

## A UNIQUE GENRE IN ENGLISH LETTERS: THE MEMOIRS OF OTTOMAN WOMEN

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The West has come to know about the East through the accounts of travelers: some favorable but mostly unfavorable. Over the centuries, these accounts have accumulated into a wealth of travel literature which has come to dominate the Western mind concerning its standing with the East (as theorists such as Edward Said have shown). Largely forged and/or supported by the political structure, compared to the Easterner, the Western man appears in that narrative as the superior power both in intellectual and moral terms, armed with a virile strength to penetrate, and, hence, to understand and to dominate a feminine east, inferior to the West in every respect. This image reached its apogee in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, but it remains influential in the minds of many people in both the East and the West.

The memoirs of two Turkish women writers from the early twentieth century represent material for a counter point of view. They show evidence of a reactive attitude towards what they perceived as western pretences of superiority over near-East, practically the late period Ottoman empire, and more specifically its foremost element: the Turkish nation. The two volumes of Halide Edip Adıvar's memoirs appeared in the 1920s, and Selma Ekrem's memoirs *Unveiled* appeared in 1930, in an era when all over the world women were only beginning to be emancipated. Halide Edip and Ekrem challenge the orientalist approaches to, and accounts of, the Ottoman empire, but they also challenge men in general, be it their own or non-Muslim, through assuming a strong and self-reliant female persona and hence dealing a blow on the preconceived notion in the West of women's absolute slavery in the east, in the setting of a disreputable harem. On the contrary, they represented their country in the West as a sovereign and dominant socio-cultural if not technically advanced, power with enough military muscle for self-defense. They also wrote

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in English and proved masterful in what should have, from an orientalist point of view, appeared as the medium of the stronger other!

Indeed the discourse of male penetration of the West into the East is reversed in the capable narrative of these Turkish women who asserted themselves in the language of the "superior," namely in English. For that reason, although it is possible to connect their memoirs distantly with the relatively sympathetic memoirs of some western women travelers to the East, such as Lady Montague and Miss Perdue, they should be given credit for creating an unique genre in English letters. In their representation of Turkey, in their assertiveness and literary strength, particularly in the case of Halide Edip, whose mastery of English might be compared to Joseph Conrad, these early twentieth-century women writers should be appreciated for their contribution of an alternative and rival ideology to the literary and political discourse of their time, as much as their role as the predecessors of the later generation feminist critics from the near east who opposed to the West on many grounds.

### **Cultural and Political Views Asserted by Halide Edip and Selma Ekrem**

Both writers recognized the value of western educational systems of which they themselves were beneficiaries. They both graduated from the American College for Girls in Istanbul. Halide Edip (who would later very seriously consider the possibility of a synthesis between the East and the West) in fact, was the first female muslim graduate of that school in 1901. She had trusted that the assimilative powers of the late period Ottoman society would be capable of appropriating what was desirable from the West and that the new Turkey would emerge through this synthesis. Later, when her expectations were frustrated and her political career came to an end in her rivalry with Atatürk, the founder of the modern Turkish republic, she became a bitter critic of what she perceived as the overly drastic changes taking place in the socio-cultural realm after the proclamation of the republic in 1923. Her reaction to the extremism of the early republican era was such that she refused to abandon her head-scarf for the sake of a western appearance:

I did not envy the bustle and the empty pleasures of the few more or less described by Pierre Loti. I never had 'hat and ball' longings (that is, to go out unveiled in a hat like Christian women, and to dance). (229)



In a very interesting way, Selma Ekrem fought for the opposite end: the requirement of veiling imposed on women by religion and social custom caused her to leave Turkey for the USA in the early 1920s, when her individual attempts failed to create for her an independent living space in the Ottoman society without a scarf. In a few years, however, all the changes she had wished for would take place in the republican Turkey, which pleased her greatly. Although she eventually chose to live in the States, we never find her complaining in her memoirs to the Westerners that she had been an oppressed woman and that women were oppressed in pre-republican Turkey. In that respect, her attitude is totally different from some of today's Iranian or Saudi Arabian women writers who find their societies as suffocating and hence describe it to the West as such. Despite the odds between herself and the country's dress code for women, she made a distinction and correctly pointed out that her reaction to the veil was exceptional and not shared with many women. In fact, Selma Ekrem's belief concerning the impossibility for a veiled woman to find fulfillment in Ottoman-Turkish society is interestingly counterbalanced and denied by Halide Edip's achievements: a writer of fiction and a newspaper columnist, a public speaker, a translator and a soldier, a political dissident, a political exile and a woman of education, she never abandoned her veil and had a prominently public life:

