Feminism and Feminist History-Writing in Turkey

The Discovery of Ottoman Feminism

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ABSTRACT
The formation of a feminist consciousness and memory in Turkey coincided with a historical period in which both social movements and academic studies proliferated. Towards the end of the 1980s, the increasing number of women’s organisations and publications began to impact upon both the feminist movement and academic research in the area of women’s studies. This, combined with the expansion of the civil societal realm, has resulted in many topics and issues related to women becoming part of the public discussion, thereby contributing to the development of a new feminist consciousness. This article discusses the impact of the work in the field of women’s history and the ensuing discovery of an Ottoman feminism on the formation of such a feminist consciousness and memory in Turkey.

KEYWORDS: Ottoman Feminism, Turkish Nationalist Modernisation, Feminist History-Writing.

Introduction

In Turkey, it was only in the 1980s that we were able to discover the early roots of women’s organised struggle for emancipation. There are various reasons why it took so long for us to become aware of this early-twentieth-century struggle, which was quite animated. The women’s movement and feminist historical research played a significant role in this discovery. The attempts, both in academic and non-academic feminist circles and in various branches of feminism, led to the discovery of a feminist past that had not been part of women’s consciousness in Turkey before. That is, women’s struggles during the late imperial period (1869–1923) were revealed and named as ‘Ottoman feminism’ for the first time within a feminist political discourse.
This new interest in the past made it possible for the voices of prominent women of the earlier generations to be heard.

In this article, I will explore the reasons for the previous lack of knowledge about the early history of the women’s movement in Turkey. I will emphasise the interesting history of that movement, and will discuss developments that transformed previously accepted historical discourses as well as the effects of this new historiography. In particular, I will look at the impact of the discovery of ‘Ottoman feminism’ on women’s positioning within the history of modernisation and the writing of that history in Turkey. First, I will discuss the role of women in Ottoman-Turkish modernisation and summarise the political discussions related to women in different phases of the history of the Turkish Republic (i.e. from 1923). In part two, I will summarise the main trends of Ottoman modernist thought in order to comprehend the intellectual impact of Ottoman feminism. In the section about the Ottoman women’s movement, I will look at the various dimensions of the debates and methods of struggle of Ottoman women, focusing on these women’s own voices. Perhaps the reason why we have discovered our history so late in time arises from certain methodological problems. In the last section, I attempt to discuss the basic problems of feminist historiography in Turkey.

Modernisation in Turkey and the Significance of Ottoman Feminism

The roots of modernisation in Turkey are located in the final period of the Ottoman Empire (1839–1918). Ottoman and Turkish reformers resemble French Jacobins in that they were centralist, authoritarian, and insistent with regard to realising the ideals of the Enlightenment. The most distinctive character of the Republic is that it separated nationalism from Islam, and went even further to undertake a process of modernisation and secularisation. The founders of the Turkish Republic, led by Kemal Atatürk, went far beyond the Young Turk dreams of Empire with their reforms that abolished and transformed the Islamic Ottoman institutions. The legal and institutional reforms of the Kemalist period aimed to establish a secular, national political order in a Muslim society.

The Republican reforms brought about important changes and transformations in women’s status and led them to enter the public sphere in large numbers. However, women themselves were active agents in this process as well, something that we, as women of late-twentieth-century Turkey, were for a long time unaware of. Historical studies that revealed the existence of Ottoman feminism changed the official approach concerning the role of women in the history of Turkish modernisation, which had previously argued that women were granted their rights by the Republican Regime without having fought for these rights themselves. Praising Kemalist reforms, this andocentric discourse designated Atatürk as the sole emancipator of Turkish women. The uncovering of women’s struggles during the Ottoman past, however, showed that women were not only granted rights from above but also actively fought for them.

For feminist academics, the study of this historical process also enabled a critical reviewing of the authoritarian aspects of the Kemalist regime and Turkish modernisa-
Sârin Tekeli, a political scientist and activist in the feminist movement of the 1980s, was a path-breaking figure in challenging the established Kemalist discourse. Tekeli argued that the achievement of women’s right to vote in municipal elections (1930) and in national elections (1934) was meant to be a sign of democratisation in Turkey under the Single Party Regime, in contrast to the fascist regimes in Italy and Germany.4 This vein of argument was the outcome of an emerging feminist viewpoint in the 1980s, when women’s situation started to be questioned from women’s point of view, within the framework of a feminist discourse independent of other political discourses, including not only the official ideological discourse of Kemalism, but various leftist discourses as well.

Within this new feminist movement, themes such as women’s bodies, violence against women, and sexuality emerged and activists began to look at women’s issues with a special focus on the common experience of oppression under the patriarchal system.5 The emergence of an independent women’s movement also kindled a new outlook for women in the areas of history, religion, state, and politics. Thus, Nükhet Sirman came to define the women’s movement of the 1980s as a reaction against the Kemalist regime and the limitations of state feminism inspired by Kemalism.6

The questioning of Turkish nationalist modernisation came as an unwelcome shock to the women of earlier generations, who had been brought up within and had therefore internalised the official ideology of the Kemalist regime. The Republic had abolished the religious segregation practices and granted women new civil and political rights, thereby transforming the accepted practices of female-male interaction and providing women with the opportunity to realise their own potential, and increasing their awareness of their own contributions to the social realm. All of this served to imbue women with a new sense of self-confidence and self-awareness, especially educated and/or professional women. Kemalist socialisation had rendered these women deeply thankful for the Republican reforms and instilled in them a deep devotion to the country. Turkish middle-class women in particular adopted these new roles with an enthusiasm that Durakbaş describes as ‘Kemalist female identity’.7 While some writers have argued that women functioned as pawns in this process, to treat women in the early Republican women’s movement as mere pawns may lead to disregarding or underestimating women as subjects capable of making history.8

