

FEMALE MUSLIM INTELLECTUALS: UNDERSTANDING THE HISTORY OF  
TURKEY'S WOMAN QUESTION THROUGH THE CONSTRUCTION OF ISLAMIC  
TRADITION

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## **ABSTRACT**

Ansev Demirhan: Female Muslim Intellectuals: Understanding the History of Turkey's Woman Question Through the Construction of Islamic Tradition  
(Under the direction of Cemil Aydin and Sarah Shields)

This paper assesses how Muslim women's roles in society proved a topic of central concern for three prominent female Muslim intellectuals, Fatma Aliye (1862-1936), Halide Edip (1884-1964), and Sâmîha Ayverdi (1905-1993). Collectively spanning the course of a century, their discourses on Muslim women were indicative of the larger historical context of their time. Each individual intellectual engaged with the topic of women's societal roles and employed an Islamic framework to answer the Ottoman Empire's, and subsequently Turkey's, woman question. I argue that while each woman struggled with different historical actors and moments, all of them, through their activism and understanding of women constructed Islamic tradition in a manner that emphasized the importance of women in both the religious and sociopolitical milieu.

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## **Introduction: Turkish Female Muslim Intellectuals and the Woman Question**

This paper assesses the topic of Muslim women's roles in society, i.e. the woman question, as a topic of central concern for three prominent female Muslim reformers: Fatma Aliye (1862-1936), Halide Edip (1884-1964), and Sâmiha Ayverdi (1905-1993). While the discussion of the woman question began with male Muslim reformists during the latter half of the nineteenth century, it was female Muslim reformers who infused the topic with serious reflection, analysis, and importance. The intellectuals in this essay situated their understanding of women within broader public discourses and political contexts. Aliye, Edip, and Ayverdi offered prescriptive measures for Muslim women to challenge European misconceptions, legitimize their position in the state, and emphasize their centrality to national identity and vitality. The questions that guided my research include: How does the discourse on the woman question change when women become involved in the conversation? Does the role of women in Islam continue to be articulated after the end of the Empire? What role, if any, does Islam play in the understanding of women's roles in society over the course of a century? Does Islam's relation to the woman question ebb and wane in its prominence? Is the topic of women in Islam simply an apologetic discourse, or does it suggest a stronger hermeneutical tradition?

In searching for the answers to these questions I found that instead of contributing to the further polarization of Orientalism/Occidentalism and secularist/Islamist binaries, Fatma Aliye, Halide Edip, and Sâmiha Ayverdi posited nuanced assessments of women's roles, complicating the ideological divisions between these categories. Through the use of an Islamic framework, Aliye, Edip, and Ayverdi presented sophisticated positions on the topic of women's issues. I

argue these Muslim female intellectuals, through their engagement with the woman question, constructed Islam in ways that highlighted women's necessary involvement and importance in religion and politics.

I acknowledge my emphasis on the Islamic framework employed by these women runs the risk of reifying them as only "Muslim Women." However, each woman's ability to elide Islam with the larger happenings of her time precludes such a simplistic portrayal. Fatma Aliye wrote in the last decades of the Ottoman Empire. Her visions were preoccupied with the debates on the legitimacy of the empire in Eurocentric public opinion. In order to accomplish this legitimacy, she sought to build a bridge between Europeans and Muslims. Aliye positioned women at the forefront of this endeavor by stressing their importance as cultural ambassadors of Muslim societies. Halide Edip saw the transition from an empire to a secular Westernized republic and did not holistically accept the radical top-down secularizing reforms. Instead she sought to amalgamate Turkish nationalism with Islam through women's religious and political capital. Sâmîha Ayverdi wrote during the peak of Republican nationalist reforms and therefore wrote within a pro-Western environment, the very subject she was most critical of. Ayverdi used Islam to discuss societal concerns, constructing Islamic tradition in such a way that issues of class, motherhood, and national identity were depicted as central to Islamic tradition.

When it comes to Islam, each woman asserted her own understanding of the faith. While all three criticized the inaccuracies of European discourse, and suggested the need for a change in the understanding of women's roles in Muslim societies, they were not uniform in their ideas. Each of them posited a construction of Islamic tradition suited to the sociopolitical context of her time. What this then suggests is that Islam does not exist in a vacuum and has been socially constructed in an effort to create new Islamic traditions and practices throughout history. This

warrants the serious historical consideration of Islam as a category of analysis. By emphasizing the Islamic framework employed by each of these female intellectuals, I hope to contribute to this scholarly endeavor. In addition to this objective, this essay serves another purpose.

My purpose for introducing these women into the discussion on the woman question as it took place in the late Ottoman Empire, and then the Republic of Turkey, is to help remedy an absence of female Muslim intellectuals and their scholarly treatment in the existing literature.

Kecia Ali, a religious studies scholar recently wrote:

“Admittedly, there are some fields of inquiry where knowledge about female figures is scanty and where not much of the secondary literature to date has been written by women. (If I counted index entries for my biography of a ninth century Muslim legal scholar, I doubt I would be pleased with the result.) But modern Islam is emphatically not such a field, which makes the blatant omission of women and women’s scholarship the more disturbing.”<sup>1</sup>

Understanding Ali’s frustration and agreeing with the need for scholarship to fill this historiographical gap, an objective of this essay is to understand the history of Muslim female intellectuals in Turkish history and highlight their role in the construction of Islamic thought and practice. There are certainly more women Muslim intellectuals in the context of Ottoman and Turkish history that warrant scholarly investigation, beyond the women in this thesis. This thesis is just a modest contribution to the scholarly endeavor to emphasize the contributions of female Muslim intellectuals and their rightful place within Muslim intellectual history.

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<sup>1</sup>Kecia Ali, “Men, Men, Everywhere,” *Feminism and Religion* <http://feminismandreligion.com/2013/11/26/men-men-everywhere-by-kecia-ali/>

## **Chapter 1: Fatma Aliye: The Deconstruction of Orientalist Claims on Muslim Women**

Fatma Aliye was born in Istanbul in 1862, as the second child of Advije Rabia Hanim and her husband Ottoman civil servant and renowned historian Ahmet Cevdet Pasha (1822-1895). As a result of her father's occupation, Aliye and her family lived in Greece, Egypt, and Janina. She received informal educational training at home and became proficient in both French and Arabic at a young age. However informal her educational training may have been, her father's political career and intellectual notoriety gave her a keen awareness of the political and intellectual currents of her time. Throughout most of her life the dominant political and intellectual issue preoccupying the minds of intellectuals was European Orientalism's claim that Muslim societies were uncivilized, despotic, and backwards, a claim Aliye would one day find herself writing against.

The Orientalist notion of Western superiority rested heavily on the subjugated status of women within the Occident, compelling Muslim intellectuals to respond by creating a counter-narrative, which addressed the status of women in Islam. One of the first Muslim intellectuals to address the issue was Cheragh Ali. In 1883 he wrote, "The general tenor of the Koran is to establish perfect equality between the male and female sex, in their legal, social, and spiritual positions."<sup>2</sup> The issue of polygamy also preoccupied the writings of these intellectuals. This issue was central to the European discourse on the uncivil treatment of Muslim women, advocated by Islamic law. Positing the practical need for polygamy during the advent of Islam, Halil Halid wrote, "the interminable warfare between pagan and Islamized Arabs, brought about

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<sup>2</sup>Chiragh Ali, *The Proposed Political, Legal and Social Reforms in the Ottoman Empire and Other Mohammadan State* (Bombay: Education Society's Press, 1883) 117.



a wide inequality between the number of both sexes and many women could find no husbands. The desire to be married is perhaps the prime aim in every woman's life."<sup>3</sup> Taking on a more reformist character where Muslim women were concerned, Semsiddin Sami stressed the importance of secular female education, arguing "the condition of any society is always symmetrical to the condition of women...the whole of humanity will be educated, once women are given the right of education."<sup>4</sup>

In addition to polygamy and education, Muslim women's veiling was also discussed. As a symbolic marker of Islamic backwardness for most Orientalists, the subject of the veil incited the consideration of Muslim intellectuals. Qasim Amin wrote, "I still defend the use of the veil and consider it one of the permanent cornerstones of morality."<sup>5</sup> Countering the Orientalist idea of Muslim female oppression in more nationalistic terms, Ziya Gokalp suggests, "The ancient Turks were both democratic and feminist...In fact, among ancient peoples no ethnic group granted women as many rights or showed them as much respect as the Turks."<sup>6</sup> While these intellectuals were prompted to respond to European assumptions of Muslim women's degradation, their comments on Muslim women are too often overlooked. These comments are a part of a larger global discussion on women and Islamic tradition, which was precisely Fatma Aliye's intellectual topic of interest.<sup>7</sup> In examining her work, *Nisvan-I Islam*, it became clear that

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<sup>3</sup> Halil Halid, *The Crescent Versus the Cross* (London: Luzac & Co. 1907) 123.

