

## “A WOMAN’S HAIR IS LONG, BUT HER MIND IS SHORT”: A SOCIO-CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE ON WOMEN IN TRADITIONAL TURKISH SOCIETY

### “O CABELO DA MULHER É LONGO, MAS SUA MENTE É CURTA”: UMA PERSPECTIVA SOCIO-CULTURAL SOBRE AS MULHERES NA SOCIEDADE TRADICIONAL TURCA

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#### Abstract

Proverbs are one of the most deeply rooted components of culture and function as fundamental references that embody social value judgements and shape the relationship between the individual and society. This study examines the socio-cultural status of women and the gender perceptions in traditional Turkish society through the proverb “A woman’s hair is long, but her mind is short”. The study addresses historical sources, literary texts, and anthropological theories from an interdisciplinary perspective. In Turkish culture, hair has historically symbolized vital energy, power, and social hierarchy. However, the proverb discussed in this study establishes a metaphorical contrast between the concrete physical feature of “hair” and the abstract intellectual faculty of “mind,” thereby distancing women from the rational and public sphere. This reflects a traditional mindset that defines women as aesthetic “ornaments” and confines them to the private domain. Drawing on Delaney’s concept of the ‘open/closed body’ and Foucault’s approach to ‘power and the body’, the study further analyses how mechanisms of social control have limited women’s physical and spiritual existence. Ultimately, the research concludes that such elements of oral heritage function as powerful discursive tools that naturalise gender roles and legitimise their transmission across generations.

**Keywords:** Proverbs, Gender, Hair Symbolism, Female Body, Turkish Oral Tradition.

#### Resumo

*Os provérbios são um dos componentes mais enraizados da cultura e funcionam como referências fundamentais que personificam julgamentos de valor social, moldando a relação entre o indivíduo e a sociedade. Este estudo examina o status socio-cultural das mulheres e as percepções de gênero na sociedade turca tradicional por meio do provérbio “Saçı uzun, aklı kısa” (Cabelo comprido, juízo curto). O trabalho aborda fontes históricas, textos literários e teorias antropológicas a partir de uma perspectiva interdisciplinar. Na cultura turca, o cabelo historicamente simbolizou a energia vital, o poder e a hierarquia social. No entanto, o provérbio discutido neste estudo estabelece um contraste metafórico entre a característica física concreta do “cabelo” e a faculdade intelectual abstrata da “mente” (juízo), distanciando, assim, as mulheres da esfera racional e pública. Isso reflete uma mentalidade tradicional que define as mulheres como “ornamentos” estéticos e as confina ao domínio privado. Baseando-se no conceito de “corpo aberto/fechado” de Delaney e na abordagem de Foucault sobre “poder e o corpo”, o estudo analisa como os mecanismos de controle social limitaram a existência física e espiritual das mulheres. Por fim, a pesquisa conclui que tais elementos do patrimônio oral funcionam como ferramentas discursivas poderosas que naturalizam os papéis de gênero e legitimam sua transmissão através das gerações.*

**Palavras-chave:** *Provérbios. Gênero. Simbolismo do Cabelo. Corpo Feminino. Tradição Oral Turca.*



## 1 INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>

One of the most fundamental elements that distinguishes one society from another is its cultural structure, at the core of which lies language. Language is not just a means of communication; it is a system through which a society’s collective memory, belief systems, value judgements, and social practices are transmitted from one generation to the next. As Herder emphasizes, the aesthetic power of a culture is measured by its ability to express the vital elements distilled from the lived experiences of its people (Eagleton, 2019). In this context, expressive forms such as folk songs, poems, and proverbs are essential cultural values that reflect social consciousness and embody shared traditions. According to Fox (2017), proverbs are the primary source of collective wisdom and one of a nation’s most valuable treasures.

Emerging within oral tradition and later partially transferred into written form, proverbs are linguistic artefacts with roots as ancient as human history itself. Although their precise origin date remains unknown, they are generally considered to be as old as humanity itself. The earliest known written examples are Sumerian proverbs inscribed on clay tablets between 2600 and 2550 BC (Schipper, 2019). Similarly, in ancient Greek civilization, proverbs functioned as social guides. They were inscribed on temple pediments and were often attributed to the Seven Sages (Çobanoğlu, 2004). They became focal points of social authority, and wisdom.

