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Book Review / *Yayın Tanıtımı*

Moral Debates in the Ottoman Empire during the First World War*

Birinci Dünya Savaşı Sırasında Osmanlı İmparatorluğu'nda Ahlaki Tartışmalar**

Çiğdem Oğuz ***The Struggle Within: "Moral Crisis" on the Ottoman Homefront During the First World War*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2021, 248 p., ISBN: 9781838607098**

Burcu Belli[1]

*This study is dedicated to Barış Erkan Yazıcı, my friend and my colleague.
**Bu çalışma arkadaşım ve meslektaşım Barış Erkan Yazıcı'ya ithaf edilmiştir.

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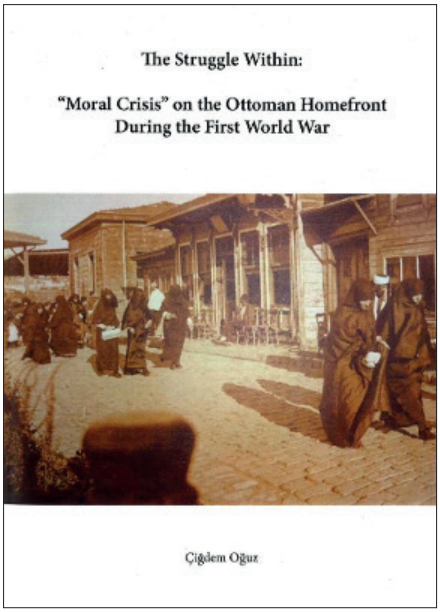

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Çiğdem Oğuz's book *Moral Crisis* delves into a controversial topic in Ottoman society, introducing readers to what morality signified in the Ottoman Muslim world during World War I. The author explores in her study how society understood morality in the war years. Oğuz investigates the interplay between morality and societal dynamics. Furthermore, she

argues that morality was an instrument of the intellectuals for shaping societal norms, and it was the subject of many discussions for the same purpose. Oğuz asserts that according to intellectuals, immorality was generally equated as a social problem emanating from Europe. Thus, a perceived link between being European and immoral is also established.

Initially written as a Ph.D. thesis, the book was subsequently published by I.B. Tauris in 2021. The author's research is grounded in three primary sources; newspapers, archival documents, and militarist sources. The key terms and themes of the book are women's morality, the place of women in the public sphere, the perspective of intelligentsia toward women and morality, and traditional family order during the war years. This review aims to analyze the book through the lens of contemporary societal reform, progress, and future planning.

In Ottoman and Turkish historiography, certain topics are taboo, typically rooted in tradition. Fortunately, a shift is occurring in this trend, thanks to some young, brave, and open-minded scientists focusing on these "secret" areas. One of these academics is Çiğdem Oğuz, a woman whose book delves into a controversial topic. Firstly, because moral concerns are sensitive, discussing these is highly likely to provoke reactions. Given the abstract nature of morality, especially in premodern, or early modern times, evaluating or discussing such matters with clarity is difficult. Yet, in *Moral Crisis*, Çiğdem Oğuz appears to navigate these complexities adeptly.

Oğuz's book is divided into six chapters: an introduction, the main body, and a comprehensive, and insightful conclusion that is deserving of chapter its own article. The text is lucidly written, ensuring that despite discussing a rather abstract concept, readers remain engaged, and enabled to understand the subject matter as best as possible. Though the topic seems academically dense, Oğuz presents it in an accessible way for a broad audience. The historical information is aptly provided, ensuring readers get a consistent background without feeling overwhelmed.

The introductory chapter serves as a guide for the rest of the book. In this section, Oğuz instructs us on how to approach the various chapters, and includes relevant terminology. She also introduces the book's essential concepts and discusses the societal context in the Ottoman Empire during World War I. According to Oğuz, WWI marked the start of the Ottoman disintegration and paved the way for the Turkish Republic. She then proceeds to discuss morality, avoiding a traditional, and dictionary-bound general definition. Nevertheless, she does not ignore morality discussions and explanations throughout history. Rather, she argues that a moral perception can include broad-ranging explanations. Oğuz still does not provide her readers with a precise definition of morality; as a result, we learn that morality can be a flexible concept that shifts depending on circumstances. Furthermore, we discover that morality is a controversial subject, with Oğuz emphasizing the importance of numerous internal and external dynamics.

