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Deconstructing a Discourse: A Western Critique of the Orientalist Stereotype of the "Soulless Muslim Woman"

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Abstract

In 19th-century Western discourse, the assertion that women in Islam had no soul was deeply ingrained, particularly through the recurrent use of the word "soul." This notion proliferated in European travel literature, missionary reports, and Orientalist writings, where Muslim Turkish women were portrayed as oppressed, invisible, and devoid of individual identity. The term "soul" became an ideological tool to portray Turkish women as closed-off, passive, and objectified beings confined to the domestic sphere. These narratives not only described the position of Ottoman women but also functioned as a rhetorical strategy to depict Islamic societies as backward and in need of Western intervention. Turkish women were often symbolized as emblems of a primitive civilization, instrumentalized to justify the civilizing mission of the West. However, not all Western observers endorsed such reductionist portrayals. Some travellers and writers offered more nuanced accounts, closely observing Ottoman women's daily lives, social roles, and influence within their families and communities. They highlighted the autonomy and respect women enjoyed, occasionally citing Islamic sources to challenge prevailing narratives. These alternative perspectives helped uncover the complex and dynamic realities of Ottoman womanhood. The findings of this study reveal that a counter-discourse existed within Western travel narratives that resisted Orientalist stereotypes. These writings demonstrated that Ottoman women were not merely passive subjects, but active agents with social visibility, familial authority, and religiously grounded dignity. By bringing these voices to light, the study exposes the multiplicity of gender perceptions in the 19th-century Western gaze and contributes to a deeper understanding of cross-cultural representations and the limitations of Orientalist generalizations.

Keywords: Islam, Orientalism, Western Discourse, Travelers, Ottoman Empire, Turkish Woman.

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Bir Söylemi Yıkmak: "Ruhsuz Müslüman Kadın" Oryantalist Stereotipine Batı'dan Bir Eleştiri

Bahar Karataş [1]

Öz

19. yüzyıl Batı söyleminde, İslam'da kadınların "ruhu olmadığı" yönündeki iddia özellikle "ruh" kelimesi üzerinden yaygın bir şekilde yerleşmişti. Bu düşünce, Avrupalı seyyahların edebiyatında, misyoner raporlarında ve Oryantalist metinlerde geniş biçimde yer aldı. Bu yazınlarda Müslüman Türk kadınları; baskı altında, görünmez ve bireysel kimlikten yoksun kişiler olarak tasvir ediliyordu. "Ruh" kavramı, Türk kadınlarını kapalı, pasif ve evle sınırlı nesneler olarak betimlemenin ideolojik bir aracı haline geldi. Bu anlatılar yalnızca Osmanlı kadınlarının toplumsal konumunu tarif etmekle kalmadı, aynı zamanda İslam dünyasını geri kalmış olarak göstermek ve Batı müdahalesini meşrulaştırmak için de kullanıldı. Türk kadınları çoğu zaman ilkel bir toplumun sembolü olarak sunuldu ve modernleşme misyonunu haklı çıkarmada araçsallaştırıldı. Ancak tüm Batılı gözlemciler bu indirgemeci temsilleri benimsemedi. Bazı seyyahlar ve yazarlar, Osmanlı kadınlarının günlük yaşamlarını yakından gözlemleyerek onların aile içindeki rollerini, toplumsal etkilerini ve gördükleri saygıyı inceledi. Bu gözlemler, Osmanlı kadınlarının aileleri ve toplulukları içinde özerklik, etki ve saygınlık sahibi olduklarını ortaya koydu. Hatta bazı Batılı yazarlar, İslam'ın kadına verdiği değeri göstermek için Kur'an ayetlerine dahi atıfta bulundu. Bu alternatif bakış açıları, Osmanlı kadınının daha karmaşık ve dinamik toplumsal rollerini gün yüzüne çıkardı. Bu çalışmanın bulguları, Batılı seyahat anlatılarında Oryantalist kalıplara karşı çıkan bir karşı söylemin varlığını ortaya koymaktadır. Bu metinler, Osmanlı kadınlarının yalnızca edilgen figürler değil; toplumsal görünürlüğe, aile içi otoriteye ve dini temellere dayanan bir onura sahip etkin öznelere dönüştüğünü göstermektedir. Bu seslerin görünür kılınması, 19. yüzyılda Batı'nın kadın tasavvurlarındaki çok katmanlılığı gözler önüne sererek Oryantalist genellemelerin sınırlarını sorgulayan daha derin bir kültürlerarası temsiller tartışmasına katkı sunmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: İslam, Oryantalizm, Batı Söylemi, Seyyahlar, Osmanlı Devleti, Türk Kadını