In Turkish culture, proverbs are conceptualized as deep, metaphorical expressions such as “*the eye of the mind*,” “*golden words*,” “*precious sayings*,” “*wisdom*,” “*winged words*,” “*physicians of the soul*,” “*eyes of words*,” “*ancestors of the words*,” “*sultans of the words*,” and “*beauties of words*” (Durbilmez, 2007). Regarded as distilled summaries of collective intelligence and social experience, these expressions have attracted extensive scholarly attention across various disciplines, from linguistics to sociology, due to their rich semantic content and capacity to embody folk wisdom.

One of the earliest and most significant works in the historical development of scholarly studies on Turkish proverbs is Ahmet Vefik Pasha’s *Müntehabât-ı Durûb-ı*

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<sup>1</sup> This article is a revised and expanded version of the paper presented at the International Symposium on Women in the Turkish World on the Stage of History (Izmir/Turkey) and published on November 30, 2023.

*Emsâl-i Türkiyye*. During the Republican period, research in this area gained momentum. Foundational reference sources in the field include Velet İzbudak's *Atalar Sözü* (1936), Selim Nüzhet Gerçek's work bearing the same title (1939), and Osman Peremeci's *Atalar Sözü* (1940). This chronological development was followed by Hamdi Akverdi's original study *Halk İçin Atalar Sözüne Tatbik Edilmiş Ruhi Bilgiler* (1940), which approached proverbs from a psychological perspective, and Hasan Çekli and Mehmet Dobada's *Atalar Dilinden* (1945) (Özön, 1958).

In light of this rich body of repertoire, the various definitions of the concept of “proverb” found in the literature can be summarized as follows:

“A saying expressed by the people, possessing a self-contained structure, didactic content, and refined form.” (Oy, 1972)

“Statements concluded through the observation of various events over centuries and derived from experience and experimentation.” (Özön, 1958)

“Proverbs, which convey the views, advice, and thoughts of our ancestors in a brief yet highly concise manner. They constitute one of the most significant products of our folklore and folk culture. The views, advice, and reflections they contain have been obtained through centuries of experimentation and observation, and the lessons learned from life experience.” (Oy, 1972)

“They have emerged from the experiences of broad segments of the population over centuries, as well as the thoughts based upon these experiences. They express the shared thinking, convictions, and attitudes of a nation and guide us. The validity of a behaviour supported by a proverb is accepted by everyone.” (Aksoy, 1988)

“These short, concise, and formulaic statements that convey judgement and are considered to have been inherited from our ancestors, possess an anonymous character, and constitute a collective expression of our nation's understanding of life.” (Elçin, 2000)

“A proverb is a concise saying that expresses a general rule or principle expected to be followed in social life, reflecting the character, attitudes and mentality of a nation.” (Çobanoğlu, 2004)

“Proverbs are fixed expressions, whether in prose or verse, that convey fundamental judgements formed as a result of long experience, and are used to offer advice, issue warnings, or provide information.” (Durbilmez, 2018)

“They are formulaic expressions that already exist within the lexical repertoire, are stored in memory, and are used in speech or writing when deemed appropriate to the lived situation and subject.” (Aksu et al., 2022)

Based on these definitions, proverbs can be described as condensed forms of expression, shaped by countless observations and experiences accumulated over vast periods of history. They are characterised by strong imagery and dense meaning. As

anonymous elements of oral tradition, these fixed judgements transcend time and space, becoming the shared property of society and addressing all segments of the community. By distilling centuries of collective thought, emotion and experience, they function as crystallised representations of life itself. Reflecting a society's perception of the world, belief systems and value judgements, proverbs also define the ideal human type and serve as guides that shape social life. In this respect, proverbs can be considered concrete linguistic manifestations of Turkish folk philosophy and the *traditional worldview*.

## 2 METHOD

Proverbs are crystallised expressions of social perceptions, patterns of thought and value judgements. They constitute the theoretical starting point of this study and serve as a primary reference source for analysing cultural patterns and behavioural norms.

The study's primary objective is to examine the socio-cultural perspective on women and gender in traditional Turkish society through proverbs as dynamic elements of Turkish oral tradition.

With a particular focus on the proverb 'A woman's hair is long, but her mind is short', the study aims to reveal how the female body and hair become symbolic indicators and how these symbols limit women's social status and sphere of action. In this context, the historical mindset embedded in linguistic patterns that associates women with the aesthetic/private sphere rather than the rational/public domain is examined.