Oğuz then introduces the main actors in this discussion, from the Ottoman intelligentsia to ordinary people, from the ulema to the military, before discussing the crisis issue. The

Moral Crisis, she claims, was a phenomenon in the eyes of Ottoman Muslims, and linked to women, and prostitution during the war. She suggests that moral debates after 1908 differed vastly from those before. Modern instruments like the press entered Ottoman social life, likely making debates more fluid and livelier. In this section, Oğuz provides a literature review and demonstrates how moral discourses were used to explain political events in the following sections. By the end of the introduction, readers have a clear map of the book's structure, knowing what each section entails.

The study's sources are classified into three types. First are the documents in the Prime Minister Ottoman Archive, with petitions giving a unique dimension to the study. The second category is wartime newspapers, and the third involves military documents, known as ATESE. In addition, Oğuz uses the minutes of the Ottoman parliament. For these kinds of studies, mentioned here are indispensable resources, and Oğuz appears to make good use of them all. In addition, her methodology becomes evident: she presents a topic before examining it from various perspectives. This section could include more information about the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP), as its philosophy was debated, adopted, or rejected by intellectuals, and other social institutions. Furthermore, providing historical information on the Ottoman Empire's political and social life would serve to illuminate the period and enhance understanding for readers unfamiliar with the time period and figures like the CUP.

A quote from Ziya Gökalp opens the second chapter, which focuses on moral arguments in three distinct newspapers in relation to his remarks. In other words, the chapter focuses on the Moral Crisis arguments among Ottoman intellectuals during WWI in various newspapers, including *İslam Mecmuası*, *Sebürreşad*, and *Yeni Mecmua*. Oğuz asserts that women's participation in social and economic life, the growth of materialism, the declaration of jihad, and ideological disputes were prominent themes during the war years. Even though they may appear as dissimilar concepts, the writer clearly illustrates their interconnectedness. Furthermore, Oğuz presents these discussion topics at the start of the chapter, so readers may observe what was discussed during the conflict and how morality played a role in these actions. Oğuz follows the same pattern for each newspaper, beginning with background information about the publication, its notable contributors, publishing years, and the number of issues printed. Then, she summarizes each newspaper's central ideology and how they defended it. The primary goal of *İslam Mecmuası*, for example, was to discover true Islam. Oğuz describes how Islam and nationalism were combined, as well as where morals fit into this new synthesis. The major purpose and motif of this new synthesis, according to her, was to give people a moral vision of their nation.

Additionally, this section also mentions the old morality. Oğuz presents the viewpoint of Ahmet Besim, one of the Islam Mecmuası' most influential writers on morals. According to Oğuz, the purpose of this study was to create a moral understanding synthesizing with nationalism. In this section, she makes a highly controversial claim: Ahmet Besim argued that high moral

acts are more important than religious practices. According to this study, Oğuz arrives at the conclusion that the nation preceded the individual, and explains this point comprehensively. She then summarizes the notes of another writer, Muallim Vayhi Ölmez. According to Oğuz, the writers' prevailing tone was pessimistic due to the war, and considers their attitudes to be reformist. For her, new, and ancient moralities were one of the most addressed issues in *Islam Mecmuası*. Oğuz also discusses upbringing, a topic covered in the newspaper and is widely acknowledged as an inherent component of morality.

Next, Oğuz turns to *Sebürreşad*, the second newspaper. This section begins with a similar introduction, discussing the CUP's relationship with the newspaper. However, readers unfamiliar with the CUP may find the connections between the two entities unclear, as implied by an aforementioned point. Oğuz notes how the tone of the paper changed after the Balkan Wars. Still, a lack of political connections and explanations is felt. This paper appears more radical than the previous one, according to Oğuz. *Sebürreşad* did not hesitate to identify the number of immoral conducts, many of which were linked to women. The salient points in this paper, for Oğuz, are parallel to the pure Islamic perspective. The widening distance between Muslims and morality was the primary cause of the disintegration. Central topics of the newspaper comprised prostitution, adultery, the presence of women in the public sphere, changing family, and gender roles, veil issues, women's clothing, and feminist movements. The system was evaluated using two specific terms: morality and immorality, which were found in this newspaper. Oğuz used citations to substantiate the writers' ideologies, which include many from Aksekili Ahmet Hamdi. According to Aksekili all difficulties can be overcome by adhering to high moral standards.

