

**MESSIAHS FOR AND AGAINST THE DOMINANT CULTURE:  
POLITICAL WRITING of AMERICAN and TURKISH WOMEN  
in the LATE 19<sup>th</sup> and EARLY 20<sup>th</sup> CENTURIES\***

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**Abstract** : Mid-nineteenth century America witnessed a counter-culture movement organized by a group of female philanthropists who tried to promote reforms in the status of women and African-Americans. Writers, educators like Margaret Fuller, Elizabeth Palmer Peabody, the Grimke Sisters, Francis Kemble, members of the mainstream culture, followed their mentors, namely Emerson and Channing, in order to defend women's rights and the cause of the abolitionists. In Turkey, Halide Edip, Melek Reşit and their followers, struggled for the independence of their country at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, similarly tried to make their voice heard with their political writings, letters, seminars and conferences in both national and international grounds. Their writings on the political realm in regard to historical framework fit into Frederick Jameson's idea of the cultural revolution which is apprehended through the ideology of form, in their case, pamphlets, memoirs and letters. It is proposed to analyze, in this article, to what extent Jameson's definition could be applicable to their case, since, in many aspects, theirs was a rare one, being both in the centre and the margin of the cultural and historical mold.

**Key Words:** History, Culture, Politics, Women Messiahs

By the mid 19th century, women of the well-to-do Protestant, white families in the U.S.A. had become deeply involved in anti-slavery agitation, working within separate organizations affiliated with those run by men. These women, who were from different regions and backgrounds of the country, also found ways of corresponding with one another, encouraging one another to promote active participation. Their actions suited notions of propriety yet sometimes were inconsistent with the Victorian sense of decorum. For example, they welcomed blacks as equals raising the whites' fear of miscegenation; and left their family circles for ventures such as petitioning the government to end slavery. Yet, despite the discontent they aroused in their elite circles their initiatives took an unforeseen event to elevate the women's question into a matter of open contemplation among the abolitionists and further

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\* This paper was presented in 26<sup>th</sup> Annual American Studies Seminar sponsored by American Embassy, Bureau of Education and Cultural Affairs and American Studies Association of Turkey, Dedeman-Antalya, 14<sup>th</sup> – 17<sup>th</sup> November, 2002.

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to alienate their mentors like William Lloyd Garrison and William Ellery Channing.

Towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Ottoman Empire had been undergoing some radical cultural changes, especially in the area of women's education, which had been so far restricted because of religious pressures. Yet, when the Empire became acquainted with the Western world through series of reformations and restorations, mainly to secure the minority rights, schools run by the missionaries opened one after another, paving the way for the education of Turkish girls of certain upper classes. The infrastructure of aristocracy, ranging from born princesses, who were mostly married to the renowned generals of the army or the top government officials, to the descendants of the Sultan ranked hierarchically according to their position in the palace, enabled the ladies of the court to have the privilege of private education.

It was also the female members of the upper-middle class families who had the opportunity to attend public or boarding schools of Western origin, learning the Latin alphabet which would later facilitate their correspondence with the Western world to share their political ideas. Initially these women of intellectual backgrounds tried their hand at writing courtly love poetry under male pseudonyms or different pen- names, to disguise their noble backgrounds, or in order not to draw the anger (curse) of extremely religious circles. These ladies through their marriages were acquainted with the social and political problems of pre-World War I, which had been marked with the controversy between the Palace and the "Young Turks", the Turkish intellectuals who were trained in Europe mainly in France and became equipped with the ideas of equality, fraternity and democracy; alongside these intellectuals, the top officials in the army were against the monarchy.

At the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, wars of independence against the Empire and lastly the aftermath of World War I which ended with a cease fire causing the loss of grounds including the main land Anatolia, alarmed the highly patriotic women of education to join their forces to support the cause of M. Kemal and his friends in the Turkish War of Independence which ended with the setting of a new republic from the relics of the Empire.

After this brief historical background to make the intellectual activities of the Turkish women known to the people not familiar with it, we can now consider the resemblances in many respects between the women of two nationalities in their endeavors concerning the welfare of their nations. In this context, then it would be appropriate to call them - the American and Turkish Ladies – as "Messiahs" as they volunteered and pioneered courageously at the times when they were generically considered as the weaker gender. In this paper, we propose to compare and contrast their ways of approach, acquisition and failure within a given span of time that is the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. We will also try to evaluate their role in gaining some grounds towards women's rights, which they had come to learn while serving for

dominant culture, using the religious language and the posture of the “Messiahs” to be heard and understood.