<sup>4</sup> Semseddin Sami, *Kadinlar* (Women) (Istanbul: Gundogan Yayinlari, 1996), 14.

<sup>5</sup> Qasim Amin, *The Liberation of Women and The New Woman* (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2000), 35.

<sup>6</sup> Ziya Gokalp, *The Principles of Turkism* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1968), 111-12.

<sup>7</sup> With the exception of a few secondary sources, male Muslim reformists' comments on the topic of women are briefly mentioned, if not entirely overlooked. In fact, their works are seldom understood as contributing to the historical discussion of gender in Muslim societies. For example, Charles Kurzman gathered a number of primary sources and categorized them thematically. Under the topic of "Women's Rights," only two of the six modernists I

not only was Aliye part of the discussion on Muslim women taking place in the global public sphere, but even more so she sought to construct Islamic tradition by positioning women as cultural ambassadors, therefore gendering Islamic tradition. In order to fully understand the importance of this work and Aliye as a Muslim intellectual it is necessary to contextualize not only her life, but more importantly the ideas of one of her greatest intellectual influences, Ahmet Midhat Afendi.

During the latter part of the nineteenth century, the Ottoman Sultan sent representatives to various Orientalist congresses in Europe, partly to counter the negative discourses on Muslims and the Ottoman Empire. One scholar charged with this responsibility was Ahmed Midhat Efendi, perhaps the most influential and prolific Ottoman intellectual of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. In 1889, he attended the Stockholm Orientalist Congress. The inaugural reception took place in the newly opened Grand Hotel. True to its name, crystal chandeliers and gold molding adorned the “Hall of Mirrors” ballroom. With Europe’s material success on display, the proud Ottoman

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mention are listed, Charles Kurzman, *Modernist Islam, 1840-1940 : a Sourcebook*, (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2002). Often times the secondary literature will emphasize their contribution to anti-imperial political ideology, or Turkish nationalism, instead of their discussions on issues such as polygamy, Tanvir Wasti’s “Halil Halid: Anti-Imperialist Muslim Intellectual,” *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 29, No. 3 (Jul., 1993), pp. 559-579; Daglyer, Üner’s. 2007. "Ziya Gökalp on Modernity and Islam: The Origins of an Uneasy Union in Contemporary Turkey." *Comparative Civilizations Review* no. 57: 53-69. OmniFile Full Text Mega (H.W. Wilson), EBSCOhost 53. Some more recent works have used gender as a category of analysis when examining the intellectual legacy of the male Muslim reformist Qasim Amin. According to Leila Ahmed, Amin’s *The Liberation of Woman* triggered the first major debate over the veil in the Muslim world. Ahmed classifies Amin as a modernizer and not a feminist, with his work “essentially reproducing the colonial narrative of the day, the inferiority of the Muslim Other,” Leila Ahmed, “The Veil Debate-Again,” in *On Shifting Ground: Muslim Women in the Global Era*, ed. Fereshteh Nourie-Simone, (New York: Feminist Press, 2005) p.154. Novel to the debate on Amin’s characterization as a female liberator in Egypt, Hoda Elsadda argues that Amin’s intellectual engagement with the “woman question” was just as much about concepts of masculinity in Egypt as femininity. For Elsadda, Amin is not a liberator, but the person who places the burden of Egyptian backwardness squarely on women’s shoulders, Hoda Elsadda “Imagining the ‘New Man’ Gender and Nation in Arab Literary Narratives in The Early Twentieth Century,” *Journal of Middle East Women’s Studies* Vol. 3, No.2 (Spring 2007). pp. 31-55. Nilifer Gole is the most significant contributor to the literature on gender and male Muslim reformist thought. Gole’s project focuses on the Ottoman/Turkish intellectual network that placed women at the center of the discourse on Westernization, placing Muslim intellectual Semseddin Sami, and Amhet Midhat Afendi within this grid, Nilufer Gole, *The Forbidden Modern*, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan 1996). While these more recent works use gender as an analytical tool, Muslim intellectual history has failed to highlight Muslim women intellectuals and their discursive contribution to the woman question.

representative called the issue of their moral superiority into question. Growing weary of correcting people's misconceptions of Islam, he decided to observe the activities of the ballroom. He noted Egyptian religious scholars speaking to ladies in the room, while the hostess of the evening, Countess Landberg, rested on the arm of Iranian delegate, Muhsin Khan. For Ahmed, it was not the shared social space that prompted him to question Europe's moral character. Instead, it was Count Landbergs' seemingly innocuous decision to have the Swedish Ballet perform at the reception. This performance elicited a direct comparison with the apparel adorning Muslim women of the empire. Accustomed to women who were modestly dressed and veiled, Midhat Effendi found no justification for the "décolletage or skimpy ballet costumes," and this display of supposed "high culture" puzzled and offended his ideas of morality.<sup>8</sup>

This story reveals three important things. First, the issue of Orientalism was important to the Ottoman sultan. Second, Muslim intellectuals engaged directly with European elites and based their analysis on Christian society upon experiences and not theoretical renderings. Third, the comparative model used by Midhat Effendi to assess the ballet dancers' costumes in comparison with the familiar apparel at home was the typical model employed by Muslim intellectuals. Male Muslim intellectuals commonly used the comparative "apologist" framework employed by Midhat Effendi. In other words, where the topic of Muslim women was concerned, male apologists simply sought to show how European women were morally disadvantaged than Muslim women. In addition to these three factors, this story introduces Ahmet Midhat Effendi, a significant intellectual figure in Fatma Aliye's life.

Ahmet Midhat Effendi mentored Fatma Aliye, whose didactic novel, *Nisvan-I Islam*, published in 1896 marked the first time a Muslim woman focused exhaustively on the charges

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<sup>8</sup>Carter Findley "An Ottoman Occidental in Europe: Ahmed Midhat Meets Madame Gülnar, 1889", *The American Historical Review*, Volume 103, Issue 1 (Feb., 1998), 15-49.

of Orientalism against Muslim women. While Aliye was certainly a product of her time and influenced by Midhat Effendi's thoughts, she distinguishes herself from Midhat Effendi and other male Muslim intellectuals contemporaries in many ways. An examination of her work reveals how exactly her understanding of the woman question, within an Islamic framework, set her apart from her male contemporaries. Moreover, Fatma Aliye's writings show how Islam was understood as a vehicle for Muslim women's importance in both constructing and understanding Islamic tradition.

Aliye differed from the male Muslim intellectuals of her time in four important ways. First, she treated the woman question vis-a-vis Orientalist claims comprehensively, and she used a prescriptive instead of comparative model in analyzing central issues, such as polygamy and the veil. Second, Aliye thoroughly blurred the lines between public and private discourse by taking issues allocated to the private realm and placing them into the context of an international discussion. Third, while some of Aliye's opinions on the issues discussed in *Nisvân-ı İslâm* mirror her male Muslim intellectual contemporaries, not all of them do. These factors position Aliye in a distinct space at the fringes of the network of male Muslim intellectuals, and the occidentalist discourse surrounding her. While these features make her unique as a Muslim intellectual, the most significant distinguishing aspect is Aliye's utilization of Islam as a tool for women's agency in *Nisvân-ı İslâm*. Furthermore, Aliye's decision to situate the woman question within an Islamic framework legitimizes her participation in a global conversation on women's roles in Muslim societies. The fact that *Nisvân-ı İslâm* was translated into Arabic and French suggests the existence of a wide audience receptive to a more specialized discussion on Muslim women by Muslim women, and the potential to utilize Islamic faith and tradition to promote a woman's right to weigh in on her role in society.

As a woman, Aliye had a direct investment in thoroughly tackling Orientalist claims against Muslim women's supposed oppression. In other words, it was her identity and position in society that were under attack. Aliye gave import to the issues that involved Muslim women in a focused manner. In addressing these issues she moved beyond the comparative apologetic model employed by her male contemporaries. Instead, she took on an active role in teaching other Muslim women how to contend with topics such as polygamy, veiling, and arranged marriages, topics that supposedly highlighted Muslim women's oppression.