The newspaper began to increasingly condemn materialism after the establishment of the Soviet Union in 1917. After WWI ended, *Sebürreşad* continued to be published, and claimed that immorality was the main reason for the Ottoman Empire's downfall. Another major concern of the paper, according to Oğuz, was the regulation of prostitution and venereal diseases; the publication argued that such movements would mislead women. Therefore, the author contends that the press' primary interest and concern, even at the end of the war, was women's issues. To sum up, Oğuz argues that the paper's principal concerns were morality and women. If the writer focused on more varied topics to frame this argument, it would be stronger, and more transparent. The discussions in 1919 took place in a very different context and conjuncture than those in 1918. Therefore, it can be said that the news and discussions may be worthy subjects of a different study. On the other hand, to validate Oğuz's thesis on the background of postwar conditions, it would be wiser to focus on the many newspapers published following WWI.

The last newspaper Oğuz mentions is *Yeni Mecmua*. Like the previous publications, she includes details about the paper, such as the prominent figures who worked for the organization and its primary concerns. Between 1917 and 1918, this newspaper was published weekly. Because Zika Gökalp was mentioned in this paper, Oğuz claims that Emile Durkheim's

influence might be seen in the articles and discussions. The paper's key terms were "shared awareness" and "solidarity." According to Yeni Mecmua, the main topics were women's issues and national morality. The last paper's details are quite limited. The major cause for this might relate to the selected newspapers' publication years and problems. This section appears uneven because of the disparity. *Sebürreşad*, for example, is discussed in great depth, while the first, and last newspapers are presented more concisely. To avoid this imbalance, it may be wiser to select newspapers with short publishing lifetimes, or Oğuz could share the many *Sebürreşad* scenarios with readers. A few additional headlines could have been explored to discover how newspapers viewed other issues. For example, prostitution was not the only crime that rose during the war; perhaps theft or murder became prominent as well. News or discussions concerning these topics could also be included in this part, allowing readers to more easily comprehend, and broaden their understanding of, the writer's perspective. Instead, focusing on a single issue narrows the scope of the study while also limiting the context.

The second chapter not only consists of these newspapers; the following subtitle discusses morality in French society during the third Republican Era. This section explains from where some of the book's main themes originated. When transitioning from the first to the second subtitle, however, an intermediary paragraph would be useful for the readers to connect the two topics. In short, the following elements must be handled to complete the picture. Oğuz discusses and informs the morality concept's roots in the rest of this chapter. Although the author does not clearly address why the notion of morality was prominent for the Ottoman intelligentsia, readers may arrive at such a conclusion themselves by the end of the chapter. As we read this section, we can see how Ottoman thinkers considered morality from a sociological standpoint. This section, for instance, emphasizes Gökalp's moral understanding. Indeed, when Oğuz discusses Gökalp, she also mentions Durkheim. A novel moral problem is introduced at the end of this chapter: war profiteers, who were equally harmful to society as the prostitution sector. Therefore, in Oğuz's opinion, the war conditions provided an opportunity for the government to establish a new code of morality. Furthermore, Oğuz makes two additional arguments. First, she claims that when women writers entered the press, the debates in the Ottoman intelligentsia shifted in ways they had never previously seen. Consequently, it would be preferable to include a women's newspaper in these discussions, or exclusively female writers and their responses to women's arguments. This would enable readers to find Ottoman women intellectuals explaining or responding to questions regarding morality and women. Second, according to Akşin, a close bond existed between these war profiteers and the CUP (Akşin, 1987). Furthermore, many of these individuals were supported by the government due to their nationalist attitudes toward non-Muslim traders. Oğuz appears to overlook this minor yet crucial aspect; she mentions this issue but does not emphasize it. This nuance would provide credence to her argument regarding the CUP's nationalist aggression.

Prostitution, public morality, and cultural perception are all discussed in the third chapter. This section is defined by two key questions: how did Ottoman authorities define actions

against public morality, and how did they respond to such offenses? In this chapter, Oğuz poses other questions, such as whether the Ottoman ruling elites agreed on a concept of immorality. Moreover, in this section, the link between religion, and moral behavior is questioned. Oğuz poses solutions to these problems within the context of public morality. She addresses one of society's main concerns: degeneration, which is linked to the women's issue. To provide a comparative perspective on morality, Oğuz illustrates instances from other countries during the war years. The author also introduces a new issue for discussion: venereal diseases, a primary concern for soldiers in WWI. Readers will learn about the measures taken by European countries to combat venereal diseases.