The study's methodology is grounded in an interdisciplinary approach, employing qualitative research techniques such as document and content analysis. The literature review draws on historical sources such as *Kutadgu Bilig* and *Divânu Lugâti't-Türk*, literary texts such as *The Book of Dede Korkut*, and contemporary folklore compilations. These data were then evaluated within the frameworks of cultural anthropology, semiotics and gender theory to reveal the deeper structural meanings underlying linguistic expressions.

During the analysis, particular emphasis was placed on Delaney's theory of spatial restriction and the '*open/closed body*', and on Foucault's approaches to power and body politics, which formed the theoretical foundations of the study. Adopting a phenomenological approach, this reading is structured around dichotomous concepts such

as ‘*long–short*’, ‘*inside–outside*’, and ‘*public–private*’, which are embedded in proverbs. The aim is to understand how individuals internalise gender roles during the process of socialisation, and how proverbs function as legitimising mechanisms within this process.

### 3 THE TRANSFORMATIONAL STATUS OF WOMEN IN TURKISH SOCIETY FROM A HISTORICAL AND SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

In primitive societies, the status of women was directly linked to the development of the concept of *property*. The delineation of land boundaries led to the idea of ownership, creating the need for inheritance. This increased the strategic importance of children and the women who bore them in agrarian societies. In this social order, women played an active role in both domestic production and agricultural labour, while men focused on tasks requiring physical strength. Although activities such as pottery making and weaving constituted both agricultural and proto-industrial labour, women’s sphere of life was generally confined to enclosed spaces in comparison to men’s. Nevertheless, women occupied a central role in social life in terms of production and productivity. Identified with the land due to their reproductive capacity and association with fertility, women came to be regarded as sacred figures within these societies. Like nature itself, they were believed to embody the seeds of life and were thus attributed mystical power. As children were affiliated with their mothers, a *matrilineal* family structure emerged. The transition from a *matrilineal* to a *patriarchal* order — in other words, from the Stone Age to the Bronze Age, or from an agrarian society to an early labour-based society — gained momentum as men developed tools and took responsibility for cultivating the land. As men took centre stage in physically demanding labour and tool-making, society evolved towards an early form of a labour-based system. However, women's restoration of social prestige only became possible with the Industrial Revolution of the nineteenth century (Arat, 1986).

Socio-cultural inferences regarding the status of women in Turkish society can be drawn through an interdisciplinary examination of historical documents, legal norms and literary texts. In his foundational work, *The Principles of Turkism* (1999), Ziya Gökalp characterises early Turks as a democratic society that respected women’s rights, describing it as feminist in nature. He presents the equal recognition of maternal and

paternal lineage in ancient Turkish law as the most concrete indicator of women's central position within the social structure. This egalitarian approach positioned women within the family, as well as in social and legal representation, on an equal footing with men. This respected status was rooted in ancient Turkish beliefs that attributed sacred power to both women and men. This belief was reflected in the legal sphere, paving the way for the recognition of advanced rights, such as joint ownership of household property by spouses, and equal custodial rights for mothers and fathers. In early Turkish society, where *chivalry* was embraced as a character trait and *feminism* as a principle, men consistently showed respect towards their wives, and women had complete control over property ownership and its use.

Examining Anatolia during the Assyrian colonial period reveals that women were responsible for state administration, played an active role in agriculture and engaged in commerce. This proves that Anatolian women enjoyed a much more advanced social status and freedom than their counterparts in Asia Minor at that time. In the city-states of Central Anatolia in particular, the presence of queens known as *rubatum*, who headed the administration and were also active in trade, demonstrates the political authority of women. Furthermore, it is evident that women were equal to men in terms of both sovereign authority and civil law. The right to divorce, guaranteed by tradition and law, and equal division of property form the legal basis for this equality. The discovery of seals and seal impressions belonging to women during archaeological excavations is one of the most significant pieces of evidence documenting women's property rights. A similar hierarchical structure can be seen in the Hittite civilisation, where Hittite queens followed the Great King in official ceremonies and had the authority to use joint seals on official documents. Women's social roles in Hittite civilisation developed in connection with religious institutions, with upper-class women in particular taking on active governance roles. This system, in which patriarchal traditions persist but women's rights are protected, demonstrates that the women of ancient Anatolia enjoyed pioneering rights and freedoms for their time. Although structures such as the *rubatum* and the *Hittite queenship* institution did not persist in the same form in subsequent eras, the fact that *Hatun*, who represented the queen in Hun, Uyghur and Oghuz societies, held a position equal to that of the *Hakan*, reflects this ancient value placed on women within the Turkish state tradition (Darga, 1976; Kafesoğlu, 1997).