While *Nisvân-ı İslâm* is an intellectual treatise, it is also a work of advocacy that prescribes how Muslim women should contend with European misconceptions. For Aliye, cultural exchange was the solution to ridding inaccurate misconstructions from the minds of Europeans. Aliye incites Muslim women to meet with other female European travelers and engage in conversations revolving around specific topics. She understood these meetings as a way of actively informing and changing the idea that Islam was synonymous with women's oppression. While this may also appear to be an apologist approach, Fatma Aliye portrayed Islam as a liberating force and significant component of women's identities, which is why instead of simply appropriating an Islamic framework, she employed it to facilitate women's political and religious participation. Aliye recognized interpersonal relationships as an avenue for cultural exchange. In order to successfully conduct these exchanges, Muslim women needed to be well versed in both French and the central component of Muslim societies, Sharia Law.<sup>9</sup> In this regard, Islam was the platform from which Aliye argues the importance of women's education.

Through this work, Aliye sought to exonerate Islam as an oppressor of women and prescribed in detail how to respond to ideas that obscure Muslim women's agency. The book is

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<sup>9</sup>Fatma Aliye, *Nisvân-ı İslâm* (Women in Islam) (Ankara: Kesit Yayinlari, 2012), 31-35

broken into three parts, with each section taking on the form of a conversation. These conversations dealt with a central topic that Orientalists insisted contributed to Muslim women's second-class position in society. The format used by Aliye in this book is conversational, as opposed to a pontification of ideas. In highlighting the structure of *Nisvân-ı İslâm*, my objective is to show how Aliye gives readers possible scenarios in which they may find themselves, and suggests ways on how to navigate these topics.

The first conversation focuses on the visit of Madame F, who is a member of European aristocracy, and another woman who is a *rahibe* (nun). They are visiting the narrator to partake in *iftar*, the evening meal that breaks the Ramadan fast. The narrator shows them the *iftar* table and states that it is an imitation of the table sent down to Jesus. This strikes the nun's interest and several religious topics unfold in their conversation throughout the evening. They discuss the Quranic view of Jesus and his disciples, the prophecy of Ahmed in the Gospel of John, and the Paraclete. The evening closes with the *namaz* (prayer), with the narrator translating the prayers into French for her visitors. The visiting women express gratitude to their host and bid farewell.<sup>10</sup> This conversation emphasizes the need for women to be knowledgeable about Islam, and the idea that knowledge needs to be expressed with the necessary language skills. This conversation also provides insight into the cosmopolitan identity common among elite Ottomans. Having a command over French and entertaining European aristocracy was not considerably rare or an abnormal occurrence.

Discussions on women vis-à-vis Islam occur in the second and third sections of the book. In the second part of the book an Englishwoman, well educated in science and religion, fluent in French and acquiring Turkish, joins the narrator for *iftar*. The fact that this Englishwoman is

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<sup>10</sup>Fatma Aliye, *Nisvân-ı İslâm*, 37-62

learning Turkish and is joining the narrator for *iftar* suggests cultural receptiveness. However, even she stereotypes the narrator's life when she asks which women of the household are the narrator's co-wives. This prompts a vigorous conversation on polygamy that transitions into a conversation on women's rights in Islam and veiling.<sup>11</sup> The third section differs from the other two, in that two Turkish women join the narrator and three French women visit them. The French women had requested the host to wear "traditional" Turkish clothing and upon their arrival found the three women to be dressed similar to them. The narrator uses this opportunity to delegitimize Orientalized representations by comparing and contrasting Turkish and European attire. By structuring the book in this manner Aliye gives a prescription for dealing with European Orientalism, while simultaneously making her position on women's role in Muslim societies both clear and unique.

Aliye's decision to centralize the woman question in Ottoman public discourse is one way her approach differed from her male contemporaries. Often male Muslim intellectuals addressed the woman question in conjunction with several other topics, such as political legitimacy of the empire and economic structures. Perhaps male Muslim intellectuals did not fully or solely engage with the woman question because the topic meant addressing the private realm, a realm they potentially considered separate from the public and international discourses they found themselves a part of. By commenting solely on issues women faced, Fatma Aliye's *Nisvân-ı İslâm* centralizes the woman question in Ottoman public discourse. Elizabeth Paulson argues that Aliye introduced elements of the private sphere into the public discourse of her time, suggesting that Aliye operated in overlapping public and private realms.<sup>12</sup> Aliye's approach to

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<sup>11</sup>Fatma Aliye, *Nisvân-ı İslâm*, 63-105.

<sup>12</sup>Elizabeth Paulson Marvel, "Ottoman Feminism and Republic Reform: Fatma Aliye's *Nisvân-ı İslâm*" (MA Thesis, University of Ohio, 2011). This is the only work that extensively analyzes Aliye's *Nisvân-ı İslâm*. In many ways this

the woman question, as both a prescriptive model and a blurring of the divide between public and private realms, is not the only thing that sets her apart from her male contemporaries. Aliye's comments on the topic of the veil, arranged marriages, and polygamy make her intellectual contributions distinctive as well.

Similar to contemporary discussion, the subject of veiling sparked an aggressive dialogue in the late Ottoman period. Fatma Aliye tackles the complicated issue in her introduction and in her second and third dialogues. In her introduction she declares:

“According to the *Sharia*, while it is incumbent upon women to cover their hair, they are not to veil their faces. However, a group of our women reverse these instructions. They veil their faces and leave their hair uncovered. In short, we have no middle. It is as if we do not know which side to take. Nevertheless, excess and deficiency in everything is bad. It is necessary to be moderate in every circumstance.”<sup>13</sup>

Aliye understood the veil as a directive of Islam and covered her own hair. However, there are photographs of her without the veil, one of which graces the 2012 edition of this book, as well as the Turkish currency she adorns. Regardless of the photos that capture her without the veil, her treatment of the issue in *Nisvân-ı İslâm* makes her thoughts on veiling explicit.

Aliye's individualized perspective as a woman informed her decision to comment on

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section of my thesis relies on the insights provided by Marvel, however, we have different objectives. While I look to this work to understand how the woman question is articulated once women start engaging in the discussion and how Islam informs this articulation, Marvel argues that both Aliye and this work have a direct affect on the political reforms affecting women under Kemalism. For other sources on Fatma Aliye please see: Akşit, Elif Ekin. "Fatma Aliye's Stories: Ottoman Marriages Beyond the Harem." *Journal of Family History* 35, no. 3 (2010): 207-18; Barbarosoğlu, Fatma K. "Fatma Aliye Hanım: A Book without a Table of Contents." *Today's Zaman*, 30 October 2008. Çakır, Serpil. "Fatma Aliye: 1862-1936." In *Biographical Dictionary of Women's Movements and Feminisms: Central, Eastern, and South Eastern Europe, 19th and 20th Centuries*. Edited by Francisca de Haan, Krassimira Daskalova and Anna Loutfi, 21-24. Budapest: Central European University Press, 2006; Kırpık, Cevdet. "Fatma Aliye Hanım and Historiography." *bilig* 53 (2010): 139-166.

<sup>13</sup>“Şeran kadınların yüzleri namahrem olmayıp ancak saçlarını setretmek vacip iken birtakım hanımlarımız da icab-ı şeriyenin aksine olarak yüzlerini örtüp saçlarını açıyorlar. Elhasıl bizim ortamımız yok. Ne tarafa gideceğimizi şaşırmış gibiyiz. Halbuki her şeyde ifrat ve tefrit fenadır. Her hususta itidal gerektir. (Hayrû'l-umûr evsatuha).” P.6



arranged marriage, a topic that goes unaddressed by her male contemporaries.<sup>14</sup> As a woman who had an arranged marriage, she held a keen awareness of the dynamics involved in this social contract. Surprisingly though, Aliye was not against the idea of arranged marriages and did not use this work as a platform to support love marriage. She states, “In our system of marriage, around eighty to ninety out of 100 contracts of marriage result in good compatibility. This contrasts with marriage that results from a courtship in Europe where good marriages do not occur. Because those who marry while in love frequently fall out of love in the middle of the marriages.”<sup>15</sup> While her decision to talk about arranged marriage is a novel introduction to the intellectualization of the woman question, this comment reflects a comparative model between Ottoman and European societies.

This comparative framework appears throughout the book and is similar to the discursive methodology used by male Muslim reformists, such as Halil Halid and his discussion on polygamy.<sup>16</sup> Aliye’s discussion of polygamy reveals other points of continuity with male contemporaries, while also reflecting one of her strongest points of difference as a female Muslim intellectual. Aliye engaged in activism against a Muslim cleric who uncomplicatedly supported the practice of polygamy. First we look at how Aliye’s ideas on polygamy expressed in *Nisvân-ı İslâm* echo those of her male Muslim contemporaries and how her actions set her apart.

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<sup>14</sup>The playright, Sinasi Sair Evlenmesi covered the topic of arranged marriages in a satirical fashion in 1859, but Aliye was the first Muslim intellectual to address the topic.