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Introduction

The Islamic concept of *tawhid* (the oneness of God) asserts that all creation originates from God and ultimately returns to Him, eliminating the possibility of duality, hierarchy, or inherent superiority between beings (Al-Baqarah 2:156). Within this framework, gender distinction does not translate into spiritual inequality. Both the Qur'an and Hadith emphasize that women possess equal spiritual value to men, and that all humans are created with an individual soul. References to "man" in Islamic texts are frequently neutral, inclusive of both genders, and are grounded in the broader principle of *tawhid*, which emphasizes harmony and balance in creation (Younos, 2002, p. 1–2). For example, the Qur'anic metaphor in Al-Baqarah 2:223 likening marital intimacy to cultivated farmland does not imply male superiority; rather, it underscores mutual consent, care, and reciprocity in spousal relationships (Quran.com, 2024, p. 37). Accordingly, the roles of women within the family are constructed upon principles of justice, affection, and dignity. Nevertheless, the interpretation and practical application of these values have historically varied across cultural and political contexts and thus must be analysed within their respective socio-historical environments.

The rise of European imperialism in the 19th century facilitated intensified exploration and textual documentation of Eastern societies. Much of the Western knowledge about Islam and Eastern culture was mediated through encounters with the Ottoman Empire, a key geopolitical actor with rich civilizational heritage. This mediation, however, was often filtered through a Eurocentric lens, resulting in a reductive portrayal of Muslim women. Travel literature and missionary accounts frequently depicted Ottoman women as voiceless, secluded figures, encapsulated by the harem trope and rendered passive within public discourse. These depictions not only ignored women's social agency but also used Islam as the principal explanatory variable for gendered subjugation (Akman, 2018, 20). Notably, the construction of this discourse was shaped by a broader Western tendency to view Islam as a monolithic and regressive tradition. Throughout the 19th century, many scholars regarded Islam as a rigid form of Semitic monotheism and used it as a tool for comparative theological and anthropological critiques. This approach often paralleled similar critiques directed at Catholicism, accusing both of fostering backwardness and superstition (Küçük, 2010, p. 117). The Islamic message of monotheism did not emerge in isolation but was deeply interwoven with earlier Semitic and Iranian religious traditions. Religious systems such as Judaism, Christianity, and Zoroastrianism shared essential elements including divine revelation, moral law, prophecy, and belief in angels and devils—further complicating the notion of Islamic exceptionalism (Esposito, 2005, p. 4).

Within this intellectual framework, critiques of Islam frequently centred on three primary axes: the status of women, the issue of slavery, and intra-Muslim conflicts (Akbulut, 2024, p. 48). Islam was often portrayed as fundamentally distinct from the Greco-Roman roots of European civilization, thereby positioning Muslims as cultural outsiders. However, such binary categorizations ignore the extent to which Islamic societies were heirs to the same Hellenistic intellectual legacy that Europe claimed as its own (Asad, 2003, p. 168). Although contemporary Orientalist discourse has adopted a more secular and ostensibly objective tone, it continues to emphasize perceived deficiencies in Islamic civilization—particularly the lack of freedom, progress, and humanism. These perceived gaps are

regularly attributed to Islam's religious character rather than to contextual historical developments (Asad, 2008, p. 135).