Information on the socio-cultural status of women among the ancient Turks can be found by examining the family structure in the *Dede Korkut Tales*. The fact that all of Oğuz Khan's children were male, and that the throne was passed on to the eldest sons, shows that the *maternal* lineage weakened and a *paternal* lineage structure took hold. The accession of Oğuz Khan's eldest son, Gün Khan, to the throne after Oğuz Khan is a concrete example of this inheritance tradition. However, the *paternal* family model among the ancient Turks should not be confused with an authoritarian, rigid *patriarchal* system. Unlike in classical patriarchal structures, where wives and children were considered the absolute property of the head of the family, the powers of the father in the ancient Turkish family structure were clearly defined and guaranteed by customs (Arat, 1986).

The female protagonist in these stories is similar to the traditional male figure in steppe culture, as she rides horses, shoots arrows, wields swords, and displays bravery on the battlefield. In this social structure, women are *heroic* figures rather than sexual objects. The exaltation of women by men is perhaps best exemplified by Dirse Khan's phrase, "*the fortune of my life, the throne of my home*", addressed to his wife. However, in the same text, his reprimand of his wife for not bearing him a son confirms that *motherhood* is central to women's social roles. The sacred bond with the mother and *motherhood* are fundamental cultural themes at the heart of the Dede Korkut narratives (Kaplan, 1951; Arat, 1986; Unat, 1982).

From the beginning of human history, the organisation of social life around a gender-based division of labour has shaped cultural values and social norms. Every society creates stereotypes that define characteristics as being specific to women or men. These definitions cause individuals to position themselves — consciously or unconsciously — in accordance with the roles that society expects of them. The most important function of these stereotypes is that they directly influence how both women and men perceive themselves and the world around them. In Türkiye, for example, gender roles are intertwined with the class structure. Thus, the country's rapidly developing capitalist economy and its associated needs have brought about profound transformations in social life (Kandiyoti, 1982). In this context, women's status in society is determined by the country's level of development, their position in the capitalist class hierarchy and traditional cultural values as a whole. Notably, Türkiye's status as a developing country

and its moral norms rooted in Islamic cultural values are the primary factors that influence the position of women. This cultural structure regulates social activities through a gendered division of labour, largely limiting women’s identities to the roles of *housewife* and *mother* (Kazgan, 1982).

In her work titled “*Küçük Kasaba Kadınları*”, Mübeccel Kıray emphasises that the fundamental role of women in traditional societies is shaped through domestic decision-making processes, consumption patterns and family interactions. Kıray’s observations regarding women’s presence in public and private spheres can be summarised as follows:

The conservative cultural fabric surrounding women’s lives outside the home limits their individual visibility and entertainment, centring on the concept of *female honour*. Within this framework, the most fundamental socialisation practice for women is home visits, often referred to as *morning coffee* or *drop-ins*, which typically remain within the immediate neighbourhood. In higher economic strata, this interaction takes the form of ritualised *social gatherings*. These gatherings are spaces for collective sharing where elements such as food, clothing, and handicrafts (such as embroidery and knitting) become prestige indicators, while topics such as birth, death, and household management form the main agenda. Traditionally, a woman’s intensive labour within the home (cooking, cleaning, etc.) is not considered a professional job; these activities are accepted as routine responsibilities that women perform by nature. The perception of elementary school teaching as the ideal profession for women is an extension of these social norms.

The institution of marriage marks a significant turning point in attitudes towards working life. While single women are generally tolerated for employment, married women face much stricter social controls. The resistance of men in traditional crafts to their wives working outside the home, in particular, reflects the asymmetry in social gender roles. Although men have a negative view of employment, women play a significant economic role within the household. By managing household spending, women establish the invisible yet pivotal link in the economic chain. In family relationships, women do not emerge as passive figures, but as a central and transformative force in human relations, particularly through the mediating roles shaped by motherhood (Kıray, 1982).