Nermin Abadan-Unat, a pioneering political scientist and academic who had herself benefited from the early Republican reforms, objected to the criticisms concerning the authoritarian character of the Republic. In 1935, at the age of fourteen, she had left her Viennese mother in Budapest to stay with her late father’s family in Izmir. According to Abadan, this move was based on a conscious decision to adopt the budding Republic of Turkey as her homeland, largely influenced by the egalitarian treatment—and thus free education—of women in accordance with the official modernisation ideology. Both in her articles9 and in her autobiographical account, Kum Saatini İzlerken (Watching the sandglass),10 Abadan relates the positive changes that the Republic affected in her life, and her attitude can be said to reflect the reaction of the first generation of Kemalist women.11 These women felt themselves empowered by the Republican state and therefore thought it unfair to criticise that early period of modernisation, as do many contemporary Kemalist women today.
The political scientist Yeşim Arat has asked how we can explain that a young generation of women has come to the fore with substantial criticisms of Atatürk and his authoritarian Republic—in clear opposition and challenge to previous generations who revered, and indeed felt deeply grateful to, Atatürk and his Republic. Arat concludes that the post-1980s women’s movement identified itself with demands for freedom and critical distance from the state as an important contribution to the development of the modernisation project in Turkey. Arat shows that the first women to take part in the political arena, that is, in 1935, were usually backed by their fathers in this regard; however, at the same time these ‘daughters of the Republic’ still experienced various restrictions imposed by the patriarchal order. As Ayşe Durakbaş has demonstrated in her study on Kemalist female identity, Kemalist fathers tried to bring up their daughters as exemplary Republican women and gave their full support to ensure their daughters’ education and public visibility. At the same time, however, these same men continued to enforce the traditional moral codes in the family, demanding that their daughters ‘symbolically veil’ their sexuality and behave in an extremely modest manner in their social conduct with men. Thus, while daughters could become somewhat emancipated with the help of their Kemalist-modernist fathers, such emancipation was not allowed for mothers and wives. Because the modernisation ideology designed by men sought to depict and limit the ideal wives and comrades for the new man in accordance with a male modernist outlook, Kemalist Republican ideology entailed a politics of ‘degendering’ and a ‘regendering’ in this process. As Deniz Kandiyoti puts it, Turkish women were now ‘emancipated but not liberated’. Indeed, there was little difference between the traditionalist and the modernist pattern with respect to gender roles. The so-called ‘new men’ (citizens and modern husband-fathers) of the Turkish Republic bore a great resemblance to the old insofar as their regulating, patronising character was concerned. The ‘new woman’, meanwhile, was expected to devote her entire being to others and to faithfully observe her duties within the family and society.

Drawing upon this observation, Fatmagül Berktay points out the continuities between the Ottoman Empire and the new Republic, thereby crystallising the continuity of patriarchy, albeit in a seemingly secular form. Berktay maintains that the modernist male founders of the Republic sought an alliance with their sisters as they reacted against traditional authority, that is, the authority of the father and the Sultan. Women supported their ‘nationalist brothers’ in the hope of becoming equal citizens. However, this alliance was problematic insofar as the ‘modernist brothers’ stopped short of granting full rights to women, seeking to restrict them within traditional gender roles. Berktay draws attention to a superseding patriarchal tradition that goes beyond religious discourse and practice, and which reduces women to secondary citizenship status. Such a patronising attitude maintains the subservience of women in the social, educational, economic, and especially sexual domains, all of which continue to be regulated by traditional codes of honour. Here, Berktay sees an interesting ongoing alliance between male Islamists and Westernists—both on the right and the left—and maintains that Islamic patriarchy was replaced by nation-state patriarchy. Just as traditional gender roles were largely maintained despite the transition to the Republic nation-state, so too was women’s role in the political sphere defined and dictated by the patriarchal reformers.
Studies revealing the limitations actively imposed by Kemalist reformers within the framework of women’s so-called emancipation began to be published in the late 1980s. An early example is the work of Zafer Toprak, a male historian, who drew attention to documents concerning the banning of the Women’s Republican Party, which was founded on 15 June 1923, months before the People’s Republican Party, and other documents related to the twelfth Congress of the International Alliance of Women for Suffrage and Equal Citizenship, held in Istanbul in 1935. Such findings indicate that women started a struggle for political rights immediately after the foundation of the Republic. Nezihe Muhittin, a prominent figure in this early women’s movement and publisher of the journal Kadın Yolu (Women’s way), and her friends sought to establish a political party called Kadınlar Halk Fırkası (The Women’s People’s Party). However, their demands were rejected on the grounds that the Constitution then only gave men the right to vote. The women were therefore advised to found an ‘association’ rather than a party. Yet the Türk Kadınlar Birliği (Turkish Women’s Association) eventually faced the same fate and, although not directly shut down, it was successfully pressured to terminate its existence by the Single-Party regime after it hosted the 1935 Congress of the International Alliance of Women for Suffrage and Equal Citizenship, on the grounds that its mission was fulfilled.

