok let me quit my job". Many things happened. A certain reason made me quit that job then I was offered many good job positions in Alanya. At the time breathing therapy was not on my mind. I did not want these good job offers. "You don't want to work anymore?" my husband would ask me and I would say 'no, I will work!'... Then he would say "but you are turning down all these offers?" I realized I was doing this unconsciously. I realized when I questioned myself is that I no longer want these jobs for the sake of making money. It was something else that I wanted but what?? More meaningful things then I became interested in breathing therapy.¹²

(Dicle, 52, Antalya)

Everything I do in my spiritual life is part of my politics life. Showing way to people as a woman. You can hold space. You can organize something as a woman. You can let's say lead a group whatever. You don't need the man help for example this is completely political action but I do it *in my retreat.*

(Havva, 33, Istanbul)

Nazlı, Dicle and Havva amongst many others have joined the labor market as practitioners where they get to acquire a personal and professional identity (Keshet and Simchai, 2014: 78). They decided to leave their mainstream jobs to become full time practitioners. According to Erich Fromm, in our modern societies the white collar worker position is that of a "small cog in a large machine". The individual is in a position where he or she feels utter insignificance and purposelessness. The individual is forced to be molded up into little cogs and to live a life serving the purpose of the enterprise they are part of. Fromm's perspective helps us make sense of the appeal

¹² Original in Turkish: 10 senedir Alanya'da yönetici olarak çalıştım. 2011 Nisan dan bu yanada nefes terapisindeyim. Başka bir iş yapmıyorum (...) Hani ben 'hadi ben işten çıkayım' gibi olmadı. Olaylar zincirliydi. Ben bu işten çıktım bir sebepten dolayı sonra bana çok güzel iş teklifleri geldi Alanya'da nefes terapisi hiç aklımda değildi o zaman. Ben bu güzel teklifleri istemedim. Eşim bana 'sen çalışmak istemiyor musun artık?' Dedi ben dedim 'yoo çalışacağım' dedim. O 'ama gelen bütün iş teklifleri geri çeviriyorsun?' fark ettim ben onu bilinçli yapmıyorum. O zaman kendime sorduğumda ben artık öyle bir iş her hangi bir iş istemediğime yani gidip para kazanmak değildi başka bir şey ama ne?? Daha böyle manevi bir şeyler sonra nefesle ilgileniyordum. (Dicle, 52, Antalya)

New Age practices have on modern individuals. The women of this study were looking for a sense of self-worth beyond their social positions. The act of abandoning a social position is an act of abandoning the social self in favor of the ‘real self’ (Fromm, 1941: 125-126). Both globally and in Turkey many women are constructing new identities through leading, counseling and healing in the holistic milieu. For example, Nazlı went from serving the interests of a corporation to ‘initiating’ people on the path of healing. Now she is a full time sound healing therapist who organizes her own retreats and workshops. Dicle lived through a similar transformation, she went from having a traditional type of job to opening her own ‘inner transformation’ center in Antalya. Now she hosts seminars and teaches a therapeutic breathing technique. Finally, Havva quit her job and after a phase of seeking she became a shamanistic healer who helps heal individuals in her shamanistic healing retreats. My participants, by offering their New Age services in the holistic milieu, take on a new identity through which they play their traditional feminine relational care role while also enjoying a sense of subjective satisfaction in the work-related identity. Women involved as practitioners “take what they view as their traditional role of caregiving and nurturing, and turn it into a career” (Keshet and Simchai, 2014: 82). They gain in return financial independence and a sense of agency rarely possible in undervalued labor.

For instance, Havva considers herself to be chosen, by virtue of her Siberian roots, to help heal individuals through shamanic ceremonies. Having personally participated in one of her retreats I observed how she changes her attitude from a simple Turkish woman to a full on shamanic healer who speaks out solely the revelations of the ‘plant’ or from her own intuition. For her circle of friends who consistently join her retreats, she is much more than a friend, she is perceived as a counselor, a psychotherapist, a teacher and even as a caring mother. She listens, provides advice and comforts all of those who seek her company but only during the retreats. Havva’s identity has been completely transformed due to the new interactions she experiences in her new shamanic work. She believes to be changing the lives of those around her by helping them heal their traumas and past painful experiences.

Just like Havva, Dicle and Nazlı play the caring role of facilitating healing experiences in the context of retreats and workshops. From an economic capitalist perspective,

indeed these women would be viewed as providers of services and products in the ever expanding specialized market of New Age spirituality. However, from their own perspective as women, their involvement can be interpreted as a seeking to exercise what Woodhead calls 'relational care' which is a form of caring for others which is strongly linked to the traditional notion of femininity. Stuart Rose, in her study of New Age women says, in the words of one of her participants, that what is happening is a "resurgence of the female principles of caring-nurturing" in New Age spirituality. Indeed, women are finding alternative, more empowering and financially rewarding ways of playing this "feminine" role of both caring for others and caring for the self (Rose 2001, Woodhead and Sointu 2008). In light of these observations, my participants found in the holistic milieu opportunities that both emancipated and empowered them. In that sense, New Age spirituality arguably appeals to their needs as women. The following photos were taken during the retreats and workshops I had participated in. Women were the organizers of these retreats and were facilitating the activities. They were actively involved in their role of caring, teaching and holding space for others.



Figure 1 An offering ceremony to Pachamama, Goddess of the Earth, facilitated by a woman during a retreat. May 2019, Fethiye, Muğla



Figure 2 During an art therapy session where Sevgi was encouraging us to share our experience in the circle. May 2019, Fethiye, Muğla

1.2.1 A Shamanistic Healing Retreat Experience

The purpose of sharing the following report is to give a thorough detailed description of the role women play in the holistic milieu through the example of Havva, an active shamanistic healer based in Istanbul. Havva quit her job at a law firm and went on a spiritual quest that brought her back home and into shamanism. Now she works as a freelance writer while also organizing retreats and workshops. Before participating in the retreat I had already interviewed Havva and gained her trust and friendship. She welcomed me to join her retreat program that was going to take place the following month.

The retreat started on a Friday night and ended on Sunday in the afternoon. Following the retreat a shamanic ceremony with Üzerlik¹³ plant took place and I ended up joining it as well. It was a silence retreat during which we were not supposed to speak to each other and make any kind of eye contact. Also we were advised to minimize our usage of phones and tablets. We were not allowed to bring with us any books or magazines. Even reading was prohibited throughout the retreat. Participants also had to follow a detox diet of green smoothies, fruit juices, salads, soups and tiny portions of a vegetable puree. The intention behind all of these prohibitions was to allow us to connect with our souls. Silencing the mind and the body would allow for more transparency and clarity. Havva strictly applied those rules and constantly reminded us of how important they are for us.

The retreat took place in a rented home surrounded by nature somewhere in Izmit. I arrived late to the place with two other female participants, Emine and Deryah. I talk with them and I find out that Emine has known Havva for over a year and has lost count of the times she experienced Üzerlik. Deryah just like myself is participating for the first time. Emine is 32, she works as a manager at LC Waikiki clothes line, once I

¹³ *Peganum Harmala*, also known also as ‘Wild Rue’ or ‘Syian Rue’. Havva continuously referred to the plant by saying Üzerlik. It is a psychoactive plant which helps in accessing non-ordinary states of consciousness. Havva uses it since it is the local alternative to the native American Amazonian plant *Ayahuasca* which is used in shamanic ceremonies.

initiated the talk on spirituality she ventured “I was looking for something and I wasn’t finding anything fulfilling”. She seems to have succumbed to the corporate world. She tries to join Havva’s retreats as much as possible. She needs breaks in nature once or twice a month for the sake of self-cleansing and releasing the accumulated stress and frustration that the city creates. Üzerlik for her is a way to connect on a deeper level. She smokes and believes ‘the plant’ communicates to her during the ceremony and urges her to quit smoking.

We reached Izmit otogar later than expected. Havva had organized for us a taxi to pick us up and bring us to the rented house where the program had already started. Since this was a silence retreat I decided to start my silence in the taxi. I couldn’t help eavesdropping on Emine and the taxi driver as they complained about how much Izmit has changed. They were both complaining about how much it is resembling Istanbul now with its traffic. Once we arrived we rushed to put our bags in the living room of the big house and go out to the fireplace where the group was sitting. They were sitting in a circle around the fire and since we arrived late we sat outside the circle. Havva, the ‘space holder’, was passing by each person and performing something on them. Once she reached Emine, who was sitting next to me, she put the end of a pipe in her right nostril then blew from the other side of the pipe causing her to throw her head violently to the back from the intensity of the substance blown. She repeated the process with the left nostril then handed her some napkins to clear her nose. She then came to me. I was the last and the same was done to me and since I have willingly joined I was expected to trust and do as Havva instructed. She asked me to take a deep breath in and to hold my breath while she blew in. The pain was outrageous but short lived. I had tears running down my face uncontrollably and I even felt my emotions triggered (I realized how much breathing is connected with emotion), the same happened with the second blow and Havva would put her hand on my head and shake it softly to comfort me while whispering “it is okay, relax, accept”. I blew my nose to clean it from the substance and tried to relax. After seconds I felt very relaxed and light. I learned later that it is called rapé (pronounced Ha-peh) and it is a powerful snuff that is used in shamanic ceremonies in Brazil and Peru. After that Havva asked us to join the circle since it was inappropriate for us to remain outside. She sat in her spot where she was surrounded by her shamanic instruments, tools and objects which

she uses during rituals and ceremonies and which I couldn't identify. Quickly she grabbed her special drum, which was given to her by a shaman who painted it and offered to her as a gift, and then she instructed us to look at the fire while she drummed. She drummed and made peculiar sounds that made the fire change shape and intensity. I thought the presence of Havva and everything she did was mesmerizing and enchanting. She had an influence on each person in the circle.

Havva then asked each person to sit facing the person next to them, we were going to look deeply into each other's eyes until she asked us to stop. I sat facing the girl who was sitting next to me. In the beginning we couldn't help smiling at the situation but we persisted and stared until we were numbed out of our interfering mind. The rapé effect lessened the awkwardness and made this intimate practice very meaningful. With the end of this ritual Havva announced that we are free now to go to bed since we had to wake up very early the next day for a full day of activities. I observed that as we took turns getting rapé-ed many girls would fall into Havva's arms in tears, they would hug her and stay there for long minutes. Havva would cuddle them up, touch their hair, pat their backs and do any kind move that would comfort them. Like a mother to her child.

The program consisted of a variety of activities such as yoga, silence meditation, dynamic meditation, Budakon yoga, Mandala making workshop and shamanic journeys. The only activity that allowed me to observe Havva's role and influence was the shamanic Üzerlik ceremony which took place Sunday night. There were 15 people who stayed for the ceremony. We were all aged between 25 and 35. The Üzerik ceremony was absolutely confidential and risky. Havva that day was not going to do any physical activity. She wanted to keep her energy for the ceremony. The ceremony took place in the big room of the house. Havva with the help of her team were preparing, cleaning and putting the mats. I observed that Havva would close her eyes and following her intuition would decide on where each one of us would sit during the ceremony. We were asked to sit in silence. Slowly slowly Havva was preparing herself with her tools, potions and instruments. She wore her shaman clothes all in white and tied a belt around her waist. She tied something around her head that had strips dangling on her face making it difficult to see her eyes. I noticed later in the ceremony

that she would move her face violently while drumming during the ceremony and pleasant sounds would come out from the head band.