The newspaper *Tanine* appeared on July 20, 1908. Tewfik Fikret and Hussein Jahid edited it together, and they had a staff composed of the ablest and best known writers of the day. Salih Zeki was to collaborate in its scientific departments, I was to write in its literary columns. (261)

Her ability and wish to observe people and her honest description of what she saw and thought, however, bring Selma Ekrem closer to Halide Edip: both believe in making good publicity for Turkey and did not deign to extract sympathy for themselves at the expense of their country. And when they compared and contrasted Turkey with the West, they did not try to adapt a western outlook for evaluation and refused to see their homeland through that perspective. Instead they saw and criticized the westerner from a stand point which was self-referential: namely based on an appreciation of their own social and cultural values:



My contact with Christianity gave me a sense of its hard intolerance as a directing influence in the lives of its devotees, while the historical developments through which it has passed seemed to me almost contrary to the teaching conveyed by the life of Christ himself. Individuals excepted, Christianity set up barriers which shut out non-Christians from a possibility of ultimate bliss more than any other religion. (*Memoirs* 192).

In particular, they tried to prove the moral superiority of the Turkish cause during the independence war. They were serving both their national interests and themselves since they were fully identified with their nation and civilization.

### **The Construction of a Female Persona Representing Self-reliant Turkish Woman in the West**

The circumstances that led Halide Edip and Selma Ekrem to seek a foreign audience are both similar and different. Both writers had to leave their country and felt that they had to justify their departure. Halide Edip was a political exile and felt that she needed to explain her stand and also to avenge herself on her political enemies. Other than this underlying psychological motive, she also had her larger themes in mind that previously inspired her to take action to reform and then defend her country. She was voicing the demands of Turkey and the Turkish people, in particular, Turkish women who had been misrepresented in the West for so long. A third and equally important reason for her to write was her need to make a living abroad which included teaching and conferencing as much as writing creatively in her capacity as an artist and an intellectual. And this is crucial. Halide Edip shows us that, even when away from home, she is able to communicate with the world with relative ease and stand independently on her own feet.

Selma Ekrem had more personal and less socio-political reasons to leave Turkey. For her the veil appeared as a hindrance before personal and social growth and she represented it in her writing as such. So she appeared in agreement with the suffragette movement of the time and gave proof that an eastern or Muslim feminism was perfectly comprehensible. As opposed to Halide Edip's public politics, she had her personal and sexual politics of a private nature, which could at the time be expressed only in disguise. As a lesbian, she could not accept the feminine role offered to her by society in the



dress code. Her reaction, as a result, appeared through a rhetoric of women's emancipation expressed as a hostility to the symbolic dress code. The other demand forwarded by her was, however, identical with that of Halide Edip: an attempt at establishing herself as a strong individual who would survive under any circumstances regardless of the relatively unfavourable situation of living in a foreign country. Ekrem abandoned the comfort of her house and ventured into the new world where she was not only a mere alien but also a lonely Muslim woman with no money.

Therefore, for both women we can mention this as a common denominator: a bid for independence, a valuation of the self in a favorable comparison with the other, and an attempt to be a participant in a foreign society rather than being a passive observer. Halide Edip abandoned the genteel alternatives offered to a woman of her class by the society. She despised the tea parties of the fashionable Sisli district of Istanbul during the occupation years of 1918-22 with their tame attempts at defending the Turkish cause at the expense of entertaining the soldiers of the occupation powers which led to a few marriages between Turkish women and some British officers. Instead she joined the resistance movement in Anatolia and became a soldier. Her name was on the official list with five other people who were condemned to death by the military court for disobeying the Sultan-Caliph. Interestingly, Halide Edip had also received a medal from Hamidian regime very early in her career, but all through her life, she was ashamed of it and tried to forget about it, because she considered Sultan Hamid a tyrant! The rebellion of Halide Edip and Selma Ekrem took them from the confines of an imaginary harem and put them in the world of truly emancipated individuals. Halide Edip's point that her hands were no longer the hands of a genteel woman of the upper classes is an interesting and physical result of that attitude.