<sup>15</sup>“Bizim şu usul-ı izdivaçla yüz münakehenin sekseni doksanı yine hüsn-I imtizaç ile netice- pezir olup, buna mukabil Avrupa’da alelumum be-muaşaka neticesi olan münakehenin kaddesinde hüsn-I imtizaç görüldüğü vaki değildir. Zira birbirleriyle aşk ve sevda ile tezevvüç edenler miyanında kendilerinde o aşktan eser kalmayanlar epeyce çoktur.” *Nisvân-ı İslâm*, 123.

<sup>16</sup>Halil Halid, *The Crescent and the Cross*, 1907; there is a section in the book devoted to polygamy and divorce. Throughout this section Halid employs a comparative model to highlight the benefit of polygamy as a deterrent to adultery. The “rampant” cases of adultery and children born out of wedlock is understood by Halid as a case similar, if not worse than polygamy, 126-29.

When Mademoiselle R, asks Aliye why polygamy is not banned, Aliye provides a response similar to the ones given by other male Muslim intellectuals. She points to the practical usefulness of polygamy in Muslim societies as a means of preventing adultery, illegitimate children, rendering mistresses unnecessary, and providing widows and barren women the opportunity to marry. She asks, “A barren woman will not find another husband easily. Let’s put aside your thought, for she will suffer extreme poverty. How shall we give an answer to the sick wife who is thrown into the street?”<sup>17</sup> While these points repeat those of her male contemporaries, Aliye distinguished herself from them as an activist against polygamy, both in this work and in her life. She states that “You will find that not only I, but the rest of Turkish women agree with you in feeling pity for women who are married along with other women.”<sup>18</sup> She continues on to talk about the infrequency by which Muslim leaders partake in polygamy, and she speaks pejoratively about men who are polygamists, calling them roosters. Her fight against polygamy is not limited to this book. The topic of polygamy reveals how Islam gave Aliye the power to publicly fight for a more egalitarian marriage structure.

Aliye participated in a debate on polygamy in a public site beyond the readers of *Nisvân-ı İslâm*. A member of the *ulema* (scholars of Islamic law), Mahmut Esat, single-mindedly defended the practice of polygamy in the press. He viewed polygamy as an antidote to moral depravity. He was a small but vocal minority who argued for polygamy through Islam. Unafraid of engaging Esat in a polemical debate Aliye wrote a riposte to him. She argued that “Islam does not order polygamy, and when it is permitted, it must be presented in what circumstances this

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<sup>17</sup>“Akim olan bir kadın kolaylıkla diğer bir zevç bulamayıp sefalet çekeceğini haydi hatırlınız için bir yana bırakalım; ama hastalıklı olan zevcenin sokak ortasına atılmasına nasıl cevap verelim?” *Nisvân-ı İslâm*, 93.

<sup>18</sup>“...zevceleri kendi üzerine diğer bir kadınla tezevvüc eden kadınlara acımak için yalnız beni değil, bütün Türk kadınlarını sizinle müttefik bulursunuz.” *Ibid.*, 89.

permission is given.”<sup>19</sup> Historians Alan Duben and Cem Behar argue that “The outcry against polygyny during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in Istanbul was part of a larger ideological battle for egalitarian gender relations and a modern way of life; it probably had little effect on what were rather low polygyny rates even at the beginning of the period.”<sup>20</sup> In the case of Fatma Aliye, her engagement with the discussion on polygamy reflects her desire for more egalitarian gender relations, by challenging patriarchal structures.

*Nisvân-ı İslâm* reveals Aliye’s understanding of Muslim women as possessors of cultural capital and agents of change. Both in her decision to write on this topic and in the book itself, Aliye shows how Muslim women can be cultural ambassadors who actively seek out acquaintances and social interaction with European women as a means of correcting European misconceptions on Muslim women and Muslim societies. Aliye’s ability to write on the relationship between women and Islam suggests that Islam, for Muslim women like her, was a way to stake intellectual space and influence cultural change.

Fatma Aliye’s use of Islam as a corroborating agent to challenge patriarchal structures, suggests that women have constructed Islamic tradition in order to experience equitable treatment, regardless of one’s gender. In fact, her decision to employ and depict women’s agency through an Islamic framework suggests the importance of Islam apropos of one’s identity. Aliye not only highlighted the agency women have in the context of Islam but championed a beneficial position for women through her own interpretation of Islamic tradition. This objective continues to be a part of the woman question in the decades surrounding the formation of the Republic of

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<sup>19</sup>“İslamiyet’te taaddüd-i zevcata emir olmayıp mesağ gösterildiği cihetle, bu müsaadenin ne gibi mecburiyetlerde işe yaradığı ibraz olunmalı.” Quoted in Fatma Kılıç Denman, *İkinci Meşrutiyet Döneminde Bir Jön Türk Dergisi: Kadın* (İstanbul: Libra Kitapçılık ve Yayıncılık Ticaret Ltd. Şti., 2009), 192.

<sup>20</sup>Alan Duben and Cem Behar, *Istanbul Households: Marriage, Family and Fertility 1880-1940* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 158.

Turkey, and more specifically to find a way to coalesce the woman question, Islam, and Turkish nationalism into a symbiotic framework. The life and political work of Halide Edip provide further insight into this sociopolitical objective.

## **Chapter 2: Halide Edip: Nationalism and Islam Merge through the Woman Question**

The woman question continued to be a central political theme throughout the first few decades of the twentieth century, during the transition from the Ottoman Empire to the Turkish Republic. A unique feature of this period's understanding of the woman question was the newly established nation-state and Turkish nationalism. In 1923, the Republic of Turkey was created under the leadership of Mustafa Kemal (later Atatürk). Transitioning from an empire to a nation-state, Atatürk's objective was to ensure Turkey's position as a political force within the Western world by transforming Turkey into a secular republic. In order to solidify the international reputation of Turkey as a modern and legitimate nation, social and political reforms directly impacting middle and upper class Turkish women were enacted. These reforms included female enfranchisement, coeducation, and marriage reform, as well as regulations on veiling. In addition to the reforms that directly impacted women's lives, there were a series of reforms extricating religion from politics.

Compared to other Muslim majority societies, the process of secularization went furthest in Turkey. The shift from a multi-ethnic empire to a Turkish ethnicity-based nation-state involved a radical distancing between Islam and cultural nationalism. The result of this distance could be found in the context of the early years of the Republic, when Mustafa Kemal Atatürk dismantled the central institutions of Ottoman Islam. He abolished the caliphate and emphasized the secularization of every sphere of life. He took extended measures to heighten Turkey's "Turkish" national consciousness at the expense of a wider Islamic identification. For Atatürk, the Romanization of the alphabet, the new dress code, and a new manifesto of the cultural

mobilization in service of the new state, would increase Turkish national consciousness. The secularization of the family code and the enfranchisement of women were used to liquidate the religious institutions of the Ottoman Empire, while simultaneously legitimizing a new state ideology.<sup>21</sup>

This historical context reveals the nation-state as a significant historical actor, the use of women as symbols of modernity, and the need to extricate Islam from politics. These historical currents certainly influenced the life and work of Halide Edip. Halide Edip, or “Mother of the Turks,” as she is regarded in popular Turkish history, gave an account of her life in her two-volume autobiography, *Memoirs and the Turkish Ordeal*. Born in 1882 to a wealthy family, Halide’s mother passed away during Halide’s infancy. Halide’s Father, Edip Bey, worked in the palace as a secretary for Abdulhamid II and sent her to live with her maternal grandparents until the age of four. She credited her grandmother as the molder of her religious outlook. When her father remarried she returned home, where she experienced the privilege of an education. English chaperons and Turkish religious sheikhs were in charge of her education until she attended the American College for Girls. During her time there, Halide received an education in Eastern and Western literature, religion, sociology, and philosophy. Exposed to the teachings of Durkheim and Comte, she declared their specific influence on her views on nationhood and modernity. In 1901, she graduated from college and married her math teacher, Salih Zeki Bey, which ultimately ended in divorce with his decision to take on a second wife. In the aftermath of her divorce an intense engagement in political activities and writings characterized Halide’s life.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup>Erik Zurcher, *Turkey: A Modern History*, (I.B. Tauris London, 2005) 186-194.

<sup>22</sup>Halide Edip, *House with Wisteria: Memoirs of Halide Edib*.

Expressed through her writings and participation in politics, Halide Edip concerned herself with the contemporary issues facing women such as education and political access. However, she became specifically interested in the woman question as a key component of Turkish nationalism. As an avid nationalist and educated intellectual, Edip served as a model for the ideal “Turkish woman,” during the immediate aftermath of the new Turkish Republic. However, her own thoughts pertaining to state formation and sovereignty departed significantly from those expressed by Kemalism. Where Edip insisted on ideals of democracy and liberalism, Atatürk prioritized secularist and republican ideals over democratic demands. Her ideological opposition to Kemalism crystallized when she accused Atatürk of establishing a despotic regime.