In 19<sup>th</sup> century America, the catalyst was a lecture tour of New England, undertaken in 1838 by two sisters who crusaded for the abolitionists, Angelina and Sarah Grimké. These two Southerners from a slaveholding family enlarged the scope of the movement, which had been initially promoted by the New Englanders, as voiced by H.D. Thoreau’s *Civil Disobedience*. Thoreau says, “I do not hesitate to say that those who call themselves abolitionists should support both in person and property from the government of Massachusetts and not wait till they constitute a majority...I think that it is enough if they have God on their side” (645). Yes, they prayed to God to be on their side as Angelina Grimké recorded in her diary (May 12, 1836): “I am confident, not many years will roll by before the horrible traffic in human beings will be destroyed...my earnest prayers have been poured out that the Lord would be pleased to permit me to be instrumental of good to these degraded, oppressed, and suffering fellow creatures” (105). The feverishly pious discourse that the sisters assumed stirred both sexes and attracted the attention of clergy, namely the Congregationalists - some to repudiate, and some like Garrison to support the in public appearances.

The title of Angelina’s pamphlet, ‘An Appeal to the Christian Women of the South,’ bore two important properties of their approach to the issue: firstly, it was based on Christianity, secondly, it involved women. It was the first attempt to bring feminine understanding to counteract the social injustices with a Biblical rhetoric reminiscent of the language of the patriarchy-the only language they could command. “The investigation of the rights of the slave,” Angelina Grimké wrote, “has led me to a better understanding of my own” (41). What Grimké had come to realize was that power and domination were sexual as well as racial. Though from the present perspective the claims for equal opportunities and legal rights of these pioneering feminists could be seen as limited in scope, they were the first to defend “moral and intellectual capacities” of women, and attack “subordination to men” (Walters 127).

The forceful language of the pamphlets is marked with biblical allusions and their rhetoric, having the male quality of expression in order to reach wider audience and followers. One would, for example, easily notice the language of the clergy when Sarah M. Grimké addressed the clergy of the Southern states in a lengthy letter about the wickedness of slavery beginning with a quotation from Luke (xix) enriched with others to support her argument. For instance, the interpretation of Ezekiel’s words indicating that the sin of the fathers if disregarded by the sons will bring pestilence to the coming generations is given as an answer to those who think of themselves exempt from the sins of slavery as an institution (113).

The same language would be adopted when she wrote *The Original Equality of Women*, where she again attempts to re-interpret the truths in the

scriptures, disregarding King James's translation by saying "I believe it to be the solemn duty of every individual to search the Scriptures for themselves, with the aid of the Holy Spirit, and not to be governed by the views of any man, or set of men" (205). Referring to the creation of mankind and claiming that the 'man' in the text is only a generic term, she, then, re-reads the quotation from the Bible as: "so, God created man in his own image in the image of God created he, him; male and female created he, them" (205), and adds that dominion was given to both over every other creature. This letter written to Mary S. Parker, the president of the Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society ends with the note: "God created us equal-he is our Law giver, our King and our Judge, Thine for the oppressed in the bonds of womanhood" (120).

When the Anti-Slavery Society in Boston became the target of the mob violence in the late 1830s, their revolutionary associations of female rights were welcomed only by a few intellectuals of the same class such as Margaret Fuller and Elizabeth Palmer Peabody, the members of the Transcendentalist Club. These women chose what many of the supporters of the women's right groups thought to be useful in their mission to educate women. Almost twenty years later, after Peabody's first Brookline boarding school for girls was founded with the help of William Ellery Channing, the Grimké sisters opened Engelswood which did not last because of financial shortcomings (1856).

The activities of Peabody, one of the other remarkable women of the time, can not be limited to her involvement in anti-slavery and feminist movements; her contribution to American culture was marked by her publication of the famous 'Dial Magazine', not only as a writer of highly radical essays on women's education, but also hosting articles on political debates. Peabody's statements, compared to that of the religious flavor of the Grimké's stolen language, though still patriarchal, that is, not questioning the role of women in society and accepting man's spiritual power on women, are more of a secular trend. In preparation for the Brook Farm experience, she envisions a Utopian community in 'Plan of the West Roxbury Community' (1842) where instead of racial and gender discrimination, equality of human beings prevails, as she says, "The principles of the organization are, therefore, cooperation in social matters in the faith of whole human soul- men and women" (42).