The rediscovery of publications of this period, such as Kadın Yolu, which reveal women’s experiences within the framework of their struggle for rights in the early Republican period, encouraged a re-questioning of the relationship between women and the Kemalist Regime. In my book, Osmanlı Kadın Hareketi (The Ottoman women’s movement), I argue that Turkish women were not only the objects of national politics but also active subjects in the struggle for emancipation. I illustrate this point by tracing Ottoman feminism in women’s journals, organisations, discourses, and activities of the historical epoch of transformation in the Ottoman polity and society, especially in the Second Constitutional Period (1908–1918). Such research, based upon original Ottoman sources, provided the impetus for the construction of a feminist memory and transformed the dominant official discourse, which had claimed that the achievement of women’s rights was due to the legal arrangements realised within the framework of the Republican reforms. Once women’s struggles during the Ottoman period had been brought to light, academics began to devote more attention to the study of the women’s movement during this period, and the number of such studies increased in number. They focused upon women’s magazines and associations, and on more prominent women of the time. Another important development was the publication of a bibliographical study on Ottoman women’s periodicals listing the names of writers and titles of articles published in these periodicals, which has come to be widely used by researchers as a primary source.

As a result of these efforts, we not only know about women whom we had never heard of before but have also learned that those women whom we did know about actually have different stories than those conveyed by the official discourse. Biographies written in old Ottoman script have been published with the new/Latin script and prominent women have been discovered. The fact that a women’s movement existed before the Republican reforms meant that a feminist consciousness could be recovered based on the stories of women who fought for social ideals and identities.
Ayşe Durakbaş presents a critical evaluation of Turkish modernisation from a feminist point of view, focusing on a prominent woman, Halide Edib Adıvar, who participated in the Turkish Revolution. Durakbaş tries to show how Edib simultaneously internalised and criticised the modernist discourses of the day. Yapraç Zihnioğlu, meanwhile, focuses on Nezihe Muhittin and women’s attempts at political organisation in the early Republican period, which was suppressed by the authoritarian Single Party politics, leading Zihnioğlu to call that revolutionary period a ‘Revolution without Women’. In her study on Girls’ Institutions (Kız Enstitüleri), Elif Akşit reveals that even though the roles imposed on or expected from women changed during the transition from the Ottoman Empire to the Turkish Republic, the dichotomy with regard to gender identities has remained the same.

The feminist awakening of the post-1980s included a critical questioning of gender roles and sexist moral codes not only within the framework of the nationalist ideology but also within that of the leftist ideology. Women in socialist groups and parties had been discussing ‘the woman question’ within the framework of oppression of the working class, perceiving socialism as the solution for women’s problems. Sabiha Sertel had expressed such socialist views in the 1930s; and they were later adopted and disseminated by the İleri Kadınlar Derneği (Progressive Women’s Association), founded in 1975. This Association would reach a membership of fifteen thousand and publish a journal called Kadınların Sesi (Women’s voice), before being closed down in the aftermath of the 1980 military intervention. It was only after the coup d’état that women who were active in the leftist movement felt the need to criticise their comrades, realising that the left, which was supposed to be egalitarian towards women, nevertheless excluded them from decision-making positions and therefore failed to break with the existing patriarchal gender codes and relations.

Another important ideological transformation in the 1990s was the changing interpretation of religion and its influence on women, leading to the view that religion did not always have a restricting impact on women. Berktay and Aynur İlyasoğlu, for example, showed that women could express their discontent via religion and use it as a means to resist the limitations of their sex status. Women authors who wrote from the standpoint of practising Muslims, such as Cihan Aktas, brought forward issues related to women’s religious practices and freedom of attire according to Islamic principles in their criticisms of secular modernisation in Turkey. Secular women academics, such as Kandiyoti, Nilüfer Göle, Feride Acar, and Ayşe Saktanber, discussed the issues of Islamic revivalism and women’s rights.

The social history of Turkish modernisation was also evaluated from feminist perspectives and new topics and themes emerged in the process. Ferhunde Özbay studied a particular type of ‘service’, the work of domestic servants, raised as members of the household, and its meaning during various phases of modernisation. Turkish modernisation was considered for the first time from the perspective of citizenship, militarism, and gender, as for example in the work of Ayşe Gül Altınay who discussed the militarisation of gender and national identity through Sabiha Gökçen, Atatürk’s adopted daughter, as the ‘world’s first woman combat pilot. Ayşe Gül Altınay has revealed that all arenas of public mobility, including defence of the homeland, were opened up to women, albeit within certain limitations.
To summarise, the significance of the 1990s was the growing volume of feminist academic research and feminist historical studies in which different ways of silencing and avoiding acknowledgement of women’s presence in history were revealed and the discovery of an Ottoman feminist past enabled Turkish women to construct a feminist memory for themselves. The new research showed that women’s role within the process of Turkish modernisation was very different from what the official discourse had led us to believe. The revelation that women had actually been active agents in this dual process of nationalisation and modernisation served to shake the very foundations of the previously accepted official history.

The Ideological Climate of Ottoman Feminism

Motherhood and women’s role in socialisation were central themes in nation-building ideologies and the related social projects throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Women’s traditional roles were re-emphasised in the nationalist ideology and the programs of social engineering became loaded with new meanings. Women’s bodies and fertility were subject to rational checks and controls within various pro-natalist or population planning policies of modern nation-states. Family was designated as the moral unit of society and the domestic division of labour between the sexes was designed according to traditional gender roles, with the husband as breadwinner and the wife assigned the domestic chores of a housewife. These ideas were stated both in the modernist discourses of the late Ottoman period and later in Turkish nationalism. In all the trends of nineteenth-century Ottoman thought, namely Westernism, Islamism, and Turkism, women were at the centre of social projects as objects of modernisation. But one should be aware that these modernising men were keen to keep women within the boundaries of their own image of womanhood, which did not go beyond the traditional. Meanwhile, issues about gender relations were at the centre of the ideological conflict between the reformists and the traditionalists.