According to Oğuz, women's roles in the war altered, while men's attitudes remained unchanged. She illustrates how women in Ottoman society and British public life were oppressed, including in their workplaces. This comparative study is invaluable for comprehending and analyzing women's global positioning, at least in Western states. Oğuz denotes how various nations used wide-ranging approaches to combat the disorder or venereal diseases. Prostitution was not prohibited in Western states during WWI, but clandestine prostitution was. For example, during the war, Germany, and France approved prostitution regulations and opened regulated brothels. The Ottoman Empire followed. According to Oğuz, the abolishment of capitulations in 1914 was a watershed moment for the Ottomans concerning prostitution. This issue, according to Oğuz, was not only about prostitution or morality, but rather nationalism. While European states attempted to register women quickly, the Ottoman state began a process of rapid discharge. Oğuz does not openly dispute this point, but notes that the Ottoman Empire spread diseases faster due to non-Muslim policies. This argument is crucial in understanding the CUP's overall stance throughout the war years: foreign prostitute women, landlords, and procurers suddenly became traitors owing to the authorization and support of Western states. Oğuz outlines this method in a clear and concise manner, and the shift between morality and nationalism is central to this argument. She proceeds to assert that these individuals needed to apply for Ottoman citizenship to stay and maintain their jobs, but the Ottoman Empire rejected and deported them because of their "immoral activities," which were previously considered normal. Oğuz demonstrates how morality was politicized during the war, with certain practices continued under the guise of national security and public order.

However, simply abolishing the capitulations was not sufficient for realizing the CUP's goals. Oğuz identifies and explains the significance of an additional instrument: the declaration of martial law. She argues that the government exploited these two pieces of equipment for political purposes. The author also demonstrates how the government legislated its conduct under the banner of national interest. Furthermore, Oğuz claims the wartime struggle against prostitution was unlike any other, but does not dwell on historical precedents. However, a notable lack of elaboration is given to the background of martial law. Readers may assume that martial law was a wartime enactment during; nevertheless, it had been applied shortly

after the 31 March incident in 1909 and prevailed until the end of the war, barring a couple of months. Moreover, a brief summary of previous rules might help to highlight the contrasts between the prewar and postwar periods. The author does not, for example, delve deeply into the Prostitution and Venereal Diseases Regulations of 1879 or 1884.

Oğuz consistently follows a simple formula in all chapters and subtitles: she introduces a concept and then expands on it in detail. In the succeeding section, the author explains what martial law entailed and how it was executed. She then poses the question, "How did this system cope with immoral Muslims?" In her response, based on her research, the government banished prostitutes, landlords, and procurers, as previously mentioned. Finally, Oğuz reveals that this expulsion policy was a problematic practice that committed women to prostitution in Anatolia, based on documents. Thus, she emphasizes problems that the system created regarding maintaining public order. The Prostitution Regulation of 1915 subsequently followed. Concerning the 1915 Regulation, she exhibits Zafer Toprak's opponent's comment, in which he claimed that the policy was liberal (Toprak, 1987; 31- 40); Toprak claimed that rather than outlawing prostitution, the government attempted to regulate it. Although Oğuz did not explicitly advocate for the prohibition of prostitution in the Ottoman Empire, her claims prove that the state recognized that its outright ban was unfeasible. For clarity on this contention, one might turn to the 1884 Regulation.

According to Oğuz, the government's primary concern was venereal diseases, which were at the center of morality and medical debates throughout the Ottoman Empire's war years. Oğuz posits that the government's anti-disease measures were a direct attempt to control women's lives and sexuality. The prevailing sentiment was mistrustful of working women, often considering them as potential prostitutes. As a result, the government attempted to provide suitable employment for unmarried women. However, Oğuz perceives these measures as another attempt to exert control over women's agency. Furthermore, one of the government's committees was charged with arranging marriages for women and men. Finally, Oğuz argues that women were subjected to additional broad-ranging pressures, including the requirement to wear veils in public, including at work. She views these dynamics, as manifestations of the government's domestic monitoring. At this juncture, a pertinent example that could be presented might be the attire norms for female workers in other countries, further highlighting differences in state policies regarding women. For instance, in certain industrialized combatant countries, women were required to wear men's clothing at work, symbolizing a form of masculinization. Conversely, it could be argued that in the Ottoman Empire, the government and intelligentsia accentuated women's femininity. Instead of focusing on prostitution during wartime, Oğuz underscores the function of wartime dynamics in curbing immorality. Thus, the link between moral crises and national security becomes elucidated.