Havva was leading the ceremony as the shaman. Everyone was following her orders without objecting. She called on us one by one to go to her corner, sit on our knees in front of her and drink the mix she had been cooking all day. Once we all took our doses and fell under the effect of the plant, Havva started drumming and singing for the purpose of keeping us aware of our surroundings and of our presence in the room. She did this for the whole period of the ceremony knowing that otherwise we would feel trapped in the visions we saw. Being under the influence of the Üzerlik dose I could only recall my own experience. In moments of extreme weakness and vulnerability provoked either by the visions or the painful vomiting Havva would appear by my side, stroke my hair and tell me comforting things. She kept coming back to give me water, reassure me and make me feel safe. Perhaps due to the situation I was in, I was moved by Havva's attention, caring and kindness during the ceremony. After the ceremony I saw that the other female participants, who are also her friends and are members of her close circle, cried in her arms and treated her with so much respect. They all seek her advice. She is the healer, the loving mother, the influencer and the spiritual guide. She is perhaps everything that is lacking in their lives. My final observations were on Havva's role in life which went from serving a private law firm to leading shamanic ceremonies in retreats. I saw how she has a remarkable influence on the people who attend her retreats and how this has helped her form a new identity in society.

2. AN ‘INNER-SPIRITUALITY’ BEYOND RULES

There are a variety of theoretical lenses that can contribute to the understanding of these examples. From the point of view of my participants, New Age spirituality has rescued them at critical times in their lives. What they read and practiced has proved effective and transforming. We observe that their urgent needs put them somehow in contact with whatever was available in the spiritual marketplace at home or abroad. Coming across New Age reads and techniques can be explained on the one hand through theories of globalization and commoditization, on the other, through multiple criticisms towards the misfortunes of the modern world we live in. There is this deep-rooted assumption that the male-dominated Turkish society that they live in is more capable of harm than good. This harm is believed to be more on women and this explains why, in their view, this society is undeniably incapable of providing them with satisfactory fixes to their physical, psychological and spiritual problems. In their discourses, the blame is placed not only on society as a patriarchal institution, but also on organized religions and their dogmatism. In the following section I will explore my participants’ understanding of religion and the way they gave a positive image of New Age spirituality.

2.1. Beyond Religious Rules

In order to further understand the nature of their spiritual quests, I analyzed my interlocutors’ discourses on religion. I was able to observe how they all struggled to give a harmonious image of their relationship with religion. Their spiritual quests are deeply influenced by the occurrence of religion in different contexts in their life. Any talk about mainstream religion provoked a feeling of resistance or triggered a negative memory associated with religious members in their families and in their lives. The majority of my participants drew a clear line between religion and spirituality. Religion in their discourse comes with a heavy baggage of negative connotations which are the result of the way religion was represented and taught to them at an early age and also of the way it has been politicized in recent years.

In this part, I delve into my interlocutors’ discourses to bring out the different ways they negotiated New Age spirituality’s emancipatory potential for women against

organized religions. In the process of listening to their stories, it was inevitable to notice the clear polarization made between religion and spirituality. In this polarization religion was viewed as bad and spirituality as good. The majority of the women in my study spoke of religion in negative terms. Spirituality, a more favored term, was associated with individual subjective experience, oneness and meaningfulness. This dangerous polarization both in academic literature and in the discourses of my participants ignores the obvious porous nature of the boundaries between religion and spirituality (Hill et al, 2000: 58). Regardless of the outcome of this polarization today more than ever the rise of a whole generation of people who identify as ‘spiritual but not religious’ has been indisputable. ‘Spiritual but not religious’ individuals are those who claim to feel that common human yearning for the ineffable beyond any kind of religious institution. In the literature there is a large body of work on the nature of the spiritual quest taking place outside the confines of organized religions, of individuals becoming “spiritual but not religious”. American sociologist Nancy Ammerman has considered this labeling of being spiritual but not religious as:

A boundary-maintaining device and source of legitimacy than as a description of the empirical situation. In this case, people are equating “religion” to the implausible beliefs and discredited institutions they have rejected. They are claiming “spirituality” as a reasonably positive and generic category and one that each individual can fill with the content of her own choosing. (Ammerman, 2014: 51)

In light of this statement, religion for the most part is equated with implausible beliefs that are generally putting boundaries on human potential and inner experience while also oppressing women. Studies in the West of the preponderance of women in New Age spirituality resulted in theorizations that could also be applied to the Turkish situation. In the research literature as well as in my interviews with the women in Turkey, patriarchal religious traditions have been problematized (Tzebiatowska and Bruce 2012; Crowley 2011; Sointu and Woodhead 2008). When speaking of religion all of my participants had resistances towards organized religions particularly organized Islam and strongly believed that it is not so keen on women’s rights and women’s self-expressivity. Organized religions as opposed to alternative New Age spirituality have treated women as second-class citizens (Tzebiatowska and Bruce, 2012: 17). With this reasoning my interlocutors have used the criticism of organized

religion in their narration in ways that imply their views on New Age spirituality as the ideal alternative that guarantees gender equality and holds a more positive empowering view towards the female body and the feminine values. In other words, the female empowerment lacking in one is compensated by the other.

In the context of Turkey and of the Muslim religious influence with which they interacted, my female participants shared strong resistance towards organized Islam. In the process of telling their stories they combined multiple reasons to explain their defiance towards any form of religious law and regulation. Following the analysis of my participants' discourses on organized religion it becomes evident that, to them, the objective dogmatism of organized religions cannot go hand in hand with the authenticity of the spiritual quest. Hence, the clear opposition in their discourse between organized religions imposing rules and improvised spirituality granting emancipation. There exists a strong assumption that religion would simply always be oppressive to women and suppressing of their 'intuition', 'authenticity' and 'expressivity'. In the following quotations my participants treated religion and spirituality differently with the latter being praised more than the former. Firstly we will observe how they treated religion.

Sevgi after having opted for Sufism as her spiritual path she wished to speak further of how she considered herself courageous enough to have challenged her prejudices about Islam. Sevgi is part of a post-modern globalized Sufi movement called TÛMATA¹⁴. This new religious movement balances "new tradition and flexibility, scientific reasoning and arousal of spiritual emotions, canonical content and a continuous search for new appropriate forms and cultural production." (Hendrich, 2011: 10). This Sufi movement has won Sevgi's heart and met her criteria:

After around 5-6 year long adventure in America I felt that I needed to go back to Turkey. Once I returned I researched Sema and in the beginning the groups I joined did not find it acceptable for women and men to practice Sema whirling together I can say I came across groups that were following strict rules¹⁵

¹⁴ An abbreviation of "Türk Musikisini Araştırma ve Tanıtma Grubu". A new religious movement founded by A sufi musician and dervish called Oruç Rahmi Güvenç.

¹⁵ Original in Turkish: yaklaşık böyle bir 5-6 yıllık Amerika macerasından sonra böyle çok ani bir kararla.. Türkiye'ye çekilmeyi hissettim ve Türkiye'ye döndüğüm zaman böyle semayı biraz araştırdım

(Sevgi, 37, Muğla)

Sevgi was immediately put off by the ‘strict rules’ of the more traditional group where men and women couldn't whirl in the same space. In her search for a less dogmatic woman friendly group she found Yalova:

Then I started to meet people who were whirling... men and women together and singing songs in love I think it was around 2011-2012 I started to go to Yalova and meet other people that were not traditional or close minded but they were spiritual whirling singing spiritual songs it was something like I found a hidden treasure inside me

(Sevgi, 37, Muğla)

What requires attention in this example is how Sevgi drew a clear-cut distinction between a traditional group and a spiritual group. In this case the traditional being close minded dogmatic while the spiritual being evidently the opposite. With this distinction Sevgi, on the one hand exhibits a certain intolerance of religious rules, particularly the ones that are not inclusive of women, on the other hand, praises the openness of ‘spirituality’ or more precisely in this case, New Age spirituality. In the words of Flanagan:

Spirituality has become the solace of soul survivors who journey outside organized religion. They find their own uses for spirituality and make their own destinies. Thus, spirituality is increasingly treated as a force, a resource of self-empowerment and expressiveness, democratized and available to all. (Flanagan, 2005: 6).

The New Age Sufi movement that Sevgi adheres to is certainly one that fits this description and one that “emphasizes freedom and self-determination” (Sointu and Woodhead, 2008: 266). Indeed, Sevgi found in that movement the opportunity to express herself. In New Age circles, the self is always encouraged to express itself, to love itself and to trust itself. This concept of expressivism and of ‘self-spirituality’ is an emancipatory concept which draws in many women who “have struggled to have a self all along” (Crowley, 2011: 3).

ve ilk başlarda böyle katıldığım gruplarda çok fazla kadın erkek sema edilmesi doğru bulunmayan biraz daha katı kurallara olduğunu söyleyebileceğim şeylerle karşılaştım (Sevgi, 37, Muğla)

In a different case, the “spiritual but not religious” distinction was made much more directly. When I asked Merve about her ideas on organized religion she assuredly reported: “I don’t like rules and regulations. Of Islam or of the Church or organized religions. I don’t have rejections. I do believe they were needed and I think they are not needed now.” (Merve, 48, Nevşehir). Merve shares Sevgi’s intolerance of rules and regulations, laws and dogmas. Merve went so far as to say that religion is not even necessary anymore. Her statement is the example par excellence of this increasing appetite for spirituality coupled with an indifference towards traditional formal religions. Merve finished her response by identifying as ‘spiritual’: “Part of me is a Jew, part of me is a Muslim and also atheist...this is where I come from. The atheist part of me gave me freedom. *Freedom from the religion*. So I was not a Jew and I was not a Muslim but I am a spiritual person.” (Merve, 48, Nevşehir)

Nazlı, a 34 year old sound healing therapist that grew up in an “open-minded Alevi family” was put off by religion because of her grandfather’s intimidating attitude. She describes how fear created disdain in her:

If there is one person who got me away from religion is my grandfather. Because he was practicing it obsessively he was making us read books of Alevi din [religion], about Ali and the pain and the way he was killed and all the drama and it made me afraid. It gave me fear. And when I was meditating I realized I do not want to be in this fear. So this got me away from religion to spirituality. If my father was like uhh Rumi I would be a Sufi for example I would be in that path but he was like the gatekeeper of that fear...fearful God that doesn’t like woman and sexuality and your tits have to be covered so all that thing made me move away from it.

(Nazlı, 34, Istanbul)

Similarly Havva a 33 year old shamanistic healer who grew up in a quite conservative family in Bursa believes her resistance to religion is due to ‘bad influence’:

“When I enter spiritual life I think I was like 24? And... But until that time I was completely atheist I didn’t believe anything at all and I was rejecting all Islamic culture that we had very bad influence in our lives here with woman rights and you know...”

(Havva, 33, Istanbul)

In the following example Sezin shares her reasons that are very much similar to the previous examples:

So I was raised by the Islam religion but it was you know in my family we didn't live that Islam religion really deeply it was just writing on my identity. Of course I was raised... I learned about the god and the prayers in specific days just that but I remember myself when I was very little I really had this powerful belief and connection to God but I didn't know anything about Islam tradition Islam religion but when I was in school when I was pushed at somehow in a religion lessons that you *have* to obey God you *have* to you *have* to I...and then in the meantime in my early teenage years in my 20s you know I denied everything and I said I don't believe in religions and I also don't believe in God so I was on the other side of the spectrum.