A common trend during this period was the emphasis on women’s domestic roles as mothers and wives. Ahmet Rıza, an intellectual bureaucrat of the time, stated: ‘A woman should seek freedom in order to fulfil her duties as a mother as best she can’. Abdullah Cevdet, a prominent spokesman of Western views, maintained that any action or development that would inhibit motherly duties would have bad consequences for women and society in general: ‘The most important duty for women, materially, or spiritually considered, with its most exalted meaning, is to become a mother. Any neglect of this obligation will consequently cause destruction for both women and society’. Islamists argued that women should behave in accordance with what they claimed was the very reason for women’s creation, that is, they should use their birth-giving qualities to reproduce and raise future generations. Musa Kazım, an Islamicist ideologue, said: ‘Women were created for the purpose of giving birth to children and raising them for a certain period of time’. However, as elsewhere, women’s rights activists in the Ottoman Empire were quick to use this reasoning to argue for their rights as ‘the mothers of the nation’.
Turkish nationalism gradually became dominant in the second Constitutional Period (1908–18) and, after the establishment of the Republic, it was this nationalist ideology that defined the framework of modern ideology that in turn defined the framework of modern femininity and masculinity in the Republic. Women’s rights were therefore defended not as individual rights, but as a matter of development and social progress. Social development was directly related to the improvement of women’s social status. Modernist men criticised the patriarchal family and society as they advocated women’s rights and questioned the limitations of patriarchy on their masculine identities. Male modernists, while complaining about their lack of rights due to paternal pressure, benefited from women’s grievances. They criticised women’s lack of education, their life, and their powerlessness regarding divorce. They also complained about arranged marriages and being bound to ‘incompetent’ women who provided no intellectual friendship. Although their support for women’s rights was based on their desire and efforts to fashion proper wives for themselves, these male reformers’ emphasis on equality contributed to Ottoman feminism nonetheless.

In this context, there was an attempt to reconcile modernity with Islam as well as a quest for a tradition harking back to the pre-Islamic origins of the Turkish nation. Westernism and Turkish nationalism were merged to some extent by Ziya Gökalp (1876–1924), who could be considered the ideologue of the Republic. Durkheim’s sociological views about division of labour and organic solidarity in a modern society were influential in Gökalp’s formulation of a nation based on a corporatist integration that negated class differences. Within such a sociological framework, he re-emphasised sexual equality and other democratic cultural characteristics among the ancient Turks, in their Asiatic, nomadic, pre-Islamic origins, thereby claiming these as components of authentic Turkish culture and Turkish nationalism.

The Ottoman Women’s Movement

‘To wake up, to see, and to demand’ are three verbs that Ottoman women used to describe their movement. Since the late nineteenth century, along with the processes of change and progress in different areas of the Ottoman world, women brought their demands for rights and freedom to the fore. They began to express themselves in society and to create an agenda and awareness regarding their own rights in the public opinion. They created journals and associations in order to discuss their problems and propose solutions. While journals helped to amplify their voices, the associations helped to transform their individual claims into socially organised demands.

It was intellectual men of the time who started women’s journals, as participation of women in the social and political spheres was limited. Terakki-i Muhaderat (The progress of Muslim women), published in 1869, was the first journal dedicated to women’s issues. However, women soon began to fully enjoy the benefits of this new area and to publish their own journals. Many more followed, with nearly forty journals having been published before 1923. A few examples can serve to illustrate the ideological and social characteristics of the time. Hanımlara Mahsus Gazete (The ladies’ journal)—published by a man, Ibnül Hakki Mehmet Tahir, but with female contribu-
tors, Makbule Leman, Nigar Osman, Fatma Şadiye—was significant in that it introduced works by women writers such as Fatma Aliye Hanım and Şair Nigar Hanım and gives us a window onto the views of modernist male intellectuals of that period. Among the Ottoman women’s journals, Hanımlara Mahsus Gazete had the longest life span, existing from August 1895 until 1908. The journal’s goal was expressed as follows:

Our task is quite vast. If we must summarise it in a few words, we would say: to contribute to increasing the breadth of ladies’ knowledge in every way; to be the mirror reflecting the opinions of women poets and writers, or in other words, to display the innate abilities of Ottoman women through the publication of their works.\(^5^4\)

Fatma Aliye Hanım, one of the columnists in these journals and a leading intellectual woman of the period, expressed her views regarding the existence of women’s history and women’s need to be aware of that history and develop a consciousness of their own.\(^5^5\) The nationalist ideology dominant in Hanımlara Mahsus Gazete was later reflected in the publishing principle of İnci (Pearl), a journal for women published and edited by men:

A good housewife should know how to organise the household, and provide for a clean and cosy home. She should be a good mother and bring up her child according to the needs of the modern era. We are publishing İnci in order to equip women with the necessary knowledge regarding household management, cooking, and the like.\(^5^6\)

Kadınlar Dünyası (Women’s world), an illustrated journal published only by women between 17 April 1913 and 21 May 1921, deserves special attention here. The name of this journal was chosen to reflect the need to create a world for women, and an agenda was created based upon this goal. Published daily for the first hundred issues, and weekly thereafter, Kadınlar Dünyası was the voice of an independent women’s movement and the most radical of the Ottoman women’s journals, in that it did not allow male writers to write in its columns: ‘Until our rights are recognised in public law, until men and women are equal in every profession, Kadınlar Dünyası will not welcome men in its pages’. In addition, the editors of this journal claimed, that it would be more helpful if the men interested in furthering women’s status would write in men’s newspapers that otherwise devoted no attention to women’s issues.\(^5^7\) In fact, this was the journal’s basic principle. Its goal was ‘to defend the rights and interests of womanhood’. These principles were included on its cover, which proclaimed that it ‘defends the legal rights and advantages of women without discrimination against sex or religion’. This goal took on a more concrete form when the women who had come together to produce the periodical formed their own association, which was also named after these principles.