In the 1970s, women's studies gained momentum, particularly due to the influence of the *feminist* movement. This laid an important foundation for understanding the decisive power of gender roles in individual and social life (Nenola, 2017). Historically, until the second half of the nineteenth century, women's labour was largely confined to the home and agricultural production, and their participation in market-oriented economic activities remained low. However, Western ideas and increased educational opportunities for women first paved the way for teaching in girls' schools. Then, during the war period between 1911 and 1923, the decline in the male population led to uneducated women being employed as industrial workers.

The increased participation of women in the workforce has triggered profound changes in the traditional cultural codes that define gender roles within family and societal structures. The secularisation and modernisation reforms of the Republican era aimed to transform the gender-based division of labour at legal and social levels, which reinforced the need for women to pursue an education as productive individuals, as well as fulfilling their roles as *mothers* and *wives*. Following World War II and the subsequent global industrialisation, significant improvements were recorded in Türkiye in terms of women's educational levels and professional expertise. In today's Turkish society, the gender-based division of labour persists in a different form. While women in rural areas are largely confined to domestic and agricultural activities and remain outside the labour market, the majority of urban women juggle household responsibilities with an active professional life (Kazgan, 1982).

#### **4 THE SYMBOLIC CONSTRUCTION OF THE FEMALE BODY IN TURKISH ORAL TRADITION: A GENDER ANALYSIS THROUGH HAIR AND PLACE**

Proverbs are one of the most deeply rooted components of culture. They are fundamental references that crystallise the value judgements and collective observations of Turkish society, shaping the relationship between the individual and society. The values and norms necessary for the healthy functioning of society are passed down from generation to generation, filtered through lived experience. William Bascom (2005), for example, views proverbs as a control mechanism that determines social acceptance and rejection, encourages ideal behaviour and resolves social conflicts.

The concept of “gender” refers to the social, cultural, and psychological structures constructed upon biological differences between women and men, rather than to the biological differences themselves (McElhinny, 2017). In anthropological theory, gender roles are generally considered to be complementary parts arising from reproductive functions. As Carol Delaney (2022) points out, although these roles vary from culture to culture, they are constructed and legitimised within each culture as *natural realities*. Therefore, gender roles encompass the behavioural models and normative expectations that a culture attributes to its individuals based on their gender. Individuals internalise the statuses and responsibilities expected of them by society through socialisation, via proverbs, jokes, and other traditional oral narratives.

In Turkish society, the meanings attributed to *gender* are mostly associated with individuals’ roles in the reproductive process. However, these definitions are cultural constructions rather than biological necessities. As Delaney (2004) states, these meanings are not presented to individuals as *natural* facts, but are communicated through cultural products. Proverbs are particularly effective in this regard, playing a key role in the intergenerational transmission and legitimisation of the aforementioned *gender* perception.

Examining Turkish proverbs reveals a rich symbolic universe that defines women’s status within the family and society, regulates relations between women and men, and delineates social roles within marriage. This oral tradition is a tangible representation of societal expectations that reflect society’s perception of women and establish this perception as a norm. For example, expressions such as ‘*If anyone weeps, it is my mother who truly weeps; the rest weep falsely*’, ‘*There is no beloved like a mother, no land like Baghdad*’, and ‘*One can never repay a mother’s sacrifice*’ (Oy, 1972) exalt the existence of women through the sanctified identity of *motherhood*. In contrast, the proverb ‘*The male bird wanders carefree, the female bird builds the nest*’ (Özön, 1958) directly associates women's social role with *nest-building*, thereby confining them to the home sphere. This spatial restriction is further emphasised in proverbs such as “*A man is known by his donkey, a woman by her bedding*”, “*A woman ties her headscarf according to her husband*”, and “*A good woman makes a meal from barley; a bad one ruins even wheat*” (BAAD, 2016).

The proverb ‘*A woman ties her headscarf according to her husband*’ emphasises not a woman’s individual identity, but her conformity to her spouse’s social status. In this proverb, a woman’s social value is linked to the reputation of a man. This suggests that even a woman’s public visibility is legitimised through male authority. Furthermore, the proverb ‘*A good woman makes a meal from barley; a bad one ruins even wheat*’, which presents the quality of domestic labour as the main criterion for judging a woman’s character, implies that women should not only be able to cook, but also manage scarce resources and demonstrate creativity. The distinction between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ here is not based on biological differences, but on a woman’s productivity in household labour. These proverbs position women as both the *material managers* and the *moral guardians* of the home, thereby imposing a heavy social responsibility upon them. They reveal that a woman’s social success, and the criteria by which she is considered “good”, are determined by virtues such as skillfulness, thrift and adaptability — all of which are measured within the boundaries of domestic labour.