(Sezin, 42, Izmir)

My participants problematized organized religions for their dogmatism and more importantly for the way religion was taught and presented to them by members of their family and society. Without exception, they associated organized Islam with the oppression of women, with restrictive rules and obligations and with fear. They all held strong prejudices against Islam accumulating in childhood and earlier stages in their lives.

Clearly in the view of our participants following the rules of religion cannot be compatible with the spirit of the journey. Robert Bellah in *Beyond Belief* (1991) has elaborated on how religions with their plans and instructions are unfit for the modern age. "Religion is a way of making sense of the world, but ours is a world it is increasingly difficult to make sense of". He emphasized the "new mentality" of the modern subject which is characterized by an openness to change. This change manifested in the sixties with the advent of the counterculture movements and culminated today in the increasing genuine interest in spirituality that started in the West and now in Turkey. Old traditional religions are being pushed to the back in favor of New Age spirituality, technologies and therapies that are promising inner-transformation, healing and connection through *experience* for the "camped and bewildered" individuals of this world. (Bellah, 1991: 8). For the women in my study, New Age spirituality grants them the possibility to live, experience and express their own spirituality freely with no constrictions. Consequently, this has made it more appealing to women.

2.2. 'Experience' and 'Inner-Authority'

I have attempted through the previous part to explore my participants' stance on organized religions. In their view, New Age spirituality, more than organized religions, speaks to their experience of spirituality as women. This brings us to questioning the attributes of this new spirituality which make it more appealing to women. As we have seen in the previous parts, New Age as a culture, a spirituality and even as a labor market provides women with experiences and opportunities which liberate and 'innerly' empower them in ways that common culture, organized religions and labor markets would not. Accordingly, the following part explores how New Age spirituality can be a 'woman-friendly' spirituality which fits and values women's preferences and modes of expression while also giving primacy to their subjective spiritual experiences the totality of which were systematically devalued in patriarchal society and discourses. 'Experience' is a defining feature of New Age spirituality and it lies at its heart. This phenomenon gives primacy to subjective embodied experiences and the expression of them. The notion of 'inner-authority' is also part and parcel of the 'subjective' experience which highly characterizes a self-oriented approach to spirituality and which takes part in the packaged ideas within New Age spirituality. Women's involvement in this new spirituality marks in a way a feminine preference for spontaneity over structure, the inner over the outer, the horizontal over the vertical and the feminine over the masculine.

2.2.1 Primacy of Subjective Experience

I am a self-taught person. *I learned life through experience* and studying on subjects at my own desired depth and pace.

(Irem, 42, Muğla)

For me, only thing I learn is from experiences (...) this is one mistake people do they read a lot about *üzerlik Ayahuasca* then the mind talks thoughts ruin the experience.

(Havva, 32, Istanbul)

I was reading about it but *I mostly learned from doing, from experiencing.*

(Feride, 45, Muğla)

Central to New Age spirituality is 'experience'. It is a defining feature of this phenomenon and through which my participants told their stories. They are constantly speaking from their experiences and believe them to be the ultimate guide in their lives. Moreover, an individual's subjective direct experience of the divine or the sacred holds true more than any other objective external religious set of beliefs. David Ray Griffin has made a distinction between the belief in a divine reality and the 'experience' of it. Building on this he argued that postmodern spirituality, by envisioning 'supernaturalistic panentheism', affirms that "the world is present in deity and deity is present in the world" (Griffin, 1988: 17). The women in my study believe to be capable of having a direct experience of the divine. A further reflection on this approach makes us observe that it negates the masculine transcendental approach which posits the divine in a separate realm inaccessible by the average human being. Based on this, a feminine approach would be viewing the divine as immanent in the world and in individuals. New Age spirituality, by giving precedence to subjective experiences, values women's spiritual experiences of the divine. Both learning and knowing from experiencing were always emphasized in my participant's accounts.

According to Robert C. Fuller, the 'spiritual but not religious' individual tends to praise what he calls authentic and genuine spirituality which relies very much on private reflection and experience. (Fuller, 2001: 4). In the view of such individuals organized religion with its imposed beliefs and rituals makes a genuine private approach to the divine quite impossible. For this reason the primacy of experience in the discourses of my participants becomes essential to our attempt to understand their worldview and all of its components. An experimental approach to the divine and what Fuller refers to as 'private experience' (Fuller, 2001: 4-5) are evidently important to the seeker and to the process of seeking or questing. In the absence of religious beliefs, belief in the spiritual experience becomes the ultimate 'belief'. Lionel Corbett in *The Religious Function of the Psyche* (1996) makes an intriguing case through the framework of Depth Psychology to this phenomenon. He confirms that "no concept of divinity that is not the result of *personal experience* will ultimately hold sway" (Corbett, 1996: 2). Anything that is based on authority rather than personal experience is doomed to provoke reactions of disbelief or strong rejection. Similarly Martyn Percy has concluded in a recent study of the contemporary attitudes towards religion and

spirituality that individualist-spirituality is on the rise and it appears to be “pointing towards foregrounding of personal *experience* and spiritual fulfilment and suggests that formal and traditional religion is consigned further into the background” (Percy, 2019: 171). Experience decides the beliefs and practices of the New Age seeker. The inner experiences are the reference not the scriptures of organized religions. When I asked Dicle about her religious beliefs she assuredly responded:

I have no religious faith left in me. I believe in Allah. I believe in a creator being. I know that I am a part (piece) of it. I know that I am a (the) face of Allah on earth just like every human being. I believe that every woman is a walking goddess, every man is a walking god, so that human being is not something that is created, but a creator. That there are human beings that can control/manage and create their own reality, their own awareness¹⁶

(Dicle, 52, Antalya)

This belief in the immanence of the divine started making sense in the flow of Dicle’s story when she gave the details of her personal direct *experience* of God which was the outcome of a one hour long New Age breathing technique called Transformational Breathing. She said: “I experienced such a session during breathing therapy.. I became one with the god in me and I remembered the word I gave and remembered why I am in the world” (Dicle, 52, Antalya)¹⁷. Her experience of union with God is translated into a belief in the divine essence that resides in her and in all beings. What is crucial is the sense of certitude that comes with personal experience and how it was the outcome of a breathing technique. Havva’s encounter with the divine happened during an Ayahuasca ceremony. She used the story as a revealing response about her transformed conception of God and how she came to know the real meaning behind *La Ilaha Illa Allah*:

¹⁶ Original in Turkish: Bir dini inancım kalmadı. Allah’a inanıyorum. Yaratıcı varlığa inanıyorum onun bir parçası olduğumu biliyorum benim Allah’ın bu dünyadaki yüzü olduğumu biliyorum her bir insan gibi her kadının yürüyen tanrıça her erkeğin yürüyen tanrı yani insanın yaratılmış değil yaratan olduğuna inanıyorum. Kendi gerçekliğini kendi farkındalığını yönetebilen yaratabilen insanlar olduğunu. (Dicle, 52, Antalya)

¹⁷ Original in Turkish: “ya ben nefes terapisini esnasında öyle bir seans yaşadım ki içimdeki tanrıyla bir oldum ve verdiğim sözü hatırladım ve dünyada neden olduğumu hatırladım” (Dicle, 52, Antalya)

I was going up to the high I was feeling I am going up somewhere and I was seeing my body from up I was sitting in the ceremony and I was seeing myself from up I was feeling the wind and stars and things when I was in very high effect of Ayahuasca I was in somewhere bright but blindly bright and I heard voice it was plant voice I think told me 'you are there now ask your question' "you are in front of the creature ask your question" and I was thinking okay I am really there in front of God or something Allah and I was thinking for a while and I said I have no question I don't know what to ask and the voice asked me again it's now your time to ask if you have question and I repeat again I have no question and then I felt so much thankful and bless shukur¹⁸ I felt shukur everywhere physically like rain I said thanks that you gave this life to me if you are God Allah really thanks to send me here that's it I have no question and then when I was going down I heard La Ilaha Illa Allah even though I had no connection with muslim religion even though I am rejecting but then later I learned la ilaha illa Allah means unity actually that's it it is not even about muslim religion it is Arabic sentence it's like now I say -we are one- I felt just unity. I seek for feeling unity.

(Havva, 33, Istanbul)

Every experience comes with solid realizations. Havva's experience transformed her rejection into tolerance and her spiritual shamanic path made her go from atheist to a believer in a divine presence, energy or essence. What she believes and claims to be a personal experience of god made her speak with certainty about what she claims to be the essence of the Muslim religion and to feel that she has learned from her experience more than any book could teach her. Both Havva and Dicle have experienced what they refer to as *oneness* in different ways and through different techniques and they share the belief that the divine is one in all beings and in all religions.

The primacy of experience in New Age teachings and practices have the potential to inspire and innerly empower women. A spirituality which puts individual experience at its heart has the potential to empower individuals in general and women in particular. The motto of this phenomenon becomes "I experience, therefore I am". In that sense, New Age spirituality is a 'woman-friendly' spirituality which fits and values women's preferences and modes of expression while also giving primacy to their subjective spiritual experiences the totality of which are systematically devalued in patriarchal society and discourses.

¹⁸ Shukur is Turkish for gratitude

2.2.2 Primacy of ‘Inner-Authority’

The big difference between the older forms of spirituality and 21st Century Spirituality is the movement away from an external authority figure and a movement toward an empowerment of each seeker. 21st Century Spirituality is not about being told what to do... It's about *becoming one's own authority*, so that our moral behavior and our cosmic awe stem from the inside out.

(Lesser, 2000: 48)

Having a personal experience of the divine results in the attainment of a strong sense of what we can call inner-authority which accompanies the spiritual seeker on his or her journey. If the spiritual journey cannot be organized or regulated then it has to be improvised according to the personal embodied experience of the seeker. Paul Heelas has used the notion of ‘internalized authority’ to refer to this individual potential in his introduction to *Spiritualities of Life* (2008). He used it in connection to the consumerism that dominates the New Age culture, however in this part I will make use of a similar expression which is ‘inner-authority’. In their accounts, my participants expressed this inner-authority in different ways. I was able to observe it in the way they took inspiration from their own inner worlds and also in how they accepted or rejected something based on how much it aligned or ‘vibrated’ with their inner feelings. Sometimes this ‘inner-authority’ was expressed in the unwillingness to commit to one path and the desire to experience with different new age teachings and practices. Inner-authority was also expressed through disbelief in anything that does not resonate with the inner self. Philip Wexler described the self that is autonomous, expressive and free from the restrictive as the ‘unbounded self’ (Wexler, 2000: 2). The self that abides only by the instructions of the inner guide which could no longer tolerate to be under any form of religious authority. Bellah described it as “an utterly individualized ‘habit of the heart’, where one’s own inner voice is taken as the ultimate life guide” (Bellah, 1985). My female participants referred to this inner voice and to their intuition as their guide. This attitude gives a total sense of freedom where one does, believes and practices what he or she feels resonance with. When I asked Dicle about the teachers who inspired her on the path she responded: “There aren’t any, I am by myself. Physically in this world I do not follow any teacher. Our masters prophets and teachers with their exemplary lives have been a source of light but *I follow my own*

light” (Dicle, 52, Antalya)¹⁹. Dicle referred to this inner-authority using the classic expression of “following her own light”. Selin, however expressed it differently by likening herself to a book that she takes as her only reference in the process of learning about her spiritual growth in terms of the feminine: “The important book I was reading was myself -my own feminine- having conversations with it checking with myself what is happening...” (Selin, 30, Istanbul).