On the other hand, Frances Kemble Butler's rhetoric, though it sounds more Grimké like, is strikingly well-balanced, recalling the essay writing style of the English masters of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. English by birth, Kemble was a renowned actress of Shakespeare's plays, who through marriage to Pierce Butler, a wealthy plantation owner, became not only an American citizen, but also an ardent supporter of the abolitionist sentiment. When her *Journal of a Residence in a Georgian Plantation* (1863), an account of her years in her husband's plantation was published with the encouragement of W. E.

Channing, she came to the verge of breaking with her husband, who was extremely disturbed not only by her accurate account of the ills of slavery, but also her independence of mind which he called “political mania of her gender” (Butler 67).

In her book, *Slavery and Christian Consciousness*, which has more introductory notes and passages than her accounts of the misuse and maltreatment of the slaves and the unhealthy conditions the slaves are forced to live in, Kemble’s observations are in later editions supported by historical facts, pictures and maps. Like the Grimké sisters, Butler uses some Biblical allusions, yet her style of writing, unexpected from the women’s literary style of the time, refutes every possible pro-slavery argument with the dexterity of the masters of rhetoric. In her introductory chapter to the book *Slavery and Christian Consciousness*, she says:

*“Abolitionism flowed from a Christian belief in right action and a Christian desire to turn fellow citizens from the path of sin, such thinking is eminently humane and rational in its objectives and its assumptions. It blended an ardent desire for reform with insistence that reform itself be based upon the main precepts of the Christian creed” (15).*

Throughout the book, she displays in the description of her life style and adventures in her husband’s plantation, what is expected from a true Christian mistress. She, for instance, holds services for the slaves, namely for the women at home every “Sabbath morning” after her official appearance at Christ Church, to teach them the basics of sanitation, child and house care.

After having surveyed some of the activities and achievements of the American intellectual women of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, who have tried to voice the ailments in the practice of American democratic idealism, because of that “peculiar institution” called slavery and their expectations for equal rights, including women, whose status in the society has been so far neglected, through the abolition of slavery and proper education for women to assess their rights, we would like to discuss similar writing strategies the Turkish women of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries applied to support the war of independence of their country from foreign invasion, which seemed more imminent than their rights. Though comparatively late to prominence, some of the Turkish intellectual women’s activities of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century bear a curious resemblance to that of the American women. Yet, the causes of their appearance in the political arena differ, that is, Turkish women in their writings and active participation in the meetings tried to evoke national feelings for the independence of their country, Americans for the rights of blacks and women. Consequently, both have found themselves inevitably voicing their own rights

since in their writings and speeches they discreetly touched upon the gender discrimination in their countries.

If we look at the social and historical backgrounds of these women of different nationalities, striking similarities can be seen. First of all, these intellectual women belonged to the mainstream, well-to-do even noble families of landed gentry, prominent educators or top officials. Throughout their lives they have met male mentors and leaders, whose causes they have adopted and followed with utmost devotion; both, in their writings, made political statements, appealing the religious beliefs, using the language of dominant ideology of the time, having what Frederick Jameson described ideology as, “encoded antithetical statements” (139). That is, in that ideology, alongside with the dominance of powerful classes of the base structure, the use and interpretation of religious norms suggestive of a discourse to suppress women, a kind of patriarchy as in the Holy Books of both cultures, also allows in itself facets of de-coding. Thus, women of education who had a better command of analyzing the religious texts, like Angelina and Sarah Grimké, had learned to develop re-interpretations of these texts, and claimed that there was no indication of racial and gender discrimination was prevalent in them. In the course of time, using the same strategy of creating a language of their own to be understood and appreciated by the common public, both the women of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century America and the women of the newly emerged Turkish Republic in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, would gain recognition and consequently their rights.

To exemplify the way the Turkish women have gained momentum in political affairs, the life story and achievements of Halide Edip Adıvar can be given. She was born to a wealthy intellectual family in Istanbul in 1884 when the Ottoman Empire had tremendous pressures inside and outside. The Turkish militia and intellectuals were against the rule of Sultan Abdulhamit, who denied the existence of the Parliament and its elected members; there were insurrections and revolts both in the main land Anatolia and the lands under Ottoman control, which demanded autonomy.

After graduating from Arnavutköy American College, and marrying an important Turkish scientist, Halide Edip devoted herself first to the liberation of Istanbul from the foreign forces, despite the Sultan Vahdettin’s restrictions due to his secret collaboration with the English, victorious of World War I; she protested the situation and occupation of Istanbul by organizing public meetings calling people to resist. Later, she had become the first female supporter of Mustafa Kemal to carry out a war against the enemy by retreating to the heart of Anatolia, setting up his quarters in Anatolia, joining him at the front and calling herself his sergeant in the Turkish War of Independence. She claimed a more active role in the politics of the young Turkish Republic in the early 1930s, not realizing that the young republic when no other example existed in the Western world, was not yet ready to send a female ambassador to

the U.S.A., a country with which she felt cultural affiliations; but being disappointed, devoted herself to the foundation of the English Philology Department in Istanbul University. In the coming pages, passages that prove her familiarity with the rhetoric of the Western world, recalling that of her American counterparts will be given as to reflect the similarities in her use of religious symbols and references to set up a common language shared by the people of every walk of life.