In 1924, her second husband, Adnan Adıvar, along with others, founded an opposition party named *Terakkiperver Cumhuriyet Fırkası* (Progressive Republican Party). In 1925 the government decreed a shutdown of the PRP and subsequently filed a case against them, claiming the party instigated a religious insurgence and plot to assassinate Atatürk. This prompted HEdip and her husband into self-imposed exile from 1924-1939. They only returned to Turkey after Atatürk’s death.<sup>23</sup> During her time in exile she continued to write a number of significant works, and upon her return to Turkey, the University of Istanbul’s Department of English Language and Literature hired her. Politically, she served as the Izmir deputy in the Turkish Parliament from 1950-1954. She passed away ten years later. Throughout her works and life Edip presented herself as a defender of her nation and thus as one of the main figures of the Turkish nationalist movement.

Both Islam and the woman question were central to her understanding of Turkish nationalism. For Edip, Islam and the state were not mutually exclusive entities, and thus she

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<sup>23</sup>Ibid, 408-416.

expressed her disagreement with several Republican reforms. Instead of reinforcing the division between the two, she constructed her own understanding of Islamic tradition through the discourse of the woman question. For Edip Islam complimented and strengthened Turkish nationalism, and she focused on the woman question to support this claim. Edip's understanding of women's societal importance involved the nation-state, cosmopolitan activism, and Islam, and at times these ideas coalesced for Edip. Looking at her initial foray into politics shows how Islam motivated her own confidence as an activist and informed her understanding of the new secularist Turkish state.

Less than five hundred words cemented Halide Edip's role as a nationalist visionary and defender. On June 6, 1919 Edip found herself traveling down the narrow path of Fuad Pasha Turbesi and entering the Hippodrome, or what is now Sultan Ahmed Square. The loud and violent beating of her heart calmed as she took in the scene before her. She observed the brilliant white minarets of the Sultan Ahmed Mosque, and the high-tiered balconies covered with black draperies, giving the illusion of ribbons dancing in the sky. Just in front of the mosque railing waved a large black flag with white lettering, which read, "Wilson's Twelfth Point." Moving her focus to the animate objects around her she realized the huge mass of people now spilled beyond the square and into the thoroughfares of St. Sofia and Divan Street, staff officers around her repeating the number "two hundred thousand." Reaching where she would deliver her speech, and with the symphony of people chanting the call to prayer, she considered, "one of the very rare moments of my life had come to me." Right before delivering her speech a thought floated into her consciousness. She thought about Islam and her nation and contemplated, "Islam which means peace and the brotherhood of men, is eternal... Turkey, my wronged and martyred nation is also lasting: she does not only share the sins and faults and virtues of other peoples, she also



has her own spiritual and moral force which no material agency can destroy.”<sup>24</sup> Edip combined Islam with nationalism and began to speak, hoping to galvanize people’s support against the occupation of Izmir by Greek forces after World War I, and the control of allied European forces in Turkey. Her speech in this public forum clearly illustrates a change in the perception of women’s activism and the space they can occupy, in this case, a Muslim woman addressing a male-female mixed mass rally was deemed acceptable.

Halide Edip entered the public realm through nationalist means informed by Islam, and was not discounted because of her gender. Halide was selected as the orator for national purposes, suggesting a shift in the political and social space women could occupy. Edip herself noted the Second Constitutional Period as the moment when women became agents of nationalism and the creators of the state, “Women got their real chance in 1908... The very atmosphere became freer for women and it was fully realized that a new Turkey could never be created without them.”<sup>25</sup> According to her, a new outlook on women presented itself. No longer relegated to the private sphere, women innervated Turkish nationalism.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup>Halide Edip, *The Turkish Ordeal: Being the Further Memoirs of Halide Edib* (New York: The Century Co., 1972), 20.

<sup>25</sup>Halide Edip, *The Turkish Ordeal: Being the Further Memoirs of Halide Edib*, 215.

<sup>26</sup>For more on Halide Edip please see: Hulya Adak, “National Myths and Self-Na(rra)tions: Mustafa Kemal’s *Nutuk* and Halide Edip’s *Memoirs* and *The Turkish Ordeal*,” *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, no 102 (Spring/Summer 2003); Ozgun Basmaz, “‘The Rebellious Daughter of the Republic’ or ‘The Mother of the Turks’: Re-considering the Late Ottoman Empire and the Early Turkish Republic through the Politics of Halide Edip Adivar” (MA Thesis, The University of Akron, 2008); Ayse Durakbasi, *Halide Edib: Turk Modernlesmesi ve Feminizim* (Istanbul: Iletisim Yayinlari, 2000), Beyhan Uygun Aytemiz, “Halide Edib-Adivar ve Feminist Yazin”, Masters Thesis (Ankara: Bilkent University, 2001); Zeynep Basil Saydun, *Construction of Nationalism and Gender in Halide Edib’s Autobiographical Writings: Memoirs of Halide Edib and The Turkish Ordeal* (Trier: WVT Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 2008); Mushirul Hasan, *Between Modernity and Nationalism: Halide Edip’s Encounter with Gandhi’s India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2010), Aylin Gorgun-Baran, “A Sociological Analysis of Leadership in Turkish Women: Fatma Aliya and Halide Edip Adivar Cases,” *American-Eurasian Journal of Scientific Research* 3(2):132-138, 2008; Erdag Goknar, “Turkish-Islamic Feminism Confronts National Patriarchy.”

According to theories on nationalism, women can be involved in national processes as biological reproducers of ethnic collectivities, reproducers of national groups, participants in the ideological reproduction, signifiers of nationalism, and participants in national economic, political, and military struggles. Halide's observations on women's roles in the nation substantiate these theories. She noted that women broke the barriers of seclusion and entered the public realm not only out of necessity, but also as a natural right and national obligation. Halide pointed to women's involvement in the Balkan War of 1912-1913 as political organizers, nurses, and educators and argued this presented society with an alternative outlook on women, "I personally believe that the nursing of common soldiers by Turkish women served more than anything else to educate the masses in the new outlook about women."<sup>27</sup> However, this is not the only facet of the new outlook towards women. For Edip, another feature of the new outlook on women included activism beyond the confines of the nation-state, a characteristic informed by Edip's Ottoman cosmopolitanism.

During the years following the formation of the republic, Edip spent time traveling to places such as America and India to lecture on the social, political, and cultural state of Turkey. Traveling as cultural ambassadors had been a common practice for Muslim intellectuals during the Ottoman Empire, and the practice continued during the early republic. In 1928 she wrote an op-ed article in the *New York Times*. This article is one of the works Halide produced during her visit to America as a lecturer for the Institute of Politics, at Williamstown, Massachusetts. "A Turkish Feminist Views Women Here," published on October 7<sup>th</sup>, 1928, compares American and Turkish women's situations both thirty years ago and contemporarily. Of all of the women Halide came across during her time in Williamstown she saw in one of the young reporters, who

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<sup>27</sup> Halide Edip, *The Turkish Ordeal: Being the Further Memoirs of Halide Edib*, 216

interviewed her, the embodiment of the best qualities of an American woman. Edip described this woman as “young enough to be [her] daughter,” with a “boyish young head and clear brown eyes,” suggesting a self-assuredness, a woman who “belongs to the world.” Halide observed three things during their interview that made this woman a citizen of the World and the best example of an American woman:

“Firstly, she obtained from you the information which has some news value... Secondly, she studies and tries to understand you, out of human interest. You had to like her and trust her. Thirdly, she tried to find out about the mass of alien humanity you represented. She was not blinded by the gaudy sensationalism of the Western fiction and journalism, not by its political purpose in connection to the East.”<sup>28</sup>

Despite being American, Halide did not perceive this young reporter as foreign. Instead, this reporter elicited the memory of a Turkish woman Halide knew. This Turkish woman was a law student in Istanbul and while her physical appearance did not resemble the reporter’s, she held “the same seriousness in her blue eyes and the same honest endeavor to understand and to serve.” To Edip, the young American reporter illustrated some of the changes women, particularly upper-class women, had experienced under the new Republic. This Turkish woman attended law school and involved herself in activism by “trying to get Turkish women to practice law.” She was part of an intellectual network that involved regular meetings with Halide Edip, and authorities on both secular and Islamic law. According to Halide, “The only difference between her and the American girl was that her work was limited to the Turkish world... while the American girl was thinking and trying to act beyond the limits of her own country.”<sup>29</sup>

The new outlook on women in the Republic afforded Edip the opportunity to voice her thoughts in an international context, while also imagining a role for women beyond national boundaries, “When I tried to visualize a future when the Turkish women will also be free and

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<sup>28</sup>Halide Edip, “A Turkish Feminist Views Women Here,” *New York Times* (1923-Current file); Oct 7, 1928.