The issue of foreign prostitutes and morality is discussed in depth in the next section. According to Oğuz, the dominant theme of discourse in the Ottoman agenda was not morality,

but nationalism. Delving further, the writer comprehensively discusses orientalism and morality. She asserts that Western states acted as if they were morally superior to others, particularly the Eastern ones, because of their orientalist mindsets. Oğuz also demonstrates that the main concern of moral anxiety in the Empire was prostitution or the sex trade. The author claims that while the government framed its focus around prostitution and maintaining order, its major objective was to deport individuals from their homes or the Empire completely using these discourses. Archival documents, particularly petitions, support her claim. Oğuz bolsters her argument with an array of documented evidence, leaving readers with little room for doubt. She argues that debates around prostitution and its moral implications were at the center of Ottoman society and intelligentsia discourse. However, based on Oğuz's analysis, it becomes clear that the broader concern was women's issues at large.

The next section focuses on the spatial dimensions of the previous discussions. Morality polemics were viewed as the introduction of European culture or lifestyle into Ottoman society, centered on entertainment, and leisure activities. Thus, some experts interpreted this as the main cause of Muslim society's degeneration. Prostitution, alcohol, gambling, and entertainment such as the theater, cinema, or tavern, according to Oğuz, were all connected with immorality from a conservative perspective. Significantly, society did not accept the existence of women in these so-deemed undesirable locales. However, the issue regarding these places is linked to women's status. This argument, which the author seemingly glosses over, indicates that it is incorrect to generalize to include all women in this case. In other words, people in theaters, and other social and public settings did not welcome lower-class women, but it was usual and expected for middle and middle-upper-class women to attend. Prostitution related to lower-class women, and women frequenting these venues were assumed to be directly seeking customers. Why was morality so important for people during the war? In the following section, Oğuz claims that jihad was the main reason. Furthermore, entertainment, and leisure activities were frowned upon since they were considered insulting to soldiers on the battlefronts and their families at home. This chapter is significant in explaining what the previously discussed principles meant to people during the war.

Oğuz focuses on a critical dilemma that the state faced. She asserts that the government was in the midst of several discussions and believed that alcohol, gambling, and commercial sex were the primary causes of social disorder. Nevertheless, the tax levied by these markets was very high. The author denotes that the state needed to choose between economic concerns and moral expectations. The government needed these funds, so it had to deal with the entertainment business and order a new degree to repress uprisings against the entertainment industry. Simultaneously, the state perceived drinking, gambling, and other immoral acts as the primary causes of all societal problems. Thus, if the state wanted to win the war, it needed to increasingly focus on morality to satisfy the conservatives. As a result, Oğuz's reflection is indicative of the mainstream viewpoint.

Saliently, Oğuz examines the night and its illumination, an often-overlooked aspect by those studying entertainment or prostitution in the late Ottoman Empire. When the night was illuminated and became an extended part of daylight in the 19th century, the state discovered a new place. Oğuz discusses this new location and its nuances extensively. The creation of a new sphere for leisure activities acknowledged as new immoral trends was made possible by the illumination of the night. Simultaneously, this new sphere is associated with modernism and noneconomic income. As a result, conservative and morality-oriented people believe there is a positive association between immorality and the Ottoman Empire's acceptance of Western entertainment. Those who frequented theaters and cinemas where men and women did not sit separately were punished with venereal diseases, according to this moral-oriented idea. Nationalists joined those who defended the above-mentioned notion as the war continued. Thus, Oğuz informs readers about the content of new ideologies.

The next section examines the economy, comprehensively exploring the activities of war profiteers, as previously described in this chapter. Oğuz also introduces a new economic plan, *milli iktisat*, which was the national economy. Finally, the author focuses on the CUP's economic attempts at Muslim enterprises, such as the creation of a national bourgeoisie. Although non-Muslim subjects were involved in economic practices during Ottoman rule, when the capitulations were abolished, many non-Muslims were considered traitors owing to their alleged immoral behavior. Oğuz explains the triangle between morality, economy, and nationalism.