Unlike Hanımlara Mahsus Gazete, whose writers were elite intellectual and literary women of the time, Kadınlar Dünyası published articles written by, and received the support of women from every segment of society. Another distinguishing aspect of
*Kadınlar Dünyası* was its four-page supplement in French during the issues 121 to 128. According to the journal, a ‘new woman’ had to be created not only ideologically, but physically as well, so that her appearance complied with the structure of the modernising society.58 The main difference between *Kadınlar Dünyası* and today’s journals is that it published many readers’ letters and thereby created an agenda of its own by addressing the issues discussed in such letters.

*Kadınlar Dünyası* was owned by a woman, Ulviye Mevlan,59 had an editorial board comprised solely of women, and was even printed by women. This trend, however, had a predecessor: the journal *Şüküfezar* (Garden of flowers), which unfortunately survived for only four issues in 1886. A quote from the first issue of that journal summarises its mission: ‘We, a group that has long been humiliated by men for being “long haired and short brained”, will try to prove that we are in fact just the opposite. We will insist that it is possible and correct to work without preferring men to women, or women to men’.60

It is possible to find out how the women’s movement was defined at the time by looking through the articles and letters of these journals, especially *Kadınlar Dünyası*. For example, women were obviously extremely determined to change their lives:

> Recently Ottoman womanhood proved that it has a soul and that it exists. We hear its sighs and moans everyday. It says: ‘We exist, we have awoken, we shall rise, now rise and show us the way’. We see this motivation in all sections of womanhood. We now believe that our life is not a good one. From now on, women are not going to live this way, and they cannot live this way. You can be absolutely sure of this.61

Ottoman women were frequently accused of imitating the West.62 However, they responded by saying that no matter where in the world they were, women faced the same basic problems. They viewed ‘the woman question’ as a universal issue and therefore underscored that women’s resistance might, of course, be similar. They also insisted that resolving women’s problems be taken seriously, and that the woman problem be considered the most important issue of the age:

> If what we want and what we will do resemble their [western women’s] demands and actions, this should not lead to the conclusion that we are imitating them. This issue, the woman question, should be the number one priority in the new minds, minds of correct reasoning, bred by this century.63

Once they had identified the common denominators, that is, the universality of the women’s movement and stated that they would follow the path it laid out, they emphasised their awareness of living in a particular society and culture, and that they would not neglect these factors in their actions. ‘We Ottoman women would like to become part of this movement, which has been started for all women by our sisters, the women of this world; however, as we proceed down the path that this movement has carved out, we shall remain within the boundaries of our own traditions and manners’.64 Significantly, ‘feminism’ was accepted as the watchword of this movement:
There are many important things (such as the telegraph, automobile, or boat) that exist in every country, yet not every language has a word or even a translation for them. Therefore we do not need the words *nisailik* (womanishness) or *nisaiyun* (womanhood). We prefer to use the word ‘feminism’ (*feminizm*) as it is. What harm can one more foreign word do to our language? For the existence and necessity of feminism cannot be denied.65

The women were also aware that they were being excluded from those practices associated with the notions of equality and freedom, ideas that then burgeoned in the intellectual world of men. Not only did men not want to give women the same political rights that they demanded for themselves, they were reluctant to grant women even their human rights.

Yes, although men appear to be such freedom-lovers, they are in fact nothing but small dictators. Even while they drenched the continents in blood, all the while calling out, ‘Liberty! Liberty!’ they were blind to the universe of women, which was greater and more important than theirs. They abstained from granting women even their human rights, let alone their political rights.66

Women expressed their reactions to the fifth anniversary of the 1908 Constitution on 10 July 1913 by calling it the ‘National Day of Men’, a clear example of their gender-conscious response to their lack of political and social rights.67 In their quest to define their self-identity, they criticised the ideology of the nation-state and claimed that its basis was paternal:

On 10 July, our men got their rights of rulership, their civil and human rights. They fully realised that they were human beings. … Ooh womanhood! Will you still remain in that benighted state? You, too, have a light, a right, and humanity; will it not be acknowledged? Womanhood! When will you see and realise that you are you? When will you, too, live freely? When will your rights have been accepted among public rights? You are the mother of this people [millet] that blesses and honours liberty. Will you continue to be the slave of customs, bigotry, and ignorance? You, too, are human beings; you, too, have rights! Women, women! Liberty was not given to our men, they took it by force. It is said that rights are not given but taken. … We, women, also demand our own natural and civil rights. If they do not give them to us, then we, too, shall take them by force! *Vive la Liberté!*68

The awareness of this situation would lead to a new consciousness, as expressed in the periodical *Kadınlar Dünyası*: only women themselves could solve their own problems:

Yes, some of the Ottoman men defend us Ottoman women. We see that and we thank them. However, we Ottoman women have our own ways and manners, and male writers can understand neither this, nor our psychology. Let them please leave us alone and not make toys for their dreams out of us. We can defend our rights by our own efforts.69
It was in this aim that women started a movement, first on the individual and later on a social level. This movement aimed to create both a new social structure, including all of its inherent components such as intra-personal relations, lifestyle, and values, and also a new type of woman who would thrive within this new social structure.