<sup>29</sup>Halide Edip, “A Turkish Feminist Views Women Here,” *New York Times*.

able to work for a larger humanity the two young faces and minds stood side by side.”<sup>30</sup> While she stressed the importance of women and their ability to contribute on an international scale, Halide herself was still concerned with domestic issues Turkish women faced. Edip argued, “New Turkey began to take shape when Turkish men started to make women matter as much as men.”<sup>31</sup> In this statement the Republic of Turkey is articulated and legitimized through women’s equal standing in society, with Edip declaring, “Turkish democracy will be safely launched when Turkish women have the vote.”<sup>32</sup> While her desire for a more humanitarian feminist engagement does not comment directly on Islam, it is important to understand how her Ottoman roots informed her intellectually. Islam’s central role in Ottoman society provided a motivation for Edip’s desire to create an Islamic nationalism that centralizes women’s societal significance.

Edip comments on Turkish nationalism especially in her speeches delivered in India in 1929. Edip’s continued discussion of Islam, nationalism, and women as a triumvirate reveals her understanding of these three as interdependent concepts. Edip’s nationalism established a relationship between religion and culture. Not confined to the world of worship and belief, religion extended into the practices of daily life. For Edip, religion was heavily embedded into the world of customs, and vice versa:

“The supreme aim of Islam being social justice, it could not leave half of society out of consideration... Islam instituted marriage, limited the number of wives and in case of divorce bound the husband to pay alimony. It inculcated a chivalrous attitude towards women in general and meted out equal punishment in cases of immorality. But its greatest significance for the modern world is that it is the first system which accords property and economic rights to women and makes them independent of the guardianship of their men.”<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>30</sup>Halide Edip, “A Turkish Feminist Views Women Here,” *New York Times*.

<sup>31</sup>Halide Edip, “A Turkish Feminist Views Women Here,” *New York Times*.

<sup>32</sup>Halide Edip, “A Turkish Feminist Views Women Here,” *New York Times*.

<sup>33</sup>Halide Edip, *Conflict of East and West in Turkey* (Delhi: Maktaba Jamia Millia Islamia, 1929), 199.

For her the institution of marriage, property and economic rights, and issues of morality were customs intrinsically tied to Islam and at the foundation of women's equality and rights. As I mentioned earlier, there were several reforms impacting women directly during the early years of the republic. Some would suggest the emphasis on legal reform where women were concerned had more to do with Western ideas of equality than an organic desire to better the lives of Turkish women. For these analysts, reforms were mainly a way of gaining international legitimacy for the Turkish nation-state. Kemalism, and most of the Western world understood the possibility for women's equality through secularism, but Edip suggests otherwise. For Edip, true egalitarian principles lay within Islam. Edip's discussion of women's rights within Islam opened up a space for Islam and Turkish nationalism to merge. Also, her dissatisfaction with the secularist project is hinted at through the thinly veiled criticism of the paternalistic nationalism, a symptom of Kemalist ideology.

Another example of Islam's importance to society, and therefore Turkish nationalism, is in Halide Edip's thoughts on veiling:

“The Koran (Sura 24, verse 31) commands women to pay due regard to their dress, enjoining them to wear veils that will cover the sides of their head, their bosom and their ornaments; there is no order to cover their faces, still less are they expected to shut themselves up and abstain from social activities. The Prophet's own wife was one of the most remarkable women, with a great social reputation. In this commandment we see two things, first, that women should be decently dressed, even if they desire to make themselves beautiful, and secondly, what is more significant, they are asked not to use their beauty and sex to exploit their fellow-creatures. This is just what a modern feminist or any healthy society aims at.”<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>34</sup>Halide Edip, *Conflict of East and West in Turkey*, 201.

Later in the same section she defends the *charshaf* (Islamic veil), by viewing the veil as a symbol of social integration. She also suggested that wearing a veil simultaneously expressed the Islamic faith of the people and nationalist sentiments.<sup>35</sup>

Halide Edip in many ways epitomized the prime candidate for the new Westernized woman that Atatürk's reforms meant to create. Yet, Halide often criticized the content, vision and goals of the Republican reforms, finding these reforms unnecessarily out of touch with the Muslim faith and tradition and neglectful of the Muslim identity of women in Turkey. However, Edip both in action and in her written work suggested a complicated identity that embraced female agency and empowerment, but not through a Western feminist model. She understood the importance of Islam both in national identity and women's identity, a point of commonality she shared with Sâmîha Ayverdi.

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<sup>35</sup>Halide Edip, *Conflict of East and West in Turkey*, 203.

### **Chapter 3: Sâmiha Ayverdi: The Woman Question between Secularism and Islamism**

Building off of the intellectual legacy of women Muslim intellectuals like Fatma Aliye and Halide Edip, Sâmiha Ayverdi also contends with topics such as, the relationship between Westernization and Turkey's sociopolitical makeup, Islam, and the role of Muslim women in society. All of these topics influenced Ayverdi's construction of Islamic tradition. Almost a century after Fatma Aliye's *Nisvan-I Islam*, the woman question vis-à-vis Islam continued to be a primary theme for Sâmiha Ayverdi. By examining women's roles in society, Ayverdi grappled with concepts of Orientalism and Westernization, issues that also influenced Aliye and Edip. Born in Istanbul in 1905, Ayverdi witnessed the end of empire and the creation of the Turkish Republic, a republic she spent most of her career as a Sufi leader and novelist critiquing. Unsatisfied with the top-down radical secularization policies of Turkey and the Kemalist desire to emulate Western nations, Ayverdi used the woman question to create a focused critique of the Kemalist agenda, its cultural limitations, and its negative side effects. A potential reason for Ayverdi's dissatisfaction with the Kemalist regime and its consequences was the new republic's prohibition policy on Sufism.

While Ayverdi grew into adulthood and began to develop her identity as a Sufi, the Republic failed to provide a space for her and for those like her in the new social milieu. Drawing on a particular French style secularist project of modernization through positivism, the young republic banned Sufi lodges, convents, and visits to tombs of prominent Muslim saints.

The government staged rampant crackdowns on Sufi orders during the 1930s and 1940s.<sup>36</sup> For decades there was a clear message sent by the Republic that there was no room for Sufism in the newly established secular state. However, Sufism in general, and in particular, the Rifa'i order, gave Ayverdi the space to reconcile her spirituality with her role as a woman in the new republic. Kenan Rifa'i, her spiritual guide, mentored Ayverdi in scholarship on Sufism. Ken'an Rifa'i's own spiritual leader was his mother, Hatice Hanim. He was of the opinion that women were more virtuous and had a greater capacity for spiritual enlightenment. Sâmîha Ayverdi's appointment as a Sufi leader after the death of Kenan Rifa'i gave her the intellectual and spiritual space to comment on women's identities and positions in society. It should be noted that female leadership in a Sufi order is not very common, even though there have always been active women scholars and disciples of Sufi orders throughout history.

Sâmîha Ayverdi was a seemingly paradoxical figure for her time. Ayverdi's leadership in a Sufi order, her prolific writing career, her influence on larger public opinion, and her civil society initiatives were hard to comprehend for both secular elite Kemalists and leaders of the new Muslim revivalism in Turkey. The last two decades of Ayverdi's life witnessed a more polarized debate on the meaning of secularism and Islam in Turkish society. A new political party, National Salvation Party (formed in 1972), promoted an Islamisation of the country through multi-party elections. Even though this party never won majority support, it symbolized a new vision of a relationship between Islam and the national state, by putting forward highly conservative discourses on Muslim women, such as the need for veiling as part of re-Islamizing their identity. In that context, Sâmîha Ayverdi seemed confusing and contradictory for both secular Kemalists and new Islamists. As a pious woman with deep knowledge of Islamic

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<sup>36</sup>Erik Zürcher, *Turkey: A Modern History*, 93-206. Part II of Zürcher's book covers the span of the Second Constitutional Period to the transition to democracy. Look to this book for details on the historical happenings that surrounded Ayverdi's life.



religious tradition, she and her followers were never veiled, and thus the new Islamism would never accept them. Yet, their critique of the official Kemalist view of history and secularism were as harsh as those hurled by Islamist critics. Meanwhile, both Sâmiha Ayverdi and her female students were often highly educated and successful professionals, playing active roles in social and economic life, and thus seemingly showing the success of modernist projects. It is within these incongruous moments of Turkish history that Sâmiha Ayverdi provided an answer to the woman question.