What was the source of that independent and headstrong challenge these women made to the world? The answer seems to be found in their personality make-up: both Halide Edip and Selma Ekrem had sufficient self-esteem. In their memoirs we rarely find unfavorable comparisons between themselves and other people at the expense of the self. Halide Edip relates her reaction to her blue-blond Circassian stepmother and the stepmother's family inspecting her dark eyes and hair, which made her feel self-conscious. As a reaction she seems to have rejected those people emotionally rather than being envious or admiring their fair features.



Both women extended this self-appreciation to their environment and, starting from their immediate families, they sympathized and empathized with, criticized and eventually loved their societies. It is true that we find them at times pitying, angry, horror-stricken or disgusted with people. But the negative feelings do not prevail over their perception of their society. And they find cause to blame humankind rather than their particular society for the shortcomings of their fellow men! That solid appreciation of the self, which might be called in Freudian terms as primary and healthy narcissism, caused them to appreciate and identify with the national culture and made them be aware of the difference between the self and the other: after the indiscriminating years of early childhood, they became acutely aware of the differences separating individuals, groups, classes, sexes, nations and religions.

Although both women attempted to be objective in their judgments concerning societies other than their own, and believed themselves to be humanists, their socio-political climate left little ground for an objective intellectual standing. The wars they observed, based on ethnic and religious purposes, forced them to be down to earth and practical. They had to take sides and it was crucial with whom they sided. Their core-self, which came into being in an early and solid identification with their society seems to have been at work in determining those choices. Despite the western schooling they underwent in childhood, they easily dismissed the western discourse of being the conveyors of civilization and hence being justified in their interference with other societies' affairs. They instead took an antagonistic stand against it when the crucial interests of their country were at stake. It is not that they didn't attempt a reconciliation, but the marriage of east and west for them, particularly for Halide Edip, takes the form of westerner's joining the east and being happily assimilated in it. And this is what she achieves in her fiction. In her novel *The Clown and his Daughter*, the former priest Peregrini marries the Muslim Rabia, converts to Islam and becomes a Turk.

In this context, the main challenge between those groups representing "the self" and "the other" appears on the Muslim-non-Muslim axis with subcategories such as Ottoman versus non-Ottoman, Turk versus non-Turk as much as Western versus Eastern Christianities. The image of the Turk rises above the others as a controlling, reconciling and--when necessary-- a dominating presence. In this context, the identification with Turkishness becomes an identification with the state: This state is strong, willing to be benevolent in the hands of able statesmen and almost secular in its control of the



religion. The identification with the state also provides men and women alike with a solid and genderwise neutral identity. Under the light of this ideological standing, which reflected the minds of a prominent group of Ottoman-Turkish intellectuals, it becomes clear why Halide Edip was preoccupied with the idea of reforming the state and its people, an idea, which also enhanced and justified her individuation. If she were a good reformer, which entailed her being capable of taking initiative and hence being capable of independent thought and action, the state and the society would benefit from her actions! We find the rudiments of the same approach in Selma Ekrem's attitude towards veiling. Regardless of her being aware or unaware of the underlying psychological reasons, we might definitely say that Selma Ekrem sublimated her resistance to veiling to the level of a fight for individual freedom for women, which would eventually benefit the society at large. Thus, the idea of social responsibility in both writers goes hand in hand with their inner need for individual fulfillment and expression. The healthy self-love Halide Edip and Selma Ekrem cherished enabled them to look at "the other" not necessarily always admiringly but critically and saved them from the complacency with the western ideologies found in the minds of many non-Western intellectuals then and now.

### **Halide Edip and Selma Ekrem as Masters of the Ottoman Realms**

Halide Edip served as a general inspector of the schools for girls and co-orphanages in Syria during the First World War and we find her as a dominating presence in that capacity. She deals with Turkish, Kurdish, and Armenian children and recognizes and describes their attributes from the perspective of her own superior position. She never lets it be forgotten that she was the representative of the dominant Ottoman power: her attitude towards the non-Turkish elements of the empire is that of a benevolent master. Although, by today's standards, she was politically incorrect, she had the then common opinions of belonging to the ruling races/classes, which were also held by the great majority of Western intellectuals at the time. Thus, the exceptionality of her position is not having that feeling of superiority but the phenomena of this feeling's being entertained by a woman of the Ottoman Empire, who was then supposed by the western mentality to be meek and humble.