The issues addressed by women’s organisations attest to the dual character of the Ottoman women’s movement: On the one hand, the women grappled with national issues, such as solving economic problems, bolstering the national economy, and promoting the consumption of domestic products, and on the other, they dealt with issues specific to women. The lack of educational institutions for women pushed them to open schools themselves. Some organisations focused solely on the issue of educating women, such as Osmanlı Türk Kadınları Esirgeme Derneği (Association for the Protection of Ottoman Turkish Ladies) and Bıckı Yurdu (School for Seamstresses). Others also aimed at raising women’s consciousness by holding conferences. Women also established associations that supported their participation in business life and their ability to earn their own livelihood, as well as philanthropic associations that aimed at healing the wounds of the Balkan Wars (1912–1913), which especially affected women and children.

Kadınlar Dünyası, mentioned above, was the official journal of the Osmanlı Mudafaa-i Hukuk-u Nisvan Cemiyeti (Association for the Defence of the Rights of Ottoman Women), founded in 1913. This Association distinguished itself by means of various activities, such as symbolic demonstrations of women’s courage, like flying in a plane, and organising an action whereby association members entered a post office en masse to mark the beginning of their struggle for Muslim women’s right to enter public offices. They established a place of business for seamstresses in order to emphasise the importance of women’s economic independence and they also made attempts to modernise women’s dress. Moreover, included in their program was an article concerning women’s participation in politics. All these activities inspired Grace Ellison from The Times and Odette Feldman from the Berliner Tageblatt to come to Istanbul to inform the public of their own respective countries about the Ottoman women’s movement.

The flexible structure of the Ottoman empire allowed women of various ethnic backgrounds to organise amongst themselves as well, in the form of organisations such as Beyoğlu Rum Cemiyet-i Hayriye-i Nisvaniyesi (Beyoğlu Greek Beneficial Association of Women), Türk ve Ermeni Kadınlar İttiham Cemiyet-i Hayriyesi (Beneficial Union of Turkish and Armenian Women), Kürt Kadınları Teali Cemiyeti (Association for the Elevation of Kurdish Women), and the Çerkes Kadınları Teaviün Cemiyeti (Association for Mutual Co-operation Amongst Circassian Women). However, the establishment of the Republic eradicated this flexible structure, and this state of affairs impacted upon the women’s movement as well. Organisations of ethnic minorities were frowned upon in Republican Turkey, whose state structure was predominantly shaped by Turkish nationalism up until recently.

Another example of the new consciousness were the lectures that expressed women’s demands. In 1911, for example, during one of her lectures in a mansion in Istanbul, Fatma Nesibe drew attention to the importance of organising the masses for the women’s struggle: ‘Today we are 300, ladies? Yes. We started with 300, but tomorrow we will be 3000 for
sure, and the day after, 6000. Finally, one day we will start the lecture with all women in attendance'.

Considering the ideological currents of the time, the women’s movement cannot claim to be purely feminist. Women, too, were affected by the winds of political nationalist ideology, which, in turn, legitimised women’s struggle for their rights. Nationalists accepted that women’s status had to be improved because of women’s duty to bring up future generations. The formation of a ‘national family’ and modernisation of the nation would only be possible if women were granted their rights. The argument that claimed full citizenship could only be granted to those who fulfilled their military service elicited a firm response from women: ‘Women can be soldiers when the motherland is in need’. And after all, they claimed, women should have been granted rights even before men, because they were the ‘mothers of civilisation’, for it was they who taught children civilised manners.

Contemporary Feminist History-Writing in Turkey

Feminist historical studies have shown that women struggled to overcome obstacles and realise themselves in various activities in Turkey. They have also left traces, if we can only see them. Today, it is important for us to reveal women’s experiences and struggles and bring that history up to date to strengthen our feminist consciousness. Halide Edib Adıvar’s words, expressed at a conference in 1913, should echo in our ears, inspiring us to increase our own awareness of our history:

The awakening and progress of women have been slow and gradual as in other movements, everywhere. The fact that Ottoman women do not have a written history of their progress should not lead us to conclude that they have not done anything. On the contrary, to speak of such an intimate subject today in a large public theatre and find such an honourable and immense crowd of women in attendance … is something to be proud of. Today, at this moment, as I address you in this way and as you listen, we are, for sure, making history. One day, when our grandchildren talk about our history with pride and … long enough to comprise an entire conference lecture, they will also mention our struggle, which is still weak but full of good intentions and sincerity, but which has already overcome immense difficulties.

The main goal of feminist historical writing has been to ensure the visibility of women’s experiences as well as their practices in struggling for their rights and freedom within the historical context, to discuss the reasons for the invisibility of women in history, and to uncover the ways that the power and agency of women have been obstructed. In short, the aim of feminist historiography is that women be able to write, and thereby reclaim, their own histories. Below, I will discuss some of my observations concerning the writing of women’s history in Turkey.