A prominent theme found in Ayverdi's work is the role of women in Turkish society and their distinctiveness. Ayverdi's discussions on women are unique because they grappled with the challenges of the later years of the Republic. The primary distinguishing factor is Ayverdi's identification of the negative effects of Orientalism and Westernization on Turkey, particularly where women were concerned. As a Sufi leader she was in a position to critique the Republic's appropriation of Orientalist thinking and Western culture and its effects on women in Turkish society. For her, Islam was the primary way to understand societal flaws, while setting forth societal aspirations. Ayverdi's prescriptive approach in addressing the woman question, both in her novels and in interviews, made her an agent of change. Before analyzing her commentary on Turkish women, it is necessary to see if and how her views changed, by looking at her first engagement with the woman question.

Sâmiha Ayverdi's initial entwinement of Sufism and the woman question occurred in her second novel *Unsunken Day*, published in 1939.<sup>37</sup> Over the course of 315 pages divided into

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<sup>37</sup> For an interesting analysis of this book please read Mustafa Siddik Karagoz, "Sâmiha Ayverdi'nin 'Batmayan Gun' Romanında Kimliği Uzerine Bir Inceleme," "Turkish Studies - International Periodical For The Languages, Literature and History of Turkish or Turkic Volume 7/3, Summer 2012, p. 1665-1674, Ankara-Turkey. Mustafa Siddik Karagöz identifies Ayverdi's novel *Batmayan Gün* (*Unsinke/Unsunken Day*) as, "significant as it is her first novel that brings up her Sufism understanding."

three parts, the reader explores the path of Aliye (no relation to Fatima Aliye), a young and beautiful girl with a reflective soul, and the challenges she faces while trying to discover the secret to existence. Aliye, as the protagonist in this novel, is plagued by deep questions. She comes across her grandfather's notebooks filled with his wisdom, and begins her journey towards spiritual peace. Without stopping, the young Aliye tirelessly reads through them. Unable to decipher the meaning of her grandfather's words, she takes the notebook to Prof. Dr. Kerim Bey. The deep and mystical conversations with Kerim Bey helps Aliye understand the true meaning and correct path in life. The mentor/mentee relationship between Kerim Bey and Aliye reveals the autobiographical nature of this novel, with Kerim Bey as Ken'an Rifâi and Aliye as Sâmîha Ayverdi in real life. This suggests the need to interpret and analyze this novel beyond a work of fiction.

This novel is an allegorical depiction of Turkish society, Sufism, cultural values, historical analysis, and women's identity at the time Ayverdi wrote the book. The female identity prioritized in the *Unsunken Day* is that of the Sufi woman. Sufi impressions and thoughts make women distinctive from men. It is not a coincidence that Aliye, with her Sufi reflections, is highlighted as the main character in this novel. While it is possible for men to have the same spiritual reactions as women, Ayverdi holds women responsible for the cultural strength and customs of society, and this stems from her understanding of Sufism. All of the spiritual weakness found in contemporary women is foiled by Ayverdi's efforts to instill spiritual strength into Aliye. In this novel, the nation's survival is contingent on women's involvement in the establishment and maintenance of Islamic culture. From this perspective, and the influences surrounding her, the intellectual woman's identity should be at the forefront of society. She is someone who is conscious of history, thinks deeply, plays the piano, learned a foreign language,

and is aware of the world's social and political happenings.<sup>38</sup> This novel expresses the ideal identity a woman should have, which is something that is also a part of Ayverdi's most direct articulation of the woman question, which was expressed in an interview conducted with Ayverdi in 1986. However, this interview moves beyond identity, by incorporating prescriptions to the shortcomings of society where women are concerned and vice versa.

Forty years after her initial engagement with the woman question and through the lens of Islam, the issue of women's roles in society continued to be unresolved and important to Ayverdi. Evidence of this is found in an interview she gave in 1986. This dialogue began with the question, "Can you evaluate the Turkish woman in terms of her past, present, and future, especially within the context of the family?" Instead of delving head first into her response, Ayverdi posited a methodological approach she felt was necessary to accurately respond to this question. Her understanding of the woman question is both a prescriptive model and cultural critique for others to understand and employ. Similar to Fatma Aliye and Halide Edip, Sâmiha Ayverdi's intellectual products revealed her construction of Islamic tradition. As a Sufi leader, she was viewed as someone who could provide insight into the condition of women in society. While the main topic of this interview is women, several subtopics were addressed, suggesting that a woman's role in society is a dynamic position, constantly negotiated through Islamic tradition. This interview covers several topics: history, culture, Ottoman women, Turkish identity, motherhood and family, class, the veil and the Cold War climate. Ayverdi's engagement with these topics reveals how she was an agent of Islamic traditions and their construction.

For Ayverdi, an understanding of history is essential to comprehend contemporary women's role in Turkish society. She declares, "From time to time, the role of women in society

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<sup>38</sup>Mustafa Siddik Karagoz, "Sâmiha Ayverdi'nin 'Batmayan Gun' Romanında Kimliği Uzerine Bir Inceleme," 1668-70.

has been analyzed (discussed in detail) and has been a topic of primary importance that has fueled discussion. Instead of memorized formulations, and nitpicking details, the role of women in society and her value should be assessed through historical examination. It is only then that we can truly understand her value.”<sup>39</sup> The importance of history comes up again in this comment, “Before everything else, we need to defeat the ignorance resulting from the distance between our main strengths, such as our past, our pride, our history, our language, and our religion and us.”<sup>40</sup> The emphasis on history leads to the evaluation of the Ottoman woman of the past, “the women of the past, during the moment of transition, were imputed and stereotyped as miserable, wretched, and insignificant figures.”<sup>41</sup> Through her historical lens, she repositions these women as invaluable to society, declaring, “The majority of women in the past could not write or read. However, to write them off as being ignorant is as slanderous as it is wrong. These women owned an oral culture, which provided them with a civilized, conscious, and social formation. For these women were owners of an oral culture that gave form to civilized society.”<sup>42</sup> Sâmiha Ayverdi used history to understand the role of women in contemporary society, which provides insight into how she viewed herself. She understood herself as both Turkish and a product of her Ottoman roots, her identity secured as a result of this. Her emphasis on the Ottoman past should not be devalued as nostalgic. For her, the past is necessary to formulating Turkish identity.

In addition to emphasizing the importance of the past, Ayverdi emphasized women’s roles as mothers. While she is not the first to use motherhood to leverage women’s societal value, she does not suggest that all women need to be mothers. However, those who are mothers

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<sup>39</sup>Sâmiha Ayverdi. *O da Bana Kalsın*. İstanbul: Kubbealtı Akademisi Yayınevi, 2013.

<sup>40</sup>Sâmiha Ayverdi, 202.

<sup>41</sup>Sâmiha Ayverdi, 203.

<sup>42</sup>Sâmiha Ayverdi, 203.

hold cultural capital and importance in Turkish society that seems to have been lost over time. She states, “When thinking of the role, place, and benefit of women, the first thing that comes to mind is the family as guard and keeper of society’s trust.”<sup>43</sup> She goes on to question when and why this changed:

“The hadith of the prophet, “Paradise is under the feet of mothers,” is there a motto greater than this to teach society to be obeisant and respectful towards women? But we are ignoring this certain and keen warning, ignoring the importance of this with heedlessness and ignorance, who is to blame for this?”<sup>44</sup>

When asked by the reporter if she thinks contemporary, well-educated women instill in their children a strong sense of faith and identity, Ayverdi employed her own methodology and compared them to mothers of the past, who according to her were able to transmit a strong cultural identity to their children. She did not only examine motherhood in an historical context. She had her finger on the pulse of contemporary issues mothers faced. Asked her opinion on the effects of women working and whether they are positive or not, Ayverdi took the opportunity to redirect the conversation to the lack of infrastructure in place to support working mothers. “She cannot be efficient because of the lack of organization and infrastructure in society, which is needed to help her fulfill her responsibilities both inside and outside of the home.”<sup>45</sup> According to Ayverdi, contemporary women were not always able to instill a strong love of the homeland, made evident by the children who study abroad and never return. It is clear here that Ayverdi is critiquing a specific class of motherhood.

Ayverdi nuanced the category of womanhood, “The different types of women in different places, cities, towns, and villages all have different issues and cannot be treated as one.” She

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<sup>43</sup>Sâmiha Ayverdi, 203.

<sup>44</sup>Sâmiha Ayverdi, 204.

