

Memory, Women, and Community: Turkey

The relations between memory, gender, and nation-state formation in Turkey can be best captured if their multiplicity is drawn out. This necessarily involves discussing the construction of gendered memories by the early republican elite in comparison with those produced by their “daughters” and looking at contemporary articulations of nostalgia in the identity formulation of different groups.

During the establishment of the Turkish Republic, the state emphasized a qualified Westernization with the aim of undercutting collective loyalties to the Ottoman legacy. This effort was coupled with a unique form of secularism based on a distinction between the “right” and “wrong” Islams – the latter being an umbrella term for any religious activity that had the potential to challenge the legitimacy of the new regime. In creating a collective memory to consolidate and justify the republican pillars, images of women would be indispensable tropes.

Ziya Gökalp, the most significant intellectual of the period, provided the framework of the new Turkish national identity with a pre-Islamic past whereby desired elements of modernization could be Turkified. His theory centralized women as the guardians and transmitters of this pure Turkish civilization, which had characteristics such as gender equality, feminism, and monogamous families (Durakbaşa 1998). As a result, the new collective identity was based on a particular remembrance of the pre-Ottoman past in which gendered subjectivities played a significant role in coalescing the “indigenous” and the “foreign.”

Whereas the bigotry of the Ottoman period and heretic religious practices were said to victimize women, the republican ideals and “correct” Islam were seen as sources of moral principles and modesty requirements. Hence, the Woman Question became the pivotal component of the Kemalist project with the image of the modern women symbolizing the break with the past (Kandiyoti 1991). The mainstream historical writing described the enlightened male elites as the pioneers of this change – concealing the suppression of women’s autonomous movements (Tekeli 1990). The discourse also distinguished between Istanbul women (among whom such movements had originated) and peasant women. While peasant women’s efforts during the war were glorified, “Istanbul women” were seen as betrayers who entertained the enemy

(Toska 1998). This gendered differentiation also served the purpose of alienating Istanbul, whose inhabitants were regarded as suspect because of the past political importance of the city.

Another remarkable aspect of this contrast is the way minorities are constructed in popular memory. The close relationship between Turkish nationalism and Turkish ethnicity is reflected in the establishment literature where non-Muslim women were depicted as morally loose, creating an other against which the morality of the “true” Turkish woman could be checked. Reinforcement of ideals of Turkish womanhood vis-à-vis the decreasing visibility of “betraying” women may have also served as a way of erasing the forced and, in many ways, brutal transformation of a heterogeneous society into one that was predominantly Turkish and Muslim. By the same token, the rejection of the Kurds as a minority and their redefinition in terms of religious heresy and regional backwardness find their parallel in literature and memoirs depicting the need to educate women victimized by lack of language skills and modern education (Türkyılmaz 2001).

Until recently, the success of such formulations was reflected in the ways “daughters of the republic” embraced this identity and advocated the nationalist project. Numerous memoirs, biographies, and oral history projects focusing on female witnesses of the early republican era reveal how women from urban, middle- and upper-middle-class families participated in the consolidation of this story (Ilyasoğlu 2000, Tekeli 1988). These elite women tended to narrate their life stories in an epic fashion resembling the historical telling of the founding of the nation, complicating the demarcation between official history and authenticity of life experience. They defined their existential meanings around their biological or spiritual fathers and defended the militarist and elitist tendencies of the republic (Altınay 2000).

Another common thread in these recollections is nostalgia, which is shaped around the contrast between the past and the present. This partly stems from the relatively recent emergence of challenges to the Kemalist visions of these women and from mainstream historical writing (Z. Arat 2000). For instance, in the Islamist construction of the republican history, the equity between modernization and secularization is questioned. At the forefront of

this challenge are urban, educated women who enter the public sphere donning the *hijāb* (Göle 1996). The new feminist groups also question the thankful attitude of the earlier generations and suggest alternative readings of history and collective memory through which they demand a more comprehensive women's liberation (Y. Arat 2000, Tekeli 1998).

As a result, in Turkey, as in many Third-World nation-state formations, images of women along with the actual participation of particular groups of women in the public sphere have played indispensable parts in shaping and reshaping collective memories.

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