In fact, the comprehensive reforms undertaken around fifty years ago to eliminate gender inequality in all areas of life, alongside structural processes such as urbanisation, industrialisation and internal migration, sparked a profound transformation in gender roles within Turkish society. As Asiltürk (2004) notes, these changes encompassed a broad spectrum ranging from fundamental behavioural codes to traditional value systems. The primary objective of feminist movements has been to restructure social practices, eliminate the socio-economic and cultural pressures imposed on women, and prevent women’s cultural roles from being confined to childbearing or serving the family. The dynamics of this transformation become more clearly observable when the oral tradition of culture is examined. With the institutionalisation of written culture, oral traditions were also integrated into this new structure, and literate individuals emerged as the producers and constructors of culture. Within this framework, *feminist folkloristics* seeks to examine not only women’s representations within oral tradition, but also the nature of their traditional roles. Oral tradition acts as a mirror, directly reflecting the gender perceptions of the period in which it exists as an integral part of the symbolic system regulating relations between the sexes (Nenola, 2017).

The most tangible manifestation of traditional gender roles is evident within the institution of marriage, the core structure of society. Marriage is a significant milestone

in the lives of both women and men, representing a profound transformation in their social status. This institution symbolises entry into social competence: prior to marriage, both genders occupy relatively passive positions in the public sphere. Unmarried men have limited influence under paternal authority and only gain decision-making power within the household after marriage. Similarly, young women attain broader social legitimacy through marriage, gaining greater freedom in areas such as *hosting guests* and participating in *social interactions*. This marks their transition into socially recognised adulthood. However, this newly acquired status also entails spatial restriction: women begin to conduct most of their social activities within the home. The roles assumed by women and men in the continuation of lineage essentially reflect a *symbolic universe* rooted in conceptions of creation. Transforming this deeply embedded symbolic structure and the asymmetric statuses it produces is difficult because the division of labour in society has been constructed alongside the roles assigned to the reproduction of lineage. Thus, while the productive activities of women and men may be *complementary*, they are organised within a *hierarchical* order characterised by gender differentiation (Delaney, 2022).

In the construction of gender identity, the female body is not only a biological reality, but also a symbolic space onto which cultural meanings are inscribed. It is a symbol through which dichotomous concepts such as *inside-outside*, *open-closed* and *clean-dirty* are produced, thereby mapping the social universe. Unlike the male body, the female body is constructed as an *open* space whose boundaries must be constantly monitored. This construction gives rise to the idea that it must be closed off and brought within normative boundaries as a cultural reflex. This signifies the establishment of social order through the body rather than being a biological necessity (Delaney, 2022). As Foucault points out, male bodies are trained to embrace the world and spread into the public sphere, becoming extensions of their own worlds. In contrast, women, who are expected to withdraw from the world, are encouraged to occupy minimal physical and social space. This existential restriction is a cultural and phenomenological process that not only confines women to the private sphere, but also limits their physical and spiritual existence through social control mechanisms (Ülgen, 2022).

*Hair* is an important complement to a woman's physical beauty and has a rich history of meaning, with its variety of colours, textures and forms. These layers of

meaning, stretching from archaic mythology to the present day, have become much more distinct and functional in contemporary culture. In the collective subconscious, hair is not just an ornamental feature; it symbolises vital energy, power and spiritual strength. In this context, the presence or absence of hair can be interpreted as a metaphor for success or defeat. Indeed, in mythological narratives, heroes are often depicted with long hair, while cutting the hair of defeated enemies is a common form of punishment (Asiltürk, 2016).

While hair may be the most superficial physical element of appearance, on a cultural level it carries extremely deep and complex meanings. The shape of hair is not just an aesthetic preference; it is also a powerful indicator that conveys messages to the outside world about an individual's belief system, social identity, and behavioural patterns. As Delaney (2004) emphasises, it is possible to infer an individual's moral stance, sexual orientation, political leanings and religious affiliations from their hairstyle. Therefore, hair functions as a symbolic means of communication, defining the boundary between an individual's inner world and social norms, translating identity information silently into the public sphere and positioning the individual within the social hierarchy.