<sup>45</sup>Sâmiha Ayverdi, 203.

does not treat women in Turkey as a monolithic category and employs class to her analysis of the woman question. She places a significant amount of responsibility on upper-class women for the absence of a solid Turkish identity, declaring that “In terms of the not working and rich women, this woman is a serious problem in Turkey and we need focus on the group in order to solve women’s issues in Turkey.”<sup>46</sup> Her emphasis on the failures of upper-class women can also be interpreted as a critique of the Republic and the reforms affecting women in order to emulate the West.

Ayverdi’s assessment of class is significant for a number of reasons. First, it shows how Islam informed her understanding of women’s role in society. She focused on class because the main objective for Sufis is to control one’s ego, or in other words one should not let wants and desires dictate their actions. She saw the material nature of elite women in Turkey as a sign of a lack of spiritual enlightenment. In trying to adhere to the Kemalist ideology of womanhood, these women sacrificed their righteousness, which is the second point of significance. This is a thinly veiled critique of Kemalist ideology that pushes women to engage in social behavior similar to European women. For Ayverdi, Kemalism’s rupture with Ottoman culture is cause for the weak historicity of the time. Third, her discussion of class is the moment where she was most direct in her solution for the ills society faced. Instead of only placing the blame on upper-class women, Ayverdi instructed on how people should inform upper-class women of the “ignorant” condition they are living in and get them involved in societal betterment:

“We need to seek a path to awaken these Turkish women, who in her wealthy and refulgent life looks at this terrifying reality with unseeing eyes. How do we do this? We need to nationalize our education system [based on our historical and cultural values]. Finally, after this is resolved, we should distribute brochures continuously, we should pay visits to the places they frequent, we need to seek opportunities to get in touch with them and ring the alarm bells in their ears, of this class who are

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<sup>46</sup>Sâmiha Ayverdi, 205.

snobbish, wanderers, empty and vain... Lets take these women and attach them to an organization so that they donate their time and resources are allocated to the benefit of the country, this organization is something that is beneficial to the country's prosperity and future. We need to give in her hand a cause and purpose to her life and she will become an involved person."<sup>47</sup>

Once again, Ayverdi is positing solutions to the issues women face. She is preoccupied with the material world in a way her Sufi identity might belie. However, the Sufi directive of controlling one's ego highlights why she is particularly harsh on upper class and elite women. For her, spirituality is linked to creating a better and moral society, and at the center of that project are women.

This interview was conducted during a renewed vigor in feminist debates in Turkey, with the veil as a central topic of discussion. The reporter asked, "About the matter of veiling and the storm created around veiling, how do you evaluate it as an intellectual woman?" The way the reporter phrases his question points to the political contention surrounding the debate on the veil in Turkey at the time. Ayverdi responded by stating:

"About the clothing, it should be known that chastity of a woman is sacred first of all for herself. Her husband and children come after. A woman needs to protect her chastity and honor for herself. If a woman can't or doesn't want to protect her honor, no one can protect and defend it. Because prostitution does not only occur by selling one's body, but also through gestures. This can be done even with one's heart. Since it is so, what is the value of any external pressure and intervention?"<sup>48</sup>

What is interesting about this quote is the way it reflects Ayverdi's acknowledgement of agency within one's spirituality. A woman is in charge of her spirituality, and her decision to be chaste or modest, is one that needs to be made by her and for herself. So the debate surrounding the veil in some ways takes away women's agency or is ineffective at instilling a moral code in women.

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<sup>47</sup>Sâmiha Ayverdi, 204.

<sup>48</sup>Sâmiha Ayverdi, 207.

For Ayverdi, modesty is first and foremost a state of mind and heart, simply wearing the veil does not make her modest. She argues:

“Today the most important issue for Muslims is not clothing type. The commands and prohibitions of God cannot be limited only with depending on clothing. All different types of clothing pieces (kavuk= quilted turban, sarık= turban, hat, baggy trousers, longer veils, and fleece) are objects that stay in this world. However there are such values which will go with us, for them our hearts needed to be in proper clothing.”<sup>49</sup>

An examination of Ayverdi’s work and life reveal how the woman question in relation to Islam continued to be an issue for more than a century. In both her life and work, Sâmiha Ayverdi served as an example of how women continued to employ Islam as a framework, platform, and tool to understand and participate in society. Also, in some ways her ideas were the culmination of those posited by the previous women addressed in this article. Ayverdi tried to reconcile the Ottoman past and the nation by addressing the woman question through the lens of Islam. Islam informed Ayverdi’s way of life and thoughts, and as a Sufi leader she held a level of power, which guaranteed people would listen and contemplate the things she espoused. Her reflections on the status of women, their societal roles, and their identities reflect a nuanced understanding and also hint at the Republic’s inability to acknowledge Muslim women’s necessary place in the larger social milieu.

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<sup>49</sup>Sâmiha Ayverdi, 208.



### **Conclusion: Deconstructing Muslim Women as a Monolithic Category**

This paper assessed how Muslim women's roles in society was a topic of central concern for three prominent female Muslim intellectuals, Fatma Aliye (1862-1936), Halide Edip (1884-1964), and Sâmîha Ayverdi (1905-1993). Each of their discourses on Muslim women was indicative of the larger historical context of their time. Fatma Aliye, as an intellectual figure of the late-Ottoman empire, contended with the Orientalist/Occidentalist paradigm crowding the intellectual main stage in the global public sphere. However, she distinguishes herself from her contemporary male Muslim reformists by prescribing a nuanced way to challenge Orientalism's claims that Islamic societies were inherently inferior, while articulating the necessary political activism on the part of Muslim women. Meanwhile, Halide Edip's political and literary career gained traction during the fight for Turkish independence and the first few decades of the Republic. Edip offered a new framework for understanding the role of Muslim women for a nationalist project. Edip advocated a role for women in relation to the newly formed Muslim majority nation-state, while negotiating a space for Ottoman cosmopolitanism and Islam. Last but not least, Sâmîha Ayverdi, grappling with larger issues of modernity and Westernization in Turkey, stipulated a methodological approach to understanding women's centrality to the nation-state, which had already distanced itself from its imperial and Muslim heritage. Ayverdi advocated the need for an ideological shift in the negative attitudes toward Islam's role in women's lives, in order to remedy societal shortcomings and flaws. I argue that while each woman struggled with different historical actors and moments, all of them, through their

activism and understanding of women constructed Islamic tradition in a manner that emphasized the importance of women in both the religious and sociopolitical milieu.

In the introduction I brought up the potential risk of this paper reifying and giving power to the category of “Muslim women.” I would like to readdress this topic. This category is employed both inside and outside of academia and has experienced renewed discursive interest in a post 9/11 world. Unfortunately, the century old ideal of Islam being synonymous with oppression, especially where women are concerned, persists. Because of the continued connotation of Islam as an oppressive religion, women who are practitioners of Islam are rendered in need of saving. The discourse on Muslim women is so pervasive that even culturally sensitive and intellectually nuanced scholars find themselves (and their work) falling into a trap where their scholarship contends with western impressions and misconceived notions on Muslim women, indirectly giving these stereotypes credibility. An example of this is Sabah Mahmood’s book *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*.

Sabah Mahmood conducts an ethnographical examination of the Woman’s Mosque Movement in Egypt. This movement is an aspect of Islamic revival that enabled women to both teach and learn Islamic practices throughout the country. She examined forms of agency fostered by traditional Islamic virtues, an endeavor often rendered pointless by Western feminist theory. By examining tradition as a discursive process, Mahmood locates agency among these women.<sup>50</sup> Mahmood’s central thesis then is that in the most conservative of Islamic circles women have agency. Why is it a surprising and celebrated discovery that religiously conservative Muslim women have agency? Why do we continue to feel compelled to highlight all of the ways Muslim women experience freedom? Is it possible to work on the topic of Islam and gender without

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<sup>50</sup>Sabah Mahmood *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2011).

employing a framework that responds directly to the stereotype of the “oppressed” Muslim woman?

As this essay reveals, the relationship between Islam and female agency has a long history. However, this is only surprising if we give credit to the idea that Muslim women are categorically oppressed. What is novel about the women featured in this thesis is how each of them constructed Islam to incorporate their gendered ideals. Fatma Aliye, Halide Edip, and Sâmîha Ayverdi were both women and Muslims who understood and experienced their faith differently, and therefore cannot be placed into a category that erases their particularities. By using the category of “Muslim women” we create a monolithic discourse that fails to account any level of diversity and presumes a uniform understanding of Islamic tradition. However, they were not “Muslim women,” but women who understood Islam in a way that was conducive to the time they lived and their specific intellectual objectives. These women challenge a monolithic understanding of Islam and women’s relationship to the religion.

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