The fifth chapter involves an analysis of home front policies for soldiers' families. The wartime government accepted the soldier's family as an institution, according to Oğuz. She inquires as to how they were able to survive. Amid the war, in 1916, the government was confronted with a new phenomenon: adultery related to the soldiers' families. The government intended to protect soldiers' families from sexual violence; nevertheless, Oğuz contends that this protection project was indeed a state tool to intervene in the sexual and private lives of women. This was a dual issue, and Oğuz eloquently discusses this complicated and sensitive subject. The Family Right was established in 1917, and according to the author, this was a direct government intrusion into female agency. When men went to the battlefronts, the traditional balance of society shifted, and women were more actively engaging in economic and social life in this new form, according to Oğuz. Thus, the government was concerned about the changing social structure. Therefore, the author believes they used the protection discourse to intervene in the family order. She denotes that the fact that the family consisted entirely of women is critical because the government used the term "family" to refer to a group of women. This is relevant because the state and several special institutions ruled over the lives of women and adolescents at this time. Of course, this was not exclusive to the Ottoman Empire; Oğuz demonstrates the practices of other states in this field, for example, giving Germany, and Britain women control applications. As can be observed, the writer employs a comparative method once more, resulting in a more reliable examination from a broader view.

Moreover, the government attempted to provide financial assistance to women to deter them from resorting to prostitution. However, they were unable to consistently pay these people's salaries in whole or on time. Hence, women voiced their dissatisfaction with the situation and filed petitions to the government. Oğuz highlights these petitions, illustrating a novel communication avenue for the government and women. This marked the first time a direct relationship between women and the state was formed. In the absence of men, women attempted to construct a new paradigm, which was partly spontaneous. The state, on the other hand, was concerned about this novel form and refused to support it. According to Oğuz, women were victorious in this struggle. A major factor underpinning this victory was that the government was unable to prevent the developments due to a lack of resources. At this point, the author's chosen method of comparison could be useful. Women's incomes in Germany and England, for example, were equivalent to those in the Ottoman Empire. As a result, such a juxtaposition would have been beneficial to demonstrate what a lack of resources meant and under what circumstances women might succeed in their struggles.

Throughout the book, Oğuz cites documents, and other sources from Muslim families and women in the Ottoman Empire. However, the question arises: what about non-Muslim women? Oğuz discusses Armenian women's complaints, and in the archives, she observes a silence regarding their concerns. Nonetheless, she claims that although Armenian women attempted to persuade the government that they were also Ottoman Empire citizens, Muslim women attempted to take away their citizenship rights. This determination is important in terms of demonstrating the government's politicization of women's roles. Even though she merely engaged briefly about the subject of Armenian women, or Armenians in general, this idea is critical. The breadth and depth of her approach may be able to inspire future studies. In the next section, Oğuz focuses on the wives of soldiers and various cases of adultery, including government solutions, or punishments for these types of offenses. She uses Germany, Australia, and Britain as examples of different states in this context. The state's main motives and concerns in this emphasis, according to the author, are multiple. The first pertains to soldiers abandoning their duties. The government then attempted to control the women, as previously stated. Furthermore, the state attempted to avoid family degeneration. It suggests the state wanted to have control over women's private and sexual lives. Oğuz asserts that the state's major goal was to sustain soldiers' morale.

The final chapter serves as a conclusion. Rather than summarizing the content of previous chapters, as is typical in traditional texts, Oğuz extrapolates her analysis to current-day Turkey. The author posits that the ruling party continues to abuse the morality discourse. She discusses contemporary applications and provides several examples of the women's issue and the ruling political party's moral discourse in Turkey. For instance, she claims that the ruling political party used immoral discourse to justify Berkin Elvan's death. Furthermore, the author relays how political figures have attempted to define women's habits, such as women should not

laugh loudly or wear short dresses. Oğuz concludes by implying that politicians abuse the same discourses for the same goals, and provides readers with a wealth of information and insights about the past and the present in myriad ways, as discussed in the main chapters.

The book's structure facilitates easy navigation throughout the many topics, and Oğuz's lucid language is also highly readable. Holistically, the author has successfully grasped a complex and abstract concept. Finally, although the text may seem somewhat sporadic, she captures, and explains different points from various angles, so astute readers will discern the underlying coherence and view it as an advantage. As a result, this work might be considered a seminal exploration of women's issues and society during World War I in the Ottoman Empire.