The most important reason for women’s invisibility and the denial of their subjectivity in the Turkish context is how they have been used symbolically in the processes
of modernisation and development. Until recently, women have been studied within the framework of Turkish modernity or Turkish nationalism. Ottoman feminism was influenced by the Ottoman modernisation and nationalist movements, and during the foundation process of the modern Republic, women were defined within a nationalist modernisation project. If we think that women’s experiences, values, and living practices are different from those of men, then we also need to write history from a feminist perspective, taking care to conceptualise women’s oppression and their practices in the struggle for freedom and rights. Women’s history-writing should therefore be liberated from the discourses of modernisation and nationalism and the invented myths and images belonging to this period.

We should also be careful when using the periodisation and specific terms mainly used to describe Western feminisms, especially taking care not to view women’s movements of the past from the vantage point of today’s gains and realities. That could lead us not only to diminish the importance of women’s struggles and ways of thinking in the past but also to recall the past to account for today’s events. Evaluating the period under study within its own conditions and highlighting the universal without discarding the local can help us to avoid mistakes of misinterpretation.

The insufficient use of original materials about women is another significant problem. We know that women have left behind fewer documents than men. However, even the limited amount of material that women actually did leave behind has not been used sufficiently. Some significant sources from which direct information about women can be obtained have not been used adequately in the Turkish context yet. Court/qadi records, inherited estate (tereke) records, imperial decrees, petitions, fatwas, heritage records, consulate records, and Ottoman miniatures that can inform us about women’s use of space and physical appearance, all contain important information. Objects found in archaeological excavations such as rock monuments, tomb stones, wall paintings, engraved tablets, plates, reliefs, pots and pans, and ceremonial cups can be important sources when tracing a society consisting of both men and women. Folk narratives, songs, epics, folk tales, proverbs, and clothing can also equally provide us with important information about women’s past.

From all these sources we can gather information about women’s domestic lives; their relationships with men and children in the family; their pregnancy and postpartum period (logusalik) experiences; their place in society; how they used space; their roles as midwives and healers; their lives in commerce and business; beliefs and their roles in belief systems (women Sufis, for example); and women’s means of entertainment, physical appearance, and clothing styles. Studies of women’s history have shown for the first time that a great many materials ranging from imperial edicts to paintings, from the needle lace produced by women to clothing, and from diaries to tear bottles, which had been neglected by traditional historians up to that point, could actually be of great historical significance. Literary works and novels are also important sources providing information about and insight into the individual and society in instances where fiction and reality overlap.

In addition, oral history methodology, which plays an important role in ensuring the inclusion of oppressed groups’ experiences in the historical narrative, can make a significant methodological contribution to women’s history. Women’s oral history
took on a pioneering role in Turkey in opening up this area.\textsuperscript{85} These studies revealed that for women the history of Turkish modernisation has been fraught with contradictions; that within its framework, women were not immediately freed from the constraints of tradition because the degree of modernisation was generally determined by men; and that therefore, modernisation did not necessarily mean freedom for women.\textsuperscript{86}

Several fields/subjects related to women’s history are still waiting to be researched. The lives of ordinary women, women workers, and migrant/immigrant women have not been studied sufficiently. Feminist consciousness has recently begun to foster discussions regarding women of different cultural and ethnic backgrounds, and histories of women from different backgrounds within the Ottoman Empire have also begun to be written.\textsuperscript{87} However, much still remains to be done in this respect. It should be noted that, just as they describe historical varieties of femininity, these new works also take a democratic approach to political and social history, which to date have established themselves solely on the basis of the experience of the dominant national group.

In conclusion, the discovery of Ottoman feminism in Turkey shows that women actively struggled for their own emancipation. It has also revealed that they played a part in shaping such processes as nation-building and modernisation. Women’s crafting and accumulation of knowledge regarding their emancipation history has made women, especially in Turkey, comprehend the continuity between the efforts of previous feminists and their own and to establish a relationship with them—thereby strengthening their feminist consciousness and belief in the feminist cause and increasing their self-confidence to change their own lives and becoming political subjects.

\section*{Acknowledgements}

I would like to thank Fatmagül Berktay, Ayşe Durakbaş, Necla Akgökçe, and Aynur İlyasoğlu, who have all contributed a lot to women’s history in Turkey, and have kindly read and commented on this text. I am also grateful to the reviewers and editors of \textit{Aspasia} for their constructive criticisms and contributions.

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\section*{Notes}


2. The institution of the Caliphate and \textit{tarikats} (religious sects) were eliminated. The Latin alphabet was adopted. The Law of Unity of Education entered into force, the Civil Code of
Switzerland was adopted, polygamy became illegal, and civil marriage was introduced with both partners being granted the right to divorce, equal right to heritage, and custody of children.


18. Zehra Arat sees this as the replacement of Islamic by Western patriarchy. Z. Arat, ‘Kemalizm ve Türk Kadını’ (Kemalism and Turkish women), in 75 yılda Kadınlar ve Erkekler, 52.


24. ‘Kadınlar Birliği Dün Kendini Feshetti’ (The Turkish Women’s Association was abolished yesterday), Tan newspaper, 11 Mayıs 1935: 2. Also see Toprak, ‘1935 İstanbul Uluslararası Feminizm Kongresi ve Barış’; Yaprak Zihnioglu, Kadınsız Inkılap (Revolution without women), Istanbul: Metis, 2003, 257–258.


35. F. Berktay, ‘Has Anything Changed in the Outlook of the Turkish Left on Women?’, in Women in Modern Turkish Society, ed. Ş. Tekeli, 250–262.