Historical sources confirm that, in ancient Turkish societies, hair was a key marker of collective identity and social hierarchy. From the Göktürk period onwards, hairstyles were subject to a specific classification system based on length, with categories such as ear-length, nape-length, shoulder-length, waist-length and heel-length. During this period, cutting a bey's hair was an exceptional act, observed only during mourning rituals and symbolising either a loss of status or profound grief. In Uyghur texts, the thick hair of alps is likened to manes — symbols of *bravery* and *valour* — thereby acquiring an epic dimension. In Kaşgarlı Mahmud's *Divânu Lugâti't-Türk*, the term '*idunçu*' refers to '*sacred hair*' that was forbidden to be cut, shedding light on the spiritual dimension of the subject.

In epics and oral tradition, the length and fullness of hair are not merely represented as aesthetic ideals, but as symbols of *power*. In the Book of Dede Korkut, the depiction of '*black hair trailing down to the heels*' pushes the limits of physical possibility, while comparisons of hair to a spear or reed emphasise both length and vitality through mythological exaggeration. In the Anatolian context, *waist-length hair* was considered a hallmark of ideal femininity and grace. Furthermore, the colour of hair also constructs a symbolic language: in the *Kutadgu Bilig*, '*black hair*' signifies youth and

vitality, *'arsal'* is used for chestnut tones, and *'white and silver-grey hair'*, emblematic of old age and wisdom, represents an individual's spiritual status within the life cycle (Ögel, 1991; Çoruhlu, 2004; Donuk, 2004; Şen, 2004; Ölmez, 2016).

As the information conveyed makes clear, hair is a multi-layered symbol representing many elements in the Turkish oral tradition. One of the most widespread and deeply rooted common cultural codes in the Turkish world is the proverb, 'A woman's hair is long, but her mind is short' (Oy, 1972). This expression establishes a metaphorical connection between 'hair', a physical characteristic, and 'mind', a mental faculty, by contrasting long with short. This conceptual contrast is a linguistic projection of the social view of women.

At first glance, this proverb may appear to be a derogatory judgement of women, but upon closer inspection, it can be seen as a sociological observation about the position of women in traditional Turkish society, both within the home and in the public sphere. Here, hair length symbolises a woman's aesthetic and physical presence, i.e. her private sphere, while the emphasis on short-mindedness points to the traditional division of labour that keeps women away from public authority, rational decision-making and management mechanisms. Therefore, this proverb summarises the historical mindset that defines women based on their biological characteristics, positioning them in the sphere of adornment (aesthetics/private sphere) rather than wisdom (public intellect). This situation should be interpreted as a cultural practice of establishing boundaries that restrict women's social development through bodily symbols.

## 5 EVALUATION AND CONCLUSION

Proverbs are a fundamental component of the Turkish oral tradition. They are not merely echoes of the past; they are also powerful control mechanisms that define and legitimise gender roles. The examined data shows that the status of women in traditional Turkish society is based on a balance between the sacred position of 'motherhood' and the 'production and economy' roles within the household. Proverbs have served as symbolic guides in this process, limiting women to the roles of childbirth and domestic labour and positioning male authority as the sole determinant of the public sphere.

This study focuses on the symbolism of hair, which was a sign of power, strength and spiritual energy in ancient Turkish history. Over time, it became a linguistic tool for expressing asymmetry in social gender codes. Through expressions such as “long hair, short mind”, women are distanced from rational competence by a concrete physical characteristic, relegating them from the sphere of “wisdom” to that of “ornament”.

Consequently, although women’s positions in education and professional life have changed significantly under the influence of modernity and feminist movements, such judgements continue to persist in cultural memory through their transmission within oral tradition. Expressions such as “A woman’s hair is long, but her mind is short” function as mirrors reflecting a society’s own existence and identity, carrying the value judgements of the past into the present. Through its analysis of this particular proverb, the present study demonstrates that efforts toward gender equality cannot be realized solely through legal reforms, but require the transformation of symbolic systems deeply rooted in language and tradition.

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### Authors' Contribution

All authors contributed equally to the development of this article.

### **Data availability**

All datasets relevant to this study’s findings are fully available within the article.

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