In her description of her black nanny Nevres, Halide Edip attributes to her some physical features, which she believes to be naturally disagreeable to a white person. But this again takes us to a comparison between the western



attitudes and Halide's approach concerning the issue of race. If we disregard the politically incorrect statement (for us now) about the assumed qualities of the black skin, she treats her nanny in a radically different way from an American Southern Belle would or could do. Nor is the status of the nanny permissive to any abuse, legal or otherwise: she is a woman with a white, in fact, blond husband and she is a respectable character who has power over Halide and might criticize her severely when she feels that criticism is called for. Halide Edip has nothing to do against her opinionated nanny, which is significant when her self-willed and proud nature is considered. The relationship is between the members of two physically different races of humankind who recognize this difference yet love and respect each other.

Yet regardless of her personal attachment to her black nanny, Halide Edip is sure of her "whiteness" as much as it stands for the historical image of sovereignty, a status which has been claimed by the westerners solely for themselves. But the answer to the question as to who was white was obvious to Halide Edip: it was she and her group per se! Thus we see her, unawares (since obviously it could never occur to her that Turks would not be considered white) wresting the whiteness from the west and asserting herself as such in its symbolic capacity. Selma Ekrem's reaction, when confronted by New Yorkers who remarked that she did not look Turkish reflects equal self-assurance:

"Glad to get back, arn'tchew?"

"Back?" I echoed. But it is the first time I'm coming to America!"

"The first time?" queried the official. "But aren't chew an American?"

"Far from it" I laughed, "I am a Turk."

The word was like a bomb. The people round me stared. I saw a vague ideas of daggers, veils, ephemeral silks and heavy incence drifting on their faces. Just then a woman whom I had never seen before touched me on the arm.

"Excuse me, my dear," she said. "Are you really a Turk?"

"Yes" said I, somewhat taken aback.

"But" she said triumphantly, "your mother, she is not a Turk, is she?"

"Oh, yes" I replied, my father is a Turk, my mother's a Turk, so are all my sisters, and my cousins and my aunts."

"But if you have just come from Turkey" she questioned, "where did you get these clothes?"

"Strange as it may seem," I answered, " we do not go around in my country wrapped in Turkish towels." (292-93)



She is amused by the prejudiced but also naïve ideas in the minds of Americans as to how a Turk should look.

Halide Edip's attitude towards non-Ottoman nations, particularly Europeans, is very much the same. In the Sinai desert during the war, when a German pilot who took pleasure in frightening his guest passengers through sky acrobatics attempted to impress her too, we find Halide refusing to be frightened: she rejects the double role of a frightened woman before a man, and a frightened non-European before a European who displays technological advancements and the control of those skills. Not only does she refuse to be frightened, but also despises the man for his petty pleasure:

After the hospitals we went to the German aeroplane station. A German air officer called Erlinger showed us round. I had heard about his wonderful feats in the air, and also of his turning somersaults in the air whenever any ordinary Turkish land officer, curious for the experience of an aeroplane ride, came his way ... When the aeroplane, which had been flying smoothly for a time, began to shake and jump, I felt that the time for fear had come and wondered how one held on to an aeroplane when it turned upside down. Just then Erlinger looked back at me with a quizzical expression. I believe that he wanted to see the effect of it I all on my face. In spite of my internal anxieties, his wicked joy at the idea of frightening Turks, even when they are meek-looking little women, amused me. I smiled understandingly, and that very instant the aeroplane steadied itself. I think that sign of fear would have led him to the wickedest feats; what was humor and amusement in me he took for courage, and that saved me. (414-15)

And in wartime Istanbul, we find her losing her temper and beating up a European woman who was functioning as a female security officer and who was disrespectful when searching her for forbidden material. The message is obvious: she is not to be dominated! And that resistance to being dominated was definitely more than an intellectual plea but involved physical action as well, which underlined her personality as much as it underlined the philosophy of the Turkish independence war fought against the west. (*Memoirs* 433-36)

Her attitude towards French nuns in Lebanon is equally illuminating: when the latter are suspected of being spies, she treats and inspects them kindly but thoroughly. Halide Edip displays her knowledge and understanding of the nuns, not in a dissimilar way a European would explain a "native" through observation and experience. She retains the role of the observer to herself. She, in that sense, challenges the allegedly masculine power of "penetration" as well,



this time, into the minds and habits of people. She also challenges the western claim to the role of the observing and classifying scholar of specimens with claiming that role for herself.