In the discourse of Dicle and Selin, the inner world is highly prioritized and viewed as a sacred realm. Despite the numerous external influences that helped and guided my participants on their paths, they still claimed that the effectiveness of such influences would not have benefited them without the resonance with the inner-authority. Canan, who is a follower of the Turkish Rukaiya order under the guidance of the Sufi master Sherif Baba²⁰, attempted to put this experience of resonance into words:

The Tariq²¹ you go on is close to your essence; this is the thing that *vibrates your soul*. So I cannot say she is different or he is that. I can say only about myself. Their style or hal²² vibrated me or it was the time. Because there is always a time when the flower blooms. We cannot just open it and make it bloom it would die. Maybe it was the time for me.

(Canan, 40, Muğla)

Canan found resonance with the modern Sufi order of Sherif Baba who believes true Sufism is beyond religion. Similarly, Duygu continuously underlined the importance of inner creativity and freedom from “outer forms”. The story of her quest revolves around her burning desire to find her own authentic movement emerging from within beyond any external instructions. This happened when she encountered the Skinner Releasing Technique: “This technique is teaching me how to align with myself in relationship to the universe, find the alignment inside not by outer forms. It is helping you find inner forms. Finding you [your] own inner practice your own path” (Duygu, 42, Antalya).

¹⁹ Original in Turkish: “yok yok ben kendi kendime. Fiziksel olarak bu yaşamda hiçbir takip edeceğim kişi yok. Erenlerimiz peygamberlerimiz üstadlarımız her zaman yaşam biçimleriyle ışık oldular ama ben kendi ışığımı takip ediyorum.” (Dicle, 52, Antalya)

²⁰ Sherif Baba is a Turkish sufi master who travels between the United States and Turkey to be with his followers. His order is based on the notion of universality and love of humanity beyond religion..

²¹ Tariq is Turkish for path

²² Hal is Turkish for state of being

Each woman in the previous examples has expressed this sense of 'inner-authority' in her own way. Dicle spoke of an 'inner light' that guides her, Selin saw her-self- as 'the book' par excellence that could teach her and guide her, Canan opted for the path that 'vibrated in unison with her soul' and Duygu emphasized the importance of her 'inner forms' and 'inner practice'. These descriptions point to the uniqueness and authenticity of the self as a source of guidance and truth. In each human being there is a place where all truth can be accessed and all guidance can be sought. This leads to the understanding that each self is unique, each self has access to the truth and each self is free to express itself. The fact that the 'inner-authority' becomes the arbitrator on all religious and moral issues limits the power of any form of 'external' authority. This orientation towards the self has been criticized as narcissistic, destructive to the self and to society (Taylor, 1989: 511). However Woodhead and Sointu, having approached the phenomenon through gender experiences, shed light on the way women's trust in their subjective experiences and their expression of them can have an empowering effect when observed in relation to contemporary femininities. (2008: 265). New Age teachings and practices give great importance to subjects and experiences that are, in the case of women, marginalized in religion and society (Woodhead and Sointu, 2008: 272). When women start speaking from a place of 'inner-authority' this means they have unleashed the potential for their 'selves' to be expressed and be valued. In other words, they start perceiving them-selves- beyond socially constructed roles and social expectations which grants them power. They all aimed at ridding themselves of all patterns, forms and structures imposed from the outside and allowing the form to emerge from the inside- from the self. The primacy of subjective experiences and of 'inner-authority' within New Age spirituality, approached from the lens of gendered subjectivity, makes it possible for us to understand why New Age spirituality appeals to women.

The focus on the 'subject', the 'self' and the 'inner' within New Age culture brings to the table more questions about the reasons behind this gradual 'subjective turn' (Heelas, 2005). The orientation towards the self and the 'subjective' experience in New Age spirituality can be seen as a manifestation of what Simmel calls 'subjective religiosity' which can be interpreted as a 'feminine' approach to the divine or the sacred. Looking at the phenomenon from this perspective could bring more insights

into why women are more appealed by this ‘subjective’ spirituality. The following chapter addresses this claim and aims at conceptualizing the phenomenon at hand holistically rather than superficially.



3. NEW AGE SPIRITUALITY AS FEMININE

In the research literature on New Age spirituality, the spiritual seeker is widely portrayed as the neoliberal consumer of experiences who picks and chooses what fits his or her needs to be granted instant satisfaction. The seeking is a perpetual experience of shopping in the spiritual marketplace. Contrary to this common theorization, my interlocutors have spoken to me of a different kind of spirituality. One that is founded on values of interconnectedness, that is relational and that promises empowerment for women. In other words, a spirituality which venerates the qualities of ‘the feminine’. In this chapter I aim to explore the nature and characteristics of a feminine spirituality and the way it differs from masculine patriarchal spirituality both in the research literature and in my participants’ discourses. First, I will analyze the narrative of ‘the feminine’ as a mode of consciousness and how it came to be embraced by my participants as an empowering narrative which transforms their understanding of femininity. I will trace the origin of this narrative which has its roots in spiritual feminist thought. Second, I will shed light on ‘the feminine’ as a cosmic energy that is rising and which is believed by my participants to trigger the awakening of women much faster than men. These two approaches to ‘the feminine’ can potentially cultivate in women a sense of spiritual superiority. Many of the women in my research share what Crowley calls “the essentialist fantasy” (Crowley, 2011) which consists of a set of essentialist assumptions which grant women a spiritually superior position due to their biological difference and feminine qualities. Despite this essentialist tendency, I argue that it has strategically served as a mode of self-empowerment and has inspired women to take on the task of ‘healing’. Moreover, the sense of responsibility towards the task led them to involve collectively with other women in acts of solidarity and healing. Their involvement in circles and retreats is also the result of a global trend whose influence has reached Turkey.

3.1. What is ‘Feminine’ Spirituality?

At an early stage in my research, I found that New Age spirituality informs the feminine sensibilities that I encountered throughout my study. There is a common theorization in the literature that New Age practices, for the most part, appeal to women due to the fact that they are more feminine than masculine. (Trzebiatowska,

Bruce, 2012: 71-72). While this is true about the practices, the question that I aim at answering is about the nature of contemporary spirituality. What makes it the extreme opposite of traditional organized religions? New Age spirituality has been described repeatedly in the research literature as diffuse. Ivan Varga, in his attempt to explain the diffuse nature of the phenomenon at hand, based himself on Georg Simmel's perspective of a religiosity that requires no object -no religion. He referred to this form of religiosity as 'diffused' religion due to an emergent need for a religious feeling beyond rigidified declared dogmas. In other words, religiosity becomes prioritized over religion, mysticism over dogmatism, and feeling over believing. Varga defines this particular nature of contemporary spirituality in the following words:

Contemporary spirituality therefore expresses several features of postmodern conditions, especially the possibility offered to the individual to shape his or her view of the world (...) The spread of so-called 'do-it-yourself religions' and 'diffuse religions' involves choosing elements from different religions irrespective of dogmatic positions. (Varga, 2007: 145)

Aside from being diffuse, the eclectic, pluralist and integral nature of today's spirituality has also been emphasized over and over by many sociologists of religion. In *Spirituality and Society: Postmodern Visions*, a work which combines the theories of a number of prominent postmodern thinkers, the envisioning of a postmodern spirituality is comprehensively explored (Griffin, 1988: 14-18). American professor of philosophy of religion David Ray Griffin starts the introduction of this book by reminding his reader of how "postmodernism refers to a *diffuse* sentiment rather than to any common *set of doctrines*". Similarly, postmodern spirituality, as opposed to modern spirituality, is diffuse and improvised rather than concentrated and organized. It is also a spirituality which focuses on the notions of organicism and holism while also going beyond dualism and materialism. For example, with such an approach, a sense of oneness with nature replaces the sense of feeling separate from nature. In short, Griffin highlights the features of postmodern spirituality by its opposite. While modern spirituality is an "one-sidedly masculine" which rejects the feminine side to divinity, postmodern spirituality embraces it. (Griffin, 1988: 8-15). In that sense, postmodern spirituality is a feminine spirituality and more importantly it is a spirituality which resembles in its nature New Age spirituality. The New Age, as a

label, gives the idea of the arrival of a new era. Perhaps it also marks the rise of a new consciousness. One that is more feminine. (Bowman, 1999: 182). In short, for spirituality to be diffuse and all-inclusive is for it to be feminine.

What seemed to emerge as a conclusion from this observation is that spirituality today, whether we call it postmodern, New Age, holistic, or alternative, is seemingly less masculine more feminine less structured, more fluid, less vertical, more horizontal, less hierarchical more holistic and so on and so forth. The contributions of postmodern thinkers on spirituality are crucial for understanding contemporary spirituality since they provide an alternative interpretation of the nature of New Age spirituality. Griffin, in his vision of a postmodern society and spirituality, emphasized how this society would transcend the modern worlds' individualism, anthropocentrism, patriarchy, mechanization, economism, consumerism, nationalism, and militarism which have been causing considerable amount of harm to humanity and the earth (Griffin, 1988: xi). Postmodern spirituality with its feminine qualities is emerging as a counter form of spirituality inviting humanity into having an integral holistic approach to life and nature. All of these claims could be hard to believe when New Age spirituality happens to be the child of the capitalist consumerist system. Yet there lies in it a set of so-called feminine values, emphasized by my participants, which promise a world that is in harmony with life.

The emergence of this feminine spirituality has also been a subject of deep interest in spiritual teachings and circles, yet it takes on a slightly different appellation which is 'the feminine'. The feminine here does not mean the set of qualities that have been traditionally associated with women. The feminine here is a state of consciousness and of being best defined by Sufi mystic and author Llewellyn Vaughen Lee in his book *The Return of the Feminine and the World Soul* (2009). He describes the consciousness of the feminine in relation to masculine consciousness in the following words:

As a part of the sacred mystery of creation, the feminine is always attuned to the oneness, the interconnected wholeness of life. While the bright light of masculine consciousness sees each object standing out clear and distinct, the diffuse, more hidden consciousness of the feminine sees the patterns of the relationships that connect them (Vaughen Lee, 2009: 19)

What I came to observe from both Griffin's and Lee's observations is that there are two types of spirituality, one that is masculine and one that is feminine. In the same way Griffin spoke of a transitioning from a patriarchal masculine modern spirituality to a more feminine and diffuse postmodern spirituality, Vaughn Lee spoke of the return of the feminine as a universal phenomenon that would bring about a shift in our spirituality and our relation to religion and to the divine. In the discourses of my participants, this distinction was also made in the way they rejected patriarchal spirituality in favour of a feminine approach to spirituality. The feminine, in their discourses, was a recurring narrative through which they expressed their worldviews and their spirituality.

3.2. Re-patterning Femininity through 'The Feminine'

When it comes to woman spirituality, the question of gender becomes crucial and central to the discussion. The talk on women's spirituality can never be void of references to the patriarchal system heavily blamed as harmful. As I have discussed earlier, the women of this study chose to seek outside organized religions because of the restrictions they could have on their spiritual experience and their potential for expressivity as women. There was a general consensus amongst them that organized religions are patriarchal and offensive to female personhood. Barbara G. Walker wrote in the introduction of her book *Women's rituals: A sourcebook* (1990) about how women in the West, back in the 1970s 1980s, expressed an interest in exploring new kinds of spiritual relationships that are "more supportive of the feminine image". In the past 10 years middle to upper class women in Turkey started sharing a similar interest. They are starting to practice alternative and unorthodox rituals that are oriented to women and their wellbeing. Before giving some examples of these women I will address the disdain towards the patriarchal system they all shared and how they agreed upon the incapacity of the patriarchal ways to bring peace and healing to humanity. While the patriarchal system, as a social system which gives power to men, was criticized and blamed by my interlocutors, some women spoke of patriarchy as a way of perceiving the world that fuels separation while prioritizing masculine qualities over feminine qualities such as sense-perception over intuition and objectivity over subjectivity. The following examples by Selin, Sezin and Merve clarify this idea.