44. D. Kandiyoti, ‘Gendering the Modern: On Missing Dimensions in the Study of Turkish Modernity’, in *Rethinking Modernity and National Identity in Turkey*, eds. Sibel Bozdoğan and Reşat Kasaba, Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 1995, 113. Here we can cite Selahattin Asım, the director of the School of Law of Thessaloniki, as a positive example of someone who goes against the grain in his courses and writings. He saw the exclusion of women from society and social life as one of the main social problems and argued that women had to fulfil certain social functions in order to attain the basic rights and be treated as individuals. Selahattin Asım, *Türk Kadının Tereddisi yahut Karılaşmak* (The degradation of Turkish women), İstanbul: Arba, 1911, 2nd ed. 1996.
45. Ahmet Rıza, Vazife ve Mesuliyet: Kadın (Duty and Responsibility: Woman), Paris: İttihat Terakki Cemiyeti tarafından basılmıştır, Published by the Ottoman Order and Progress Society, 1908, 10.


47. Musa Kazım, ‘Hürriyet-i Müsavvat’ (Freedom and equality), quoted in İsmail Kara, Türkiye’de İslamcılık Düşüncesi (Islamic thought in Turkey), vol. 2, İstanbul: Risale Yayınları, 1987, 54.


51. With the signature Kadınlar Dünyası (Women’s world): ‘Osmanlı Kadınının Istediği’ (What the Ottoman woman wants), Kadınlar Dünyası (Women’s world), no. 11 (5 October 1913): 1.

52. Aile (Family) was published by Şemseddin Sami in 1880. Demet (Bunch) was published by Celal Sahir in 1908. There is no record of any editor in most of the publications in this period; in most cases the typesetters served as editors.


56. İnci (Pearl) no. 1 (1919): 2.

57. ‘Açık Muhabere’ (Open communication), Kadınlar Dünyası, (Women’s world) no. 21 (24 April 1913): 4.

58. Information about dress as well as face, hair, and body care provided in the journal was intended to contribute to the appearance of women in the public sphere. Accounts of the lives and work of famous women of the West, including Madam Curie, Sarah Bernard, George Sand, and other leading women of the arts and sciences as well as various professions, were provided to promote a Western-oriented identity. News about the programmes and events of women’s organisations, texts of women’s conferences, book critiques, and music and theatrical news were also included within the pages of the journal.


62. In an article of his published on 12 January 1921 in İkdam Newspaper, the male intellectual Yakup Kadri started a polemic amongst women about this issue. See Nêmet Cemil, ‘Kadınlığın Terakkisi’ (Women’s progress), Kadınlar Dünyası, 19 February no. 194/8, (1921): 2. Moreover, Turkish women are still accused of imitation today.

64. With the signature: Kadınlar Dünyası, ‘Hukuk-u Nisvan’ (Women’s rights), Kadınlar Dünyası, no. 1 (4 April 1913): 1.

65. Nimet Cemil, ‘Yine Feminizm, Daima Feminizm’ (Feminism again, feminism always), Kadınlar Dünyası, no. 194/8 (19 February 1921): 2. Genç Kadın (Young woman) magazine, which was published by men in 1919, rejected feminism on the basis that it was European in origin. From the Editor, ‘Mesleg¨imiz’ (Our aim), Genç Kadın, no. 1 (4 January 1919): 3.


68. With the signature, Kadınlar Dünyası, ‘10 Temmuz İd-i Ekber-i Hürriyettir’ (Tenth of July is the great Feast of Freedom), Kadınlar Dünyası no. 98 (10 July 1913): 1.


71. For example, Zabel Hancıyan and her organisation, Azkaniver Hayuhyac İngerutyan, founded in Istanbul in 1879, aimed at opening new schools for young girls and helping the education of Armenian women in Anatolia and did open twenty-three schools in Anatolia. See Osman Nuri Ergin, Türk Maarif Tarihi (The history of Turkish education), Istanbul: Osmanbey Publishing, 1930, vol. 1, 632–633.


74. ‘Bir İki Söz’ (A few words), Kadınlar Dünyası, no.194/1 (2 January 1921): 2.


77. P.B. (editor Süleyman Bahri), ‘Beyaz Konferanslar’ (White conferences), Kadın, no.14 (7 January 1911): 13–14. Unfortunately, we have no information about Fatma Nesibe, apart from the texts of her eleven lectures, which were published in Kadın (Women) in Istanbul, 1911. See S. Çakır, ‘Kadınlığın İlk Tarihi Sıkayıet: Beyaz Konferanslar’ (The first historical complaint of womanhood: White conferences), Tarih-Toplum, no. 231 (March 2003): 40–47.

78. With the signature, Kadınlar Dünyası, ‘10 Temmuz İd-i Ekber-i Hürriyettir’, Kadınlar Dünyası, no. 98 (10 July 1913): 1. Although conscious of its own goals and actions, the women’s movement remained under the influence of the issues of its time, remaining involved with national problems: ‘Our goal is not only the rise and progress of women but the rise and progress
of our nation’. Ulviye Mevlan, ‘Düşünüyorum’ (I am thinking), Kadınlar Dünyası, no. 168 (6 April 1918): 2.


82. Seeing that these women really existed made people aware of the various ways of silencing the past to induce a kind of historical amnesia. This was, in a way, related with the more or less general amnesia over the Ottoman past and subjectivities of the past. The change in language and the replacement of the Ottoman alphabet with the Latin alphabet also contributed to a break in cultural continuity.


85. There has been a proliferation of women’s oral history projects in Turkey, accompanied by the establishment of various archives. The Women’s Library carried out a project entitled ‘A Pilot Project on Women’s Oral History in Turkey’, and the Istanbul University Women Research Centre completed a project on ‘The Pioneer Women of the Republic’.