In Selma Ekrem's attitude we find a similar approach. Her father was the governor of Jerusalem before the First World War and they had dealings with different races and religions throughout their stay in the region. Selma Ekrem's belonging to the superior ruling Turkish class is very prominently expressed in her description of their meetings with the local Arab people. She also gives a full account of how her father as a Muslim controlled the sites holy to Christianity and how he managed to keep the uneasy balance between different Christian sects. Her description of her mother's benevolence towards poor Russian pilgrims again illustrates her feelings of superiority: a Muslim woman showing magnanimity towards a group of non-Ottoman, non-Muslim, and mostly male pilgrims:

Mother then called the Russians to her. They halted in the middle of the road, not knowing what to do. Yeronda shouted to them to come and then they came obediently, like children. Mother went among them and to each poor pilgrim she gave an icon. Great shivers of joy ran through their faces, like the wind piercing through fields of ripe wheat. (98)

Her account of the USA gives us the impression that despite the tremendous and intimidating material advancements she observes in that country, the looseness of the social fabric, that is, the relative weakness of social contact among the members of the American society makes her think favorably of her own country over the USA, where individual contact is easier and more reliable, whereas there is a pervading loneliness in American society due to the extreme individualism.

### **Conclusion: The Problem of the Exotic**

Both Halide Edip and Selma Ekrem wrote for an English-reading public and they had to resolve two problems. They definitely needed to make their books readable, which might have required them to include the element of the exotic to sharpen the appetite of their readers. They also needed not to compromise their individuality and the nation that they were representing, and hence, needed to dismiss the exotic! They were, however, fortunate in two things: they happened to have lived in a certain place at a certain time that provided the stage for one of the most interesting adventures of human history.



The legendary atmosphere of the First World War and, in the case of Halide Edip, the legendary heroism of the Turkish independence war have given them enough material to keep the public awake. This enabled them to avoid what might be called the objective of the documentary filmmaker or the photographer who avoids the mainstream and looks for the marginal and the bizarre. Moreover, both writers were interested in teaching their audience about the civilization they were coming from and that made them include interesting explanatory passages as to how and why certain customs and practices were followed in the Ottoman lands. But nowhere in their narrative does one find the gaudy descriptions of the supposed eastern decadence begging for attention, nor the complaining voice of the refugee who begs for approval and acceptance at the expense of criticizing her society in what might be called an emotional betrayal. In that respect, both writers defy the orientalist descriptions of non-European intellectual who is in alliance and subservient to the West through education or religion.

Halide Edip detested polygamy and got a divorce from her husband when the latter made a second marriage. She later married another man in a "marriage of the minds" with whom she was a political and intellectual partner. But she seems to have dispensed with her role as a sexual woman relatively early in life, and launched herself into politics and literature. Less ambitious in the public domain but more intensely pursuing personal happiness, Selma Ekrem would not abandon her core sexual identity for the sake of achieving an all-important public persona. That made her an observer of her life and society and eventually the writer of her autobiography in order for her to establish herself in a new society and to make a living. She sought for recognition not for her social-political career but for her individual life. She attempted to transplant herself into American soil but did not want to cut herself off from her native land. In America she felt more comfortable in a tie and jacket suits and very closely cropped hair, which made her resemble a young man, a freedom she could not enjoy in Turkey. In her autobiography she calls for justification for her change of country and also expects respect for being a member of her physically but not emotionally abandoned society. This is obviously a more complex situation: Selma Ekrem rejected not being Turkish but being a woman in Turkey.

Their standing reminds one of the wish-formula so often repeated in non-western countries: "let's take the technology of the west but retain our culture." Halide Edip and Selma Ekrem seem to have anticipated and followed this advice even before it was formulated. They appear as strong personalities not



harmed by assimilated orientalist ideas and emotions. Neither the western Christianity represented by the British or by the French, nor the Eastern Christianity represented by Russia and the neighboring nations of Greeks and Armenians is viewed by them in a sense of naïve awe but through the eyes of a mature person with enough knowledge and experience to appreciate her own cultural values. In their example, the orientalist picture of a Near Easterner looking at a westerner through the eyes of a child is discredited. In both writers, the reference point to pass judgment on an issue is embedded in their own cultural medium which allows them to maintain a healthy self-centeredness: they reach the "other" through that narcissistically valued core-identity and their self-appreciation is what allows them to see, discover, appreciate or critique the "other. They like their society as an extension of their selves and reciprocally as the forming agent of that appreciated self. This feeling remains strong even when they go abroad in forced or self-inflicted exile.

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