“Because if you put labels on other sisters and if you compare yourself with other sisters and if you become jealous of them then this means you have the patriarchy in you. You have a daughter of patriarchy in you which is the unhealthy feminine.”

(Selin, 30, Istanbul)

“Today women are not saying let’s support each other they are still supporting masculine they are in love with their sons and they pamper them and they don’t pamper their daughters. So yes women were oppressed but those oppressed women oppressed women more than men. That cycle needs to be broken. If patriarchy needs to die. They need to work for it”

(Merve, 48, Nevşehir)

Selin and Merve along with other participants redefined notions like power, authenticity, unity and wholeness from the perspective of healthy femininity. Through their discourses, I came to understand that in order for an individual, man or a woman, to fathom the feminine facets of spirituality he or she has to rid themselves of the residue of their patriarchal selves. In order to achieve this many of my participants delved into the popular New Age literature on Jungian psychology and found a body of knowledge on women’s unique experience of spirituality. To mention a few, Selin, Mehtap, Sezin and Feride are particularly well read on the writings of well-known Jungian psychoanalysts such as Clarissa Pinkola Estes and Marion Woodman. Both *Women Who Run With the Wolves* (1992) and *Conscious Femininity* are books that became immensely popular and have influenced many women across the globe as well as many women in Turkey. For instance, the famous work of Clarissa Estes has gained immense popularity in Turkey and has reached its 27th edition. One of the women I interviewed, Mehtap, has spoken to me about the translator of the book whom she had interviewed and had thanked him on behalf of all Turkish women for making this contribution. In her view, this book is a treasure that continues to initiate Turkish women on the path of understanding and valuing themselves while also transforming their conception of femininity. With this said, it comes as no surprise that Mehtap as well as Sezin have already met with Estes in person in Colorado on a retreat program and became her messengers in Turkey by spreading the tales and values of her book.

My purpose from exploring such works is to show how my participants argued, through their actions, that the transitioning from a patriarchal toxic worldview to a feminine holistic one requires seeking, learning and a process of cleansing. For instance, Selin has come to realize that “we have patriarchy in us. It is not a system outside of us it is in us” after having delved into the writings of Estes and Woodman and also after having participated in woman circles and retreats. She now believes that women need to break free from all social restrictions and to “reach this state of rawness. This part in us that is not tamed, that is not educated that is not smoldered that is not shaped and formed to be able to fit into something else. So this kind of rawness and authenticity” (Selin, 30, Istanbul). She continually referred to women that still carry the patriarchal consciousness as daughters of patriarchy. In her view the indication that women still fuel toxic patriarchal thinking is in the way they judge other women, they try to gain power over men or claim to be superior to them and, finally and most importantly in the way they would value socially constructed sexualized femininity in the place of their true authentic selves all of which cause separation. On the other hand, the indication of a healthy feminine consciousness is in the experience of authenticity and in union with life that is beyond the dualism of patriarchy and gender. Indeed, the narrative of ‘the feminine’ gave rise to an alternative understanding and experience of femininity.

I have highlighted the different ways my participants viewed patriarchy and patriarchal spirituality and how they delved into a learning journey with the intention to free themselves from the constrictions that the patriarchal system has put on them psychologically and spiritually. What is quite essential to point out in the following paragraphs is the way my participants have defined feminine spirituality and the feminine approach to the divine.

For example, Sezin’s journey took a turn when she questioned her inherited ideas about power and transformed her views by redefining it from the standpoint of feminine spirituality.

So I would define it like really being in the heart in the unity consciousness and bringing everything together there is no separation at all in femininity but you have to go deep deep inside and find your deep self in there which

is not separated which is your whole inside that is the femininity and maybe lyrics music poems intuitions art love and being open being vulnerable these are all aspects of femininity and also being in your inner power there is no authority outside but there is respect to each one of us. In patriarchy so there is this hierarchy that is why the separation comes there is no femininity there you have to obey the powerful one.

(Sezin, 42, Izmir)

Sezin identifies feminine consciousness in unity and patriarchal consciousness in separation. She went further and drew on their contrasting approaches to power with patriarchy stressing power over others while femininity stressing power from within. The definition of the patriarchal way naturally introduces the definition of its opposite; the feminine way. Feride as well found patriarchal monotheistic religions as insensitive to the feminine approach to the divine. And came to this inner discovery after an intense period of burn out which she viewed as the time for her to face her “shadows”.

Simultaneously as I was descending. We call it descent in feminine spirituality so you descend...descending into the body, into the earth, and that's also the shadows, the more dark side...but it is not used as a negative...it is...you need to get in touch with that for wholeness...we can't always talk about light and...there is no light if we don't go through the darkness. So the more masculine approach is the ascending, the Great Spirit, you go through the mind and up and above... It's like there is no “body” you leave your body basically. You know that kind of spirituality. The monotheistic religions are more like that. That's the masculine and the more feminine approach is the descent through the body, the earth and it is so body centric while other spiritualities are more spirit oriented. The indigenous practices are very feminine.

(Feride, 45, Muğla)

Feride believes that the omnipotence and transcendence of the masculine God of monotheistic religions and “his” place above creation is at the root of all negligence and harm towards nature and all bodily manifestations. Professor of constructive theory Catherine Keller in an article entitled *Toward Postpatriarchal Postmodernity* (1988) brings our attention to the way women have been devalued across history. The notion of the “feminine” that we have been discussing represents all that has been devalued in the patriarchal world.

She symbolizes all the power, value, and wisdom culturally repressed in and through the oppression of women. Sometimes this complex of power, value, and wisdom has been called the Feminine to distinguish it from particular women. But metaphors do not float free of specific embodiments without becoming stereotypes thus Goddess is an apotheosis of all that has been devalued in and through the devaluation of women: difference, emotion, body, nature, cosmos. (Keller, 1988: 77)

Feride, in her explanation, gave an example of the way the idea of the ascent towards a celestial god led to the negligence of the body. In other words, the masculine above oppresses the feminine below embodied by the earth and by women's bodies. In opposition to the "ascension to God in the heavens" approach of monotheistic religions Feride valued instead the descent into oneself in order to connect with the divine within and also embodied in nature. Keller, in her vision of a post-patriarchal world, reached the conclusion that in a consciousness which values all the manifestations of the feminine, "spirit then no longer works against body, for the universe unfolds here and now, from our own flesh." (Keller, 1988: 77-78). Both in the discourse of Feride and Keller's views, we can see how feminine spirituality is horizontal demanding a sense of interconnectedness with life and nature while patriarchal spirituality is vertical leaning towards a veneration of a higher power and a dualism between humans and the divine.

3.2.1. Origin of the Narrative

The question that we could ask now, where does this narrative originate from? How did my participants come to this holistic understanding of the notions of patriarchy, femininity and 'the feminine'? While the striking majority of the women I interviewed generally judged feminism as conflict oriented, the narrative of the feminine that they highly value originates from feminist thought. Many of the ideas, values and convictions they shared about the feminine originate from the works of feminists who founded the women's spirituality movement or were directly influenced by it 40 years ago and which grew out of political feminism in the mid-1970s. Back in the 1970s "feminism has actively encouraged people to explore alternative religious philosophies, especially worship of the goddess." (Fuller, 2001: 95). For example authors such as Clarissa Estes, Vandana Shiva, Ursula K. Le Giun and Barbara Walker,

who are highly valued by my participants, are all feminist and eco-feminist authors that have brought awareness to the oppression of women and nature in their writings and have attempted to empower women and women's bodies through a revival of premodern customs such as rituals, storytelling, dancing and handcraft.

The spiritual awareness that these authors call for is diverse, diffuse, integrative, holistic, based on communion with nature, and calls for reimagining of religious symbols, myths and God-concepts. In that sense, when my participants refer to 'the feminine' they refer to a form of spirituality which values women, their feminine qualities, their intuition, their creativity and their difference without necessarily calling for intolerance of men, masculinity or masculine qualities. It would be adequate to mention now that the feminism my participants rejected is the radical form of feminism which calls for a radical reordering of society and not the spiritual form of it which puts emphasis on women's 'inherent' feminine qualities, women's bodies and women's spiritual power (Crowley, 2011: 164). The fact that my participants have been influenced by various strands of feminist spirituality directly or through New Age culture means that they have also been influenced by the essentialist tendencies that lie within it.

I have explored the definition, nature, values and origins of feminine spirituality. We saw how my participants defined the feminine in terms of qualities, values and a mode of consciousness and how 'the feminine' as a narrative originates from spiritual feminism. However, an intriguing development took place in the interviews when my interlocutors started speaking to me of the feminine in terms of cosmic energy that is rising globally and which is having consequences on individuals, particularly women, and on life as a whole. We will see how my participants have come across this development through different paths, teachings and readings in popular New Age literature. My ultimate aim is to show how both the discourses on the feminine as a feminist narrative and as a rising energy in the cosmos have paved the way to a spiritual form of gender essentialism which puts women on top of the pyramid.

3.2.2. The Feminine is Rising: “An essentialist fantasy”

Prior to conducting any interview I had absolutely no knowledge of the “the feminine” as a cosmic energy. After the sixth encounter I noticed that many women spoke of a universal energetic shift that has been gradually taking place yet culminated in the year 2012. It is a narrative that explains the rising consciousness of humanity due to the transitioning from masculine to feminine energy or from Yang to Yin energy. Many women in Turkey have learned about this shift narrative through different sources and spiritual teachings such as Kryon channelings, feminist spirituality, the Sufi teachings of today’s less traditional Sufism and from other sources as well. For instance, Dicle came across this narrative through the Kryon channelings and teachings of Lee Carroll. She gave a detailed explanation of this emerging phenomenon in the following words:

In every man there is both yang and yin energy, in every woman there is yang and yin. Yin energy means pure doubtless motherly compassion meaning the allowing, the space giving...in men this pure doubtless mother energy will rise, also in women this pure doubtless mother energy will rise. We call it divine feminine pure compassion energy. That’s why we see more women. Also, women give birth. The awakening and balancing of women with this energy and their raising of the girl or boy they give birth to create a new awareness that will change everything. We are now at the 4th dimension vibration level. Since 21 December 2012. This 4th dimension vibration level will last 16 thousand years. Humanity is now doomed to wake up, now we have passed this step and Gaia is pushing humanity to wake up. We will surely advance, no longer can the darkness win.²³

(Dicle, 52, Antalya)

Sezin also shared a similar account of the one Dicle knows yet she weaves her own story into this universal shift narrative:

in 2010 I resigned from the company and from that world and all my dark night of the soul started -laughing- so yeah my old identity now I can define it my old way of living which was false the false identity false way of living it was not me at all was really deconstructing and it was painful. I think 2012

²³ Original in Turkish: Bizim aslında her erkeğin içinde de yang ve yin var her kadının içinde yang ve yin var. Yin enerji yani saf kuşkusuz anne şefkati yani izin veren yani alan yani..erkeklerde saf kuşkusuz anne enerjisini yükseltecek kadında da saf kuşkusuz anne enerjisini yükseltecek bu ilahi dişil saf şefkat enerjisi diyoruz buna. O yüzden daha çok kadınlar görüyoruz. Bir de kadınlar doğurgan bu kadınların bu enerjiyle uyanması ve dengelenmesi ve doğurdukları kız ya da erkeği büyütmesi her şey değiştirecek olan yeni bir farkındalık yaratıyor. Biz şimdi 4. Boyut titreşim düzeyindeyiz 21 Aralık 2012’den bu yana 16 bin yıl sürecek bu 4. boyut titreşim düzeyi. İnsanlık artık uyanmaya ilerlemeye mahkum çünkü artık bu işi bir kere geçtik ve Gaia insanlığı itiyor uyanmaya. Mutlaka ilerleyeceğiz artık hiç bir şekilde asla karanlık kazanamaz. (Dicle, 52, Antalya)

was the year that I really met with the divine feminine. So she came in a dream to me I always have powerful dreams but I was not on them so and those days I was living this dark night of the soul I was really struggling and I was trying to find a way to go to the light so I started to you know read spiritual book attend some spiritual groups but it was not only woman because those years we were still asleep you know.

