



Writing Women's Lives: Auto/Biography, Life Narratives, Myths and Historiography *An International Symposium, 19–20 April 2014, Istanbul*

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The Istanbul Women's Library and Information Center Foundation, on occasion of its twenty-fourth anniversary, together with Yeditepe University organized the international symposium "Writing Women's Lives: Auto/Biography, Life Narratives, Myths and Historiography," which took place at Yeditepe University on 19–20 April 2014. The symposium coordinators were Birsen Talay Keşoğlu, Vehbi Baysan, and Şefik Peksevgen, assisted by eleven more members of the Organizing Committee, including Aslı Davaz, director of the Istanbul Women's Library.¹

This symposium was extraordinarily successful. More than two hundred participants from all continents presented papers during forty-four (mostly parallel) sessions. The symposium was less Western dominated than any international women's history conference I have ever attended, both with regard to the presenters and their topics. In addition to numerous papers about women in Ottoman and Turkish history, there were also papers about Afghanistan, Bengal, China, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Iran, Jordan, Pakistan, and South Africa, and some about Great Britain, the United States, Portugal, Spain, and a few Eastern European countries. In addition, many papers discussed cross-cultural interactions and shared histories. In line with the conference's main theme, many papers explicitly focused on methodological and theoretical issues in women's history. Topics-wise, there was a strong focus on women's experiences in or with religion, art, politics, war, media, and migration, from the thirteenth up until the twenty-first century.

A selection from the forty-four session titles can further convey some of the symposium's richness: Women Challenging Male-Stream History Writing; Oral Histories and Testimonies; Reflections of National History in Women's Lives; Women in Political Activism; Archives, Memoirs Women's Historiography; Gendered Experience, Women's Experience and Social History; Women's Voices in Religious Discourses; Women's Experience in the Middle East; Women's Experience of Migration; and Literature and Auto/biographical Fiction.

There were two sessions that stood out for me. In the first, Turkish scholar Metin Yüksel presented his research in progress about Seyyedeh Zahra Hosseini's voluminous, immensely successful, and officially endorsed 2007 memoir of the Iran-Iraq War



of 1980–1988, which has been translated into English as *One Woman's War: Da (Mother)*. He explored the reasons why this book is so successful and asked how it presents women, and the paper led to an especially lively discussion with the audience. Jordanian scholar Jude Sajdi discussed her research about two Palestinian women's narratives of how they survived the Nakba ("the Catastrophe": the 1948 displacement of Palestinians that preceded and followed the foundation of the state of Israel) and subsequently built their lives. Sajdi, a third-generation Palestinian exile with a particular interest in women's stories, emphasized that it is difficult to generalize about the Nakba, but that it is of great importance for the younger generation to depict the life that women and men in Palestine once knew.

Finally, Elif Mahir Metinsoy presented her research about "Ottoman Women's Resistance to Violence through Their Everyday Narratives during World War I." Ottoman women whose male relatives were at the front experienced physical and other forms of violence from external and internal enemies. These women struggled to protect their legal and economic rights, and they recorded their experiences in letters and petitions to the state. These letters and petitions are new archival sources that have allowed Elif Mahir Metinsoy to include ordinary women's narratives and history into Ottoman women's history of this crucial period.

In the other session, I was especially impressed by Bürge Abiral's thoroughly researched paper on "Silencing Sexual Violence and Vulnerability: Women's Narratives of Incarceration during the 1980–1983 Military Junta in Turkey." The author argued that three hegemonic discourses (on feminine respectability, a militarized nationalism, and a leftist masculinist discourse of strength) intertwined to create a deep silence about these women's experiences with sexual violence, and that we need an anti-militarist feminism.

When a conference has so many sessions scheduled at the same time, one can inevitably hear only a fraction of the papers. But this is not a complaint: it is the other side of such a rich offering. In addition to the interesting program, the two-day seminar was also very well organized. Sessions with mainly Turkish presenters had simultaneous English translation. The program also included a dance performance, a whole series of documentary films, and a boat cruise with dinner on the Bosphorus.

Because of the great number of papers on Ottoman and Turkish women's history, many of them including theoretical and methodological reflections, the overall impression of the symposium is that women's and gender history is a blossoming field in Turkey, even if the integration of this work into the master national narrative remains problematic (but, alas, where not?). The Istanbul Women's Library and Information Center Foundation has now twice (co-)organized a successful international women's history conference or symposium,² we can only hope that in future years more of these events will follow.

◆ Notes

1. For the official symposium website, see <http://www.wwl-symposium.org/en/default.asp> (accessed 29 June 2014).

2. For information about the Library, see their website at <http://www.kadineserleri.org/en/default.asp> (accessed 29 June 2014). For a short description by Aslı Davaz of the history and work of the Library, and a report by Birsen Talay Keşođlu and Fatma Türe of its 2009 international conference, see *Aspasia: The International Yearbook of Central, Eastern, and Southeastern European Women's and Gender History* 4 (2010).