In those years of Turkish women's political involvement, alongside with meetings of protest where powerful female speakers denounced the foreign occupation, other channels like writing letters to the wives of nations' heads, were developed by the Turkish women, including the members of the late royal family who courageously challenged not only the domain they belonged to, but the long established Islamic traditions that excluded women from active participation. These letters mostly addressed to the French and to the English authorities have been also sent to the U.S.A., another victorious nation of World War I, who now had the word in World's politics.

Despite the Ottoman Empire's centuries old interaction with the European nations, namely, England, France, Germany and Russia, her relationship with America came late at the end of 19<sup>th</sup> century, when American missionaries and entrepreneurs began to come to Anatolia for different reasons; the former to open religious schools for the minorities, the latter to promote trade. When such schools were opened, the daughters of elite Muslim families were also sent, regardless of the rumors that these schools propagating Christianity. Thus, a group of Turkish intellectual women with a good command of English, and familiarity with the Anglo-American culture came onto the scene. It was the time when the Ottoman Empire faced the fatal crisis of losing the mainland-Anatolia which was occupied by the allied forces, namely Italian, French, English and Greek forces who had been allies during World War I against the Ottoman-German coalition. These women, mainly house-wives, though still under strict Islamic code of behavior, made themselves recognized by the common public and joined their forces, mainly in social gatherings and meetings; and corresponded with Mustafa Kemal, the leader of the independence movement and later the founder of the Republic.

These women's associations under the general umbrella of 'Anatolian Women's Motherland-Defense Association' reported their achievements to Halide Edip who was acting as a private secretary and public affairs officer to Mustafa Kemal himself. As the mentors and conductors of these activities, Mustafa Kemal and Halide Edip incessantly answered their letters and directed them in their activities and efforts to make themselves and their cause (the liberation of the country from the occupation, even at the expense of American mandate) to be heard by the foreign authorities; these women's associations tried every possible channel for that purpose, including writing letters to President Wilson's wife, where they reproached her by reminding her of her

husband's, President Wilson's famous twelve principles which was a kind of decree to secure the world's peace in regard to sovereignty of nations. The last sentences of this letter are these:

*Dear Madam; what happened to the promises of your husband who had, in the name of his nation, in front of all the world, declared twelve principles securing the rights of all nationalities and religions? Has the voice of justice been drowned by the noise of ambition?*

*You are powerful and victorious, but we demand that the promise given by his Excellency in front of whole would to be fulfilled.*

*Hoping that before it is too late to prevent, Anatolia, our main land being colonized through bloodshed, and the babies orphaned, you'll help secure and support our rights for humanity and nationality, with our doleful and unhappy regards, dear Madam, (32)*

*(In the name of Women's Association of Defense of Rights, January 17, 1920)*

Their pleas drew the attention of American Congressmen and the reporters, who came to observe the political developments and to set up the first unofficial meetings leading to Ankara Agreement-the first political relationship of the parties-between the young Turkish government and Washington. Consequently, the Turkish-American relationship owes much to the efforts of these women, who, like the others, participated in political activities to be benefited by some rights after the foundation of the Republic. Considering that even during the war years, the Turkish women proved their capacity of filling the gaps in public domain, vacated by men in the army; they worked at the state offices, taught schools, worked at the hospitals, even carried ammunition to the front, all signifying a readiness for equal rights with men, they deserved the rights of formal education, to vote and to be voted for the Parliament at first hand.