(...) it was 2012 so I am mentioning this year because in that year in spiritual texts they mention that something shifted and the divine feminine energetically was again birthed on the earth so I think many woman around those years started to awaken and we didn't know what is happening and what is this all about...we were just calling this inner fire in us and we were questioning we were crying we were how do I say...arıyorduk [we were searching] We were looking for something and we didn't know what we were looking for.

(Sezin, 42, Izmir)

I saw that women were up front in this transition (...) Women have special gifts and power because we are more in touch with feminine energy that is rising more naturally. This is not about superiority or being better than men but our nature allows it. It enables us to embody that energy which is needed in the world right now.

(Feride, 45, Muğla)

In the previous examples, Dicle, Sezin, and Feride speak of the same narrative and based on it each one of them shared a certain belief concerning the place of women in this shift. They basically believe that a cycle has ended and a new kind of feminine awareness has been on the rise ever since. Both Dicle and Sezin brought in the influence of the shift on women in particular. Sezin even clearly stated that around 2012 many women including herself had an experience of the Divine Feminine²⁴ and “started to awaken” while Dicle used the narrative as an explanation to women’s increasing participation in alternative spiritual practices. Equally, Feride emphasized the impact of the rising feminine energy on women by giving the argument that women’s bodies are vehicles designed to embody the feminine. More importantly Feride also said that “women have special gifts and power” and are “more in touch with [the] feminine energy that is rising”.

²⁴ Equivalent to The Feminine or Sacred Feminine

This shift seems to benefit women much more than men and that women are the ones who are more sensitive to this universal shift and to the feminine. The study of the women's accounts on this shift has led me to look into how it could have an empowering effect on women. In other words, from the perspective of this universal shift and that of my participants, women become spiritually more privileged. The global narrative on the rise of the feminine grants women a position of superiority and also of responsibility which results in a sense of empowerment based on a set of essentialist assumptions. Women not only embody the feminine much faster than men but they also "*inherently* embody the feminine qualities that are so desperately needed in our world right now. Women hold the power to re-pattern our humanity, our civilization." (Feride, 45, Muğla). Crowley, writing on the beliefs of New Age women, observed that they tend to use essentialist arguments "to testify to their authority in the religious sphere" and to emphasize the fact that they are "more spiritual". An extra tendency which applies to Feride and many others is to say that "they have inherited a world that "men have ruined," and that only women have the special power to fix it". (Crowley, 2011: 164). When asked to reason out their spiritual superiority many women put forth the biological argument. In short, they emphasize women's cyclical connections with the earth and even what is beyond, the universe. Women, by virtue of their being females, their capacity of giving birth and their feminine qualities of caring, nurturing and protecting play a significant crucial role in balancing and healing the Earth. In the following examples Feride, Mehtap, Sezin and Duygu advanced this argument.

The women I think by nature are ...their maternal instinct and you know the nature of hormones. The simple fact that we have cycles, we have a womb and we have blood cycles.(...) our bodies are cyclical and that is more in tune with the cyclical nature of nature. I think that makes us more in tune with change, cycles and more open to the mysteries of birth and death and life. And also these maternal instincts that I mentioned...because we are in trouble...humanity is in trouble...so that archetypal mother energy is activated in women and a lot of women after giving birth they go through this spiritual awakening almost.

(Feride, 45, Mugla)

I think it is about the *rahim*²⁵ thing to me. We carry this as women we carry this umm name of Allah in us and we are aware of it more than man maybe and we have *döngü* cycle we have our cycles and you cannot ignore your cycles as a woman and you cannot! (...) The sun rises every day and as it sets it reminds us actually of how we are in constant movement and how we are part of the universe. Nothing is fixed and standing still, a woman with her body is more aware of this²⁶

(Mehtap, 39, Istanbul)

women carry the feminine side in our bodies much more than men because our bodies are designed biologically to carry feminine essence the energy must [much] more than [than] man because we have the breasts the hips our womb area the womb is the *çanak* umm carrier (...) So that's why the woman had to awaken before man and engage with spirituality more than man.

(Sezin, 42, Izmir)

Because they are in this physical connection with the nature. We can't deny it we are bleeding every month there is a time (...) And we give birth and do all these strange things than man doesn't do and we are programmed to protect a child we have to be stronger if you look at the animal female they are stronger.

(Duygu, 42, Antalya)

Clearly I saw that there was a pattern of thought emerging. My interlocutors agree that it is the biological difference which allows women to be more “in tune” with the cycles of nature, with change, to be prone to awaken and engage spiritually and to be stronger. There lies the essentialist assumption that women are closer to nature, that they have this biological connection and spiritual affinity with nature that men do not (Birkeland, 1993: 22) or as Vaughan Lee put it, “women’s bodies, their sexuality, their physical cycles are sacred in a way that is not true for men” (Vaughan Lee, 2009: 68). Women by virtue of their capacity of giving birth are endowed with maternal instincts which serve their spiritual awakening, something that is lacking in a man’s biology. Adding to the biological difference, my participants also believe that men are suffering from a state of numbness due to which hinders their potential to awaken and connect the way

²⁵ By saying ‘rahim’ Mehtap was referring to the womb in Arabic which shares the same root with the name of Allah ‘Al Rahim’ implying that women carry the divine name of Allah by virtue of having wombs.

²⁶Original in Turkish: güneş her gün doğup her gün batarak aslında bizim hareket halinde bir evrenin parçası olduğumuzu bizi hatırlatıyor sabit duran hiç bir şey yok, kadın bedeniyle birlikte bunun daha çok farkında bunu (Mehtap, 39, Istanbul)

women do. In the following examples, Sezin and Selin underlined this lacking aspect in men.

They don't talk about themselves, they don't open their feelings and talk about vulnerable experiences. The unconsciousness. We have to go to the unconsciousness, the feminine side.

(Sezin, 42, Izmir)

But because again men societally and historically they are not given the space and opportunity to connect with their own feminine but it is not because of their nature it is because of the conditions so if they are given the right conditions men can heal as much as women can. So in this story I see women as the lucky ones not men because they can say "yeter artık" [enough] but men they are not even there! They can't say it let alone becoming healers. To say it they need to get out of this state of numbness.

(Selin, 30, Istanbul)

Men are not as capable as women to connect with 'the feminine', to tap into their unconscious or their shadow side, to allow for moments of vulnerability that allow for healing. Here not only the biological difference is believed to grant women a sense of superiority in spiritual matters but also the social conditionings of femininity and masculinity that raises boys to suppress their emotions and to show no signs of vulnerability. Men in society and particularly in Turkish culture, spiritually speaking, are less privileged from that perspective. Men, due to social upbringing, are portrayed to be in a state of numbness. Deep in the culture and in society girls are allowed to be more sensitive and emotional, they are allowed to cry, on the other hand boys are not always encouraged to show emotions by crying. From the perspective of the women in my study, if one is incapable of tapping into their feminine, into their grief or pain then they would not be able to experience spiritual awareness.

Despite the essentialism that is at work in their systems of belief, women draw on these assumptions to empower themselves. I observed as I interacted with my participants that 'the feminine' is perceived as a psychological symbol which is deployed strategically in order to bring about personal transformation, liberation and empowerment in women. It is a symbol which helps them value their femininity and their feminine qualities yet does not engender hostility, hatred or desire to oppress

men. Elizabeth Carlassare in *Essentialism in Ecofeminist Discourse* (1994) defends essentialist discourse by underlining how the reconstruction of characteristics that have been traditionally associated with women serves in “fostering social and psychological transformations and empowering women while working to liberate women from their gender construct.” (Carlassare, 1994: 228). Such constructions can potentially cultivate in women both a sense of spiritual superiority and responsibility and that of itself is an opportunity for them to sit in their power. The assumptions and the narratives that we have examined put the responsibility on women to spiritually awaken and heal themselves in order to nurture and heal the earth. Or as Feride put it, women take over the “spiritual labor, it's like giving birth...laboring. We are holding most of the spiritual laboring right now” (Feride, 45, Muğla). In 1994, Cheree Carlson wrote an article summarizing Lucretia Coffin Mott's ideas on womanhood. Mott's early feminist text written in 1849 contains an intriguing statement which would resonate with many of the women in this study. Even though Mott's writing dates far back it shows how the capacity of women to heal and alter the world has been envisioned by many feminists and continues to play a role in empowering women around the globe. Mott even explicitly states that women are “morally superior” hence they should take on the responsibility of going out into the world to alter it. Women are responsible for bringing humankind up to their level (Carlson, 1994: 94). In 1849 Mott called for what post-secular women today both in Turkey and abroad would approve of. We can even say that women, who are fully conscious of this responsibility, carry the burden to heal the world in the same way the white man took on the burden of civilizing the world.

Both in theory and in practice women's healing capacities and activities have been attracting academic attention. Marianna Krull in *Women's Spirituality and Healing in Germany* (1995) studied the healing rituals organized by women in Germany. German women were influenced by the Goddess movement in the United States and moved on to practice the Goddess worship in connection to their own German roots and heritage. Krull considered German women's high engagement in ritual circles is an indication of their rising power. She believes that the influence of these circles is not only therapeutic and healing but also politically revolutionary in terms of reclaiming the power of an entire social group. She says in encouragement of German women “We

have to discover our female strength and healing power not in his-toric, but in her-storic times!" (Krull 1995: 146).

Mott and Krull speak of an alternative power that women have that can transform society and humanity. They look upon the healing power of women as the key to bring change. While the origin of this empowering wave is in the US, it continues today to influence women across the globe. American, European and now Turkish women are gathering around altars, creating rituals, hosting circles and retreats for the sake of healing. With the help of rapid globalization and its technological tools, and through the spread of New Age culture from the West, practices and rituals that value women's spirituality, bodies and feminine qualities found their way into the lives of women in Turkey during the past 10 years. Many women felt 'called' to become healers and helpers to both men and women. Some opted to offer their help only for women and exclusively in the name of 'the feminine'. While my participants did not precisely describe themselves as healers, they still expressed the responsibility to take on the task to involve collectively with others, men and women, in acts of solidarity, healing and sisterhood. The examples of Sezin, Dicle and Mehtap express this sense of responsibility towards healing others.

So in 2014 one day I woke up and I knew I had to open a blog about feminine wisdom it just happened in one morning but I think it was like in the past it was like I was pregnant to this calling and then I gave birth to the blog and then I gave birth to my dişil bilgelik [feminine wisdom] programs and yeah and I knew that inside that I had to really guide only women and activate their calling in their hearts and activate their womb area and then I started to work on this. It was very obvious I couldn't just ignore it.

(Sezin, 42, Izmir)

There were times when I was tired, when I thought, "what am I doing here?", "is that it?" then I started to wake up to the fact that this is my way, my life mission. Now I become physically tired, but spiritually I cannot describe my feeling of satisfaction. When a seminar ends, the light that I see in the eyes of people as they give their feedback is an indescribable feeling. A perfect feeling.²⁷

(Dicle, 52, Antalya)

²⁷ Original in Turkish: yorulduğum düşündüğüm 'ben n'apıyorum burada' diye kendi sürecim devam ederken bu mu diye düşündüğüm zamanlar oldu sonra bunun zaten benim yolum olduğu yaşam misyonum olduğuna uyanmaya başladım şimdi fiziksel olarak yoruluyoruz ama manevi doyumlu ve hissimsi anlatamam. Seminer bittiğinde insanların verdiği geri bilgilenme gözlerinde gördüğüm ışık tarifsiz bir duygu. Mükemmel bir duygu. (Dicle, 52, Antalya)

I find joy in it. I love it...I really love it...it fills me with energy...it is my spiritual work to do this circles and (...) it is my service and I love it so much...I hope it is sustainable. It is my elderly vision as I saw Clarissa there was a big shift in my mind till then all the elders I saw they were just old they were always speaking about illnesses. They don't leave the home and they cannot do anything all about illnesses how the world is not so good anymore. I never saw a wise old woman who wants to share the wisdom so after I saw Clarissa I had a vision I can be an old wise woman like this and this circles are the seed for it. This is my lifetime vision.

(Mehtap, 39, Istanbul)

Globally, many women come together in circles and retreats for the purpose of connecting with each other, venerating the feminine, and for creating a safe space for self-expression and vulnerability. In Turkey women are being influenced by this transnational growing movement as well and we can consider that the development of this phenomenon in Turkey is an extension of this global movement. In Turkey, women are heading a rising healing movement by teaching a variety of alternative holistic teachings, practices and techniques in the form of retreats, workshops and also circles. Chia Longman, in her study of woman circles in Belgium, Netherlands and Germany, suggests that “the rise of the feminine that is being propagated and explored within women’s circles, and women’s spirituality/well-being culture more generally, contains political potential beyond the level of mere personal empowerment.” (Longman, 2018: 3). Contrary to Longman’s suggestion, in Turkey, I observed that woman circles have an effect on women that still remains on the level of mere empowerment. The practice of woman circles, which has been on the rise in Turkey, has attracted considerable attention. The circle is a space where women can freely reconnect with their own femininity by connecting to their bodies, the earth and the divine in order to heal and feel empowered. (Longman, 2018: 8).

I had personally experienced the circle and had a taste of its empowering effect. I will share in the following pages my account of the circle experience I participated in. Such an account will help show how, the circle, a ritualistic practice that has been revived in North America through the feminist spirituality movement back in the 1970s has become an essential healing and empowering practice in the lives of a group of women in Istanbul.

3.2.3. A Woman Circle in Istanbul

On the 15th of November 2019 I attended my first ever woman circle in Istanbul. Mehtap, one of the women I interviewed, was the circle host. She is a full time writer, editor and for over a year now a woman circle facilitator. She spoke to me about the disappointing depressive influence political upheavals in Turkey had on her. Nothing had ever turned out as she hoped. To summarize the situation of her country she said “so in this country in order to be able to stand firm you are forced to seek something otherwise you would turn into a machine so someone careless, heedless who has buried themselves in alcohol. I think there are two options: either you will die with your unconscious so like drinking or religiosity or you will search for meaning. There are 2 ways.”²⁸ (Mehtap, 39, Istanbul). She herself took the second choice and started searching. The only place she could go is within. On her searching journey she encountered Clarissa Estes’s famous book *Women Who Run with the Wolves* (1992) and decided to travel and meet her. In the following quotation she told me briefly what the book has taught her:

This book is a book that teaches how to rise from misfortunes. This has never been taught to us. We have always been taught to sit and cry, to be a victim, to blame someone, to wait for the savior, if you knew, the savior who has the power to save you is in you, you wouldn’t need prince on a white horse

(Mehtap, 39, Istanbul)

Today, Mehtap hosts circles in her home, reads out the tales and repeats over and over again the lessons the tales teach believing that this is the only way that women could become empowered. This time Mehtap hosted the circle in a rented space. There were 13 women including myself and my mother. Apart from us all other women were Turkish. The circle lasted around 3 hours and it took place on a Friday morning. The space was prepared with cushions organized in a circular shape around an altar. There was soothing music playing and a relaxing smell of roses in the air. Tea, coffee and fruits were served in the kitchen. Once Mehtap called us all in the room to start, we sat

²⁸ Original in Turkish: yani bu ülkenin içinde sağlam durabilmek için bir şey aramak zorundasın yoksa ya makine olacaksın yani hiçbir şey umursamayan kendinden bir haber alkole kendini gömmüş bence 2 seçenek var ya tamamen you will die with your unconscious so like drinking and or religiosity anything or you will search for meaning..there are 2 ways. (Mehtap, 39, Istanbul)

around an altar of sacred objects some symbolizing the four elements such as water, sand, air and fire and others holding high value for Mehtap such as a statue of Buddha's head, Women who Run with the Wolves book, stones and crystals (see figure. 3). We started with a 10 minute long guided meditation. Mehtap instructed us to close our eyes, sit comfortably as much as we can, and to take three deep breaths in order to relax. Throughout the meditation she brought our attention to our body. The idea was for us to create a connection with each part of it, with each organ and to be able to feel with it. We started from the tip of the head and ended at the soles of the feet. After the meditation I felt a sense of centeredness and calm that I didn't have before we started. I felt more connected to my body and more aware of my state of being.



Figure 3 Woman Circle in Istanbul, November 2019

After we had all opened our eyes, Mehtap told us that today she decided that she will start the circle with Clarissa's voice. It was an audio recording under the name *abri la puerta* of Clarissa Estes speaking in English. The recording lasted 10 minutes after which Mehtap asked if anyone needed any translation. She ended up summarizing in Turkish to the women who couldn't understand. Following that she shared with us briefly her story of meeting Clarissa Estes. Going to Colorado and being in the presence of that woman was an experience that changed the course of her life. After

30 years of being atheist she had had an indescribable experience of the divine which altered her beliefs. She described Clarissa as this source from which she had drunk and now she is overflowing with this wisdom. Her responsibility and service now is to make it flow into other women. As Mehtap told her story, I watched how the women in the circle listened to her with utmost amazement for having embarked on this journey. Her story seemed to have an effect on the women and to inspire something in them. Indeed, Mehtap, for the women attending her circle, was more than a circle host, she was holding space for them to heal, and she was their counselor and perhaps even their guide. The majority of the women who were present had taken part in many of her past circles. I, my mother and one more woman were the only ones having their first experience.

Directly afterwards, Mehtap went over essential questions which concern the book such as: why women? Why wolves? She told us that wolves are a metaphor. The wolf represents the intuition in us which has been suppressed by the enslaving capitalistic system. This system takes us completely away from ourselves and leaves us cut off from our inner selves and from nature. Because we have lost trust in our own nature we suffer from depression, from a feeling of meaninglessness and from unhealthy attachments to others and to our jobs. We are constantly in an insecure feeling about life. Capitalism and industrialism have left us with the option to work all week and spend the money we make on the weekends. She emphasized towards the end that this is how life is in Istanbul. In order to escape this reality, some people go to retreats, circles or just involve in other activities. She spoke to us afterwards about women. Why had Clarissa decided to write about women? Mehtap's answers were always inspired by the book in her hands. Femininity for centuries was never allowed to be expressed. This means that now more than ever a woman has to make peace with her own femininity. Second step would be for women to reevaluate their relationship with men, who are also suppressed through unhealthy masculinity. Women have been oppressed in a deep way. However, Mehtap reminded us that women experience cycles which connect them with the cycles of nature and for this reason they are more in touch with life and the changes that take place in life. By basing herself on Clarissa, Mehtap underlined how women's empowering and enriching creativity, women's strong qualities and their differences were never studied. That is why Clarissa Estes, while

writing this book, has chosen the most empowering encouraging tales to share with the women of the world.

Mehtap read to us the tale as well as the analysis of the story. Her reading took up to 30 minutes. The following extract from Clarissa's book summarizes the moral of the tale:

The psychological truth in "The Red Shoes" is that a woman's meaningful life can be pried, threatened, robbed, or seduced away from her unless she holds on to or retrieves her basic joy and wild worth. The tale calls our attention to traps and poisons we too easily take onto ourselves when we are caught in a famine of wild soul. Without a firm participation with the wild nature, a woman starves and falls into an obsession of "feel betters," "leave me alones" and "love me - please.

(Estes, 1992)

After Mehtap finished reading the tale, she immediately took her bendir and with the help of a friend on the ukulele they sang together a spiritual Sufi chant called *Hak şerleri hayr eyler*.

We all sat in silence listening to the song. Everything about the circle was soothing and was helping me sit calmly in my own body and to be more meditative. As Mehtap sang I noticed that some women were moved to tears. Perhaps the meanings of the tale have resonated with them on a deep level or perhaps it was simply the song and the meanings in it. After a five minute break the actual circle ceremony started. Before starting Mehtap briefed us on the practice of the circle. She said that the aim is not for us to have a conversation. Whenever a person's turn comes up to share, the others have to listen to her with all their presence. When a woman asked what she meant by "listening with presence" Mehtap responded that we should try and be in a meditative state. We do not give responses or advice to each other in the circle. We do not talk in a scientific technical way. We do not talk about what happened to other people. We use "I" language. Heart language. And finally she pointed out that spontaneity is key. If we want to say something our heart will push us to. Once that happens we are supposed to go and pick any speaking object in the altar and then start sharing. Those that do not feel the urge to share do not have to. The question for the circle was: after you have heard the story and its analysis, what is alive in you right now? Something that you want to say. How did you resonate with the tale?