Yet, these women were not the first to initiate patriotic policies; as early as 1913, the late princesses of the Ottoman Empire, namely Ladies Nazime and Nimet whose names are not known very much today, began to hold meeting with a group of women at Darülfünun (today's Istanbul University) either to compose letters to foreign missionaries to delegate them to stop the bloodshed in the Balkans and in Eastern Anatolia or made speeches to criticize the civilized nations and call women for struggle and action in order to evoke national consciousness. One of the speeches given by Lady Fatma Aliye in these meetings is briefly as follows:



*You European nations, though civilized, have done nothing to stop the cruelties and religious atrocities. We want you to know that, we Turkish women know our place in the society and in Islam and we will do our duty to God Almighty by working for our nation's welfare (47).*

A few years later, in 1919, centered in Sivas, but also in many parts of the country, women's associations were founded under the leadership of Lady Melek Reşit, the wife of the governor of Sivas, Sir General Reşit. We do not know much about her background but through her letters sent to Europe and U.S.A., it is evident that she could carry out correspondence in English and French. She usually wrote letters to the wives of the commanders of the allied forces and also sent copies of them to H. Edip and M. Kemal to inform them about the reactions she received. In one of these letters, she says, "The English accepted our pleas coldly, the Americans and Italians, and especially the French complimented us, even promised to answer our petitions officially" (70).

Melek Reşit was also well-aware of the necessity to hold the women of the association intact and knew how to excite the crowds of women in her speeches which were usually followed by religious rituals; in one of these speeches, she says:

*My Lady Compatriots,  
I hope that our prayers will be accepted. Men, women, children, everybody must work for our freedom; this is a Farz (obligation). Because our honor, religion, and lives are connected with the welfare of our country. Unfortunately, our female world lags behind in serious matters; though, in our country women's meetings like these are not approved, the wounds of the women can only be cured by the women themselves. Let us not forget that we have a place in our country's public and social lives. We'll do our share in protecting our country by the permission of God Almighty (92).*

As easily noticed, Melek Reşit's highly patriotic innovations in her speeches are also marked by the explicit demands for women's rights. In May 30, 1919, at an open air meeting of 100.000 people to protest the occupation of Istanbul by English forces, another important Lady, who would later become one of the earliest novelists of the young republic, Şukûve Nihal clarified Lady Melek Reşit's statement of equality of right by saying that:

*"Do you know why we are now in such distress? As women we have been silent instead of resisting injustices. If we had had the*

*right of electing our representatives to a national parliament and a cabinet deserving our confidence, we would have never experienced this disaster” (111)*

Halide Edip, on the other hand, while addressing a mixed audience at a famous Fatih meeting, was highly conscious of her style, which was in tone and diction no different from other male speakers, except for the metaphors reminiscent of her Anglo-American education:

*“The night is dark, but every dark night in one’s life will bring the morning. Tomorrow we will tear this terrible night and create a bright morning. All we want is our one and foremost right, higher right for life, our natural right. The occupants may not hear our voice. But, we can address ourselves to our leaders, to call on duty. Also together with our men we ask for a powerful, wise, courageous government, coming directly from the bosom of the nation to represent us fully. We are here to say that we are now in the darkest day, everybody is silent waiting for the light” (79).*

Her diction in this open air meeting became fiercer and more religious in tone as to evoke feelings of resistance to hardships; her target audience was the women:

*Ladies, today we don’t have anything like canons, guns but we have a weapon more powerful than these: Justice and power of God. Canons and guns are vindicated but justice and God’s power survive. You mothers you are endowed with the holy devotion to God and love of nation as to face the canons and guns. We have, equally together with men, proved to the world that we deserve the title of a nation among others” (113).*

As we have seen from the above quotations, Turkish intellectual women, like their American counterparts, while fighting for a cause have come to realize their own rights, as they empowered themselves through their writings and speeches, ironically, however, using the same predicaments of their religion that the patriarchy had so far practiced to subdue women, that is the extensive use of religious metaphors, which would be understood by everybody regardless of his/her social and educational background, they have achieved their goal, or at least paved the way for the coming generations of women.

**Özet :** Amerika’da kölecilik ve ırk ayrımına karşı savaşım veren Angelina ve Sarah Grimké kardeşler, zenci kadınların eğitim görmeleri için okullar açılmasına öncülük eden Elizabeth Palmer Peabody ve Ellery Channing ve bu bilince basın yoluyla destek sağlayan Frances Kemble Butler gibi çarpıcı örneklerle anlatılan kadın kahramanlar, toplumda önemli değişimlerin yolunu açmışlardır. Türkiye’de ise ülkelerinin bağımsızlığı için savaşım veren Halide Edip Adivar ve Melek Reşit Hanım yazılarıyla, siyasal katkılarıyla, oluşturdukları konseylerle, verdikleri seminer ve konferanslarla seslerini ulusal ve uluslararası düzeyde duyurmuşlardır.

Kısaca kadının toplumsal olaylara karşı duyarlılığı ve ülkelerinin gönenci için savaşımını konu alan bildiri, böylelikle aynı dönemlerde yaşayan kadınların ortak yanlarını da değerlenmektedir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Tarih, kültür, politika, kadın mesihler

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