I remember feeling quite nervous about the sharing part. I found out that I was not the only one when one woman confessed that her heart was beating so fast:

my heart is beating so fast, actually I am a teacher and I always speak in front of people but now it is beating so much (...) Focusing on the body, on the heart. I have never in my life given attention to my own heart. I did today. The tale is very interesting, I never listened to my heart, I have thrown my intuition to the side and I don't know and remember how this happened. The tale gives me this message at least. I need to listen to myself. Other things, family, husband, I guess I need to silence them, this I think is what I should do

(Anonymous participant, Istanbul)

This example along with other ones moved me to tears as I listened. The women themselves as they spoke their voices shook and they cried. I was amazed at how all these women that are strangers to each other have managed to express themselves to this degree and to trust each other within less than 3 hours. They all lamented the fact that they have lost touch with their intuition, that they have neglected themselves and sought power, love and respect from the outside. Some lamented the sacrifices they have made to their wellbeing in order to please their families and children and others lamented the long years they spent working in the corporate world. They shared private stories about their lives, their relations, decisions they have made and painful episodes that they lived through. I observed within myself how good it made me feel that others listened attentively and kindly to me as I spoke and trusted that I would listen to them in the same way. I came to a realization that the circle allows us to heal because it gives us the opportunity to both express ourselves freely and to be listened to by others. Self-expression and deep listening are both practices that make the circle the healing empowering practice that it is. It is an empowerment stemming from within. In other words, it is when women come together in circles or retreats and meditate on the sacredness of the feminine qualities that they all share, each woman leaves with a strengthened sense of self-worth. One woman in the circle thought this to be the purpose of the circle: “we empower each other in these circles”. (Anonymous participant, Istanbul)

CONCLUSION

I have attempted in this study to explore the dynamics behind women's involvement in New Age spirituality. The range of spiritual, holistic and well-being practices as well as teachings that New Age offers have a special appeal that attracts more women than men. The women that I have encountered in Turkey were on a spiritual quest or seeking that brought them in contact with the globalized New Age culture and all that it offers. Having listened to their stories and testimonies I came to understand that their engagement with New Age spirituality has made a difference in their lives and has influenced their conceptions of spirituality, health, work, femininity and most importantly of their own 'selves'. In addition to that, I came to realize that a combination of factors makes New Age spirituality strategically fit for a woman's experience of spirituality. Not only do the practices and teachings within this phenomenon appeal to women by providing them with empowering alternatives in society but also it appeals through its focus on the subjective experience and its emphasis on the 'self' as the source of all authority beyond any external religious authority. Women find appealing the emancipatory potential in New Age spirituality which gives primacy to their inner experience and inner voice. Finally, the more appealing and empowering to women is the spiritual narrative of 'the feminine'.

For the women in this study, 'The feminine' is an archetype within Jungian psychoanalysis which emphasizes feminine qualities and values such as intuition, interconnectedness, openness and oneness. As an archetype it has been imagined in spiritual feminism in ways that empower women. The 'feminine' is also believed to be a rising consciousness or energy within New Age as well as feminist teachings which is accelerating women's awakening and putting the responsibility on them to take on the task of healing. The feminine as a phenomenon manifests as well in the nature of New Age spirituality which is diffused and centered on subjective religiosity. New Age spirituality viewed as a feminine spirituality contrasts with the 'one-sidedly masculine' patriarchal religions. In that sense, it has the potential to appeal to women's experiences of spirituality and to innerly empower them.

I have addressed each aspect of the appeal in separate chapters. In the first chapter we saw how New Age spirituality is a woman-friendly spirituality which speaks to women's needs. Women find solutions and fixes to their physical, psychological and spiritual problems. Drawing on the examples of the women in Turkey, the search for meaning is much more than a 'desire for consumption', it springs from a place of urgency and necessity to make sense of life's circumstances and situations and to view the sacred wisdom behind them. A deeper look into the meanings they have found in New Age teachings can make a difference in our approach to the phenomenon. While consumption is part and parcel of the seeking experience of my participants, the teachings and techniques that are 'consumed' have made a difference in their lives and introduced them to an alternative holistic worldview. Not only did they find meaning but they also experienced a sense of psychological and spiritual well-being.

The search for healing took an intriguing turn when my participants were introduced to holistic healing. What is particularly different about healing in the New Age culture is its 'holistic' approach. It is a form of healing which gives equal attention to the body, mind and soul. Many of the women I interviewed have deliberately constructed their own bricolages of healing practices and techniques which grant them a sense of well-being, as well as a sense of empowerment. With the rise of the Women's Spirituality movement in North America many women-centered healing rituals were created in hopes of providing women with an inner sense of empowerment and more importantly to help them heal themselves from the wounds of patriarchy. We can observe that healing in New Age spirituality generates in the healed subject the feeling that they are capable of healing themselves and that they can depend on their own power and potential to heal. Contrary to traditional medicine, New Age holistic practices aim at raising an individual's awareness of their own relationship with their bodies and their emotions. In that sense, holistic practices appeal to women in the way they empower them to heal themselves.

New Age spirituality empowers women by giving them the space to construct new work-related identities. My participants put emphasis on their unwillingness to remain involved as a 'cog in the machine' of capitalism. Instead, they are willing to leave their socially prestigious jobs in order to seek professions which give them a sense of

personal identity. In their discourses, the corporate world becomes an object of criticism justifying the leap towards alternative professions within New Age spirituality which promises much more than financial gains. My participants, by offering their New Age services in the holistic milieu, take on a new identity through which they play their traditional feminine relational care role while also enjoying a sense of subjective satisfaction in the work-related identity. Indeed, my participants found in the holistic milieu opportunities that both emancipated and empowered them. Putting into account all the previous explorations, women find in New Age spirituality what they seek whether it is meaning, healing or a more psychologically and financially rewarding social role.

In the second chapter, in order to further understand the nature of my participants' inclination for spirituality, I analyzed their discourses on religion. I was able to observe how they all struggled to give a harmonious image of their relationship with religion. When asked about their views in general they expressed disdain and distrust. Any talk about organized religion provoked a feeling of resistance or triggered a negative memory associated with religious members in their families and in their lives. The majority of my participants drew a clear line between religion and spirituality. Organized religion, and more precisely the religion Islam, in their discourses comes with a heavy baggage of negative connotations which are the result of the way religion was represented and taught to them at an early age and also of the way it has been politicized in recent years. They all held strong prejudices against Islam accumulating in childhood and earlier stages in their lives.

Organized religion for the most part is equated with implausible beliefs that are generally putting boundaries on human potential and inner experience while also subjugating women. In contrast, New Age spirituality is viewed as the ideal alternative that guarantees gender equality and holds a more positive empowering view of the female body and the feminine values. In other words, the female inner-empowerment that is assumed to be lacking in one is compensated by the other. New Age spirituality with its teachings, technologies and therapies is promising inner-transformation, healing and connection through *experience*. If we are to put a motto for this phenomenon it would be "I experience, therefore I am". In that sense, New Age

spirituality is a 'woman-friendly' spirituality which fits and values women's preferences and modes of expression while also giving primacy to their subjective spiritual experiences the totality of which are systematically devalued in patriarchal society and discourses. One of the packaged ideas that constitute the core of New Age spirituality is the primacy of subjective inner experience. In each human being there is a place where all truth can be accessed and all guidance can be sought. This leads to the understanding that each self is unique, each self has access to the truth and each self is free to express itself. The fact that the 'inner-authority' becomes the arbitrator on all religious and moral issues limits the power of any form of 'external' authority. The primacy of subjective experiences and of 'inner-authority' within New Age spirituality, approached from the lens of gendered subjectivity, makes it possible for us to understand why New Age spirituality appeals to women. The orientation towards the self and the 'subjective' experience in New Age spirituality can be seen as a manifestation of what Simmel calls 'subjective religiosity' which can be interpreted as a 'feminine' approach to the divine or the sacred. Looking at the phenomenon from this perspective has offered insights into why women are more appealed by this 'subjective' spirituality.

The third and final chapter explored the narrative of the 'feminine' through which my interlocutors expressed their worldviews and their spirituality. I have highlighted how my participants perceived patriarchy and patriarchal spirituality and how they delved into a learning journey with the intention to free themselves from the constrictions that the patriarchal system has put on them psychologically and spiritually. There was a general consensus amongst them that organized religions are patriarchal and offensive to female personhood. when my participants refer to 'the feminine' they refer to a form of spirituality which values women, their feminine qualities, their intuition, their creativity and their difference without necessarily calling for intolerance of men, masculinity or masculine qualities. I have explored the definition, nature, values and origins of this 'feminine' spirituality. We saw how my participants defined the feminine in terms of qualities, values and a mode of consciousness. However, an intriguing development took place in the interviews when my interlocutors started speaking to me of the feminine in terms of cosmic energy that is rising globally and which has consequences on individuals, particularly women, and on life as a whole.

We explored how the majority of the women in this study are clearly shaped by New Age narratives about 'the feminine'. Certainly, my participants have delved into alternative ideologies and spiritualities that promote empowering values for women and that transform their understanding of femininity. Particularly, beliefs and practices generating from feminist spirituality and spiritual feminism amongst other strands emphasize the sacred qualities of the feminine believed to be highly present in women as opposed to men. These beliefs and assumptions, sometimes essentialist, lead to an intense experience of empowerment. The consequence is that they start religiously embodying the principles of this feminine spirituality originating from the West and go so far as to organize their own woman circles, rituals and retreats in Turkey.

The combination of all these factors has proved empowering to women in Turkey. The study of women's testimonies in Turkey has shown that globalized New Age teachings, practices and narratives appeal to a certain group of women in society. Indeed, this appeal reached women that are well-educated and that were involved in white-collar positions all of whom sought to create an alternative lifestyle, job and identity. Along with this, they were also seeking alternatives to both religious conservatism and materialist secularism that are both present in Turkey. Approaching the phenomenon of New Age spirituality through the narrative of the feminine has been a complex task yet it has helped us examine it from a new 'alternative' angle that is beyond the consumerist approach. I have attempted to apply my participants' theorizations about the narrative of the 'feminine' on the phenomenon of New Age spirituality by arguing that the feminine as a quality and as an approach manifests in the rise of religiosity against religion in contemporary spirituality. Through this perspective my thesis contributes to our understanding of women's experiences in New Age spirituality but also to our perspective on New Age spirituality as a whole.

The research is, however, subject to several limitations. Given the limited scope of this study, much remains to be explored about the gender gap within New Age spirituality. I came across a number of intriguing aspects of New Age spirituality in relation to women in Turkey yet I deliberately did not explore them simply because this master's thesis could not have addressed all facets of this phenomenon. For instance, further studies in Turkey could bring into account women who adhere to the religion of Islam

yet are as deeply engaged in New Age spirituality as the non-affiliated women I have encountered. In that sense, there is perhaps a category of individuals of female majority who are both ‘religious and spiritual’ and who do not see a contradiction between both. While I focused directly on the stories of the women I interviewed, I found out through them that some of the women who attend their retreats identify as conservative Muslims yet learn through New Age techniques how to deepen their religious practices. The following quotation summarizes this tendency:

I have students who have hijab [veiled]. They are mainly psychologists or PDR psychological counselors. They come to my retreats to the long-term trainings. They get trained here and they go back and write me and say “Now I can do namaz [prayer] the way it was intended in the Quran, with so much faith while being present instead of listening to what is being talked in the room, TV or thinking about something else while I am praying”. They say that “After 25 years of praying namaz, I now know what it means to meditatively being one with God in prayer”. So they learn to be mindful in their namaz

(Irem, 42, Muğla)

A second aspect that could be considered for future research is the way Turkish women in particular have assembled in their bricolage of New Age beliefs a set of ‘Sufi’ teachings and meanings that serve them on the path to spiritual fulfilment. Sufism or Tasawwuf related beliefs and practices found place in Turkish women’s stories which reveals that there is always the possibility of reconciling with the inner path of Islam, Islamic mysticism, yet never with the set of predetermined rules and practices that the religion imposes.

Furthermore, future studies could be conducted on the influence of New Age spirituality on women’s political and social engagement. I have not elaborated on this aspect in this thesis yet I observed the tendency in my participants to call for a more-than-materialistic engagement in society by building on the notion of ‘inner activism’ or ‘spiritual activism’. A study of how women in Turkey are engaged in social transformation through their spiritual healing work can bring insights into the impact of this phenomenon on Turkish women’s lives as well as Turkish society.

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