Islam, as a universal religion, encompasses followers from a wide array of cultures, regions, and ethnicities. Accordingly, interpretations and applications of Islamic teachings—particularly regarding women's rights—inevitably vary across communities. As with adherents of Christianity, Judaism, or Buddhism, Muslim women cannot be treated as a homogenous group. Their roles and experiences differ significantly based on cultural, historical, and geographical contexts. Throughout Islamic history, religious principles have played a central role in shaping women's rights and societal positions. However, these roles have never been static; they have evolved in response to shifting socio-political and cultural dynamics. During the Ottoman period, women occupied diverse roles and held varying degrees of agency. Despite the patriarchal structure and certain social restrictions, Ottoman women had the legal right to own property, initiate lawsuits, and seek justice in the courts—demonstrating a considerable degree of legal autonomy (Shaw, 2002, p. 159).

Contrary to the dominant Western narrative that depicted Muslim women as passive and socially invisible, Ottoman women, particularly in urban centres, participated actively in economic, religious, and philanthropic life. Women from elite families frequently endowed public institutions through waqfs, thereby exercising substantial influence in both civic and political spheres (Dallh, 2023, p. 25). These contributions are often omitted in Orientalist representations. Moreover, the intellectual and literary engagement of Ottoman women have been exemplified by figures such as Fatma Aliye Hanım, who contributed meaningfully to Ottoman feminist and philosophical thought (Demir, 2016, p. 178). Judicial records from the Ottoman Empire—including documents from Prime Ministry Ottoman Archives (BOA), such as BOA, C.ADL, 29/1706; BOA, C.İKTS, 24/1186-1; BOA, A.DVN.MHM, 5/47; and BOA, ŞD, 631/32-2—further corroborate the active legal involvement of women in matters such as property claims, inheritance disputes, and marital litigation, thereby affirming their agency and legal recognition within the framework of Islamic jurisprudence (Nehir, 2021, p. 90-100). Given this complexity, any attempt to generalize the status of women in Islam risks oversimplification. A historically and culturally informed approach is essential to understanding the multiplicity of Muslim women lived experiences. Rather than assuming a monolithic reality, it is necessary to appreciate the heterogeneity that characterizes gender roles in Muslim-majority societies.

1. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research methodology grounded in historical and discourse analysis, aiming to investigate the representations of Muslim women in the Ottoman Empire as constructed by 19th-century Western observers. The methodological orientation of the study is interpretivist, prioritizing the contextual, cultural, and ideological dimensions embedded within textual sources over statistical generalizability. Rather than treating the selected texts merely as historical documents, the study seeks to examine them as discursive instruments that mediate perceptions of gender, culture, and civilization. The research draws upon both primary sources—including travelogues, and secondary sources, such as scholarly critiques of Orientalism, and Islamic legal history. By integrating these two categories of sources, the study aims to reconstruct the multi-

layered representations of Ottoman Muslim women that circulated in 19th-century European discourse.

The core focus lies on Western travel literature, missionary narratives, and Orientalist writings, which historically functioned as vehicles for both empirical observation and ideological projection. These texts are analysed not only for the descriptive content they provide about women but also for their rhetorical strategies, representational frameworks, and implicit cultural assumptions. Particular attention is paid to binary oppositions established between East and West—such as woman/man, progress/backwardness, and civilization/primitive—which underpin the structure of many of these writings. To identify and compare different representational strategies, the study employs a comparative content analysis. This allows for the identification of dominant Orientalist discourses and the counter-narratives that emerged in opposition—narratives produced by certain Western travellers and observers who, based on direct experience, interreligious familiarity, or ideological dissent, offered alternative and often more nuanced portrayals of Muslim women.

The empirical dataset of the study consists of texts published between 1820 and 1912, selected through purposive sampling to reflect a range of ideological perspectives. Among the authors examined are prominent figures such as Lucy Garnett, Sir Edwin Pears, William Ramsay, Alexander Van Millingen, and Lydia Maria Child. In addition to these distinguished writers, texts by other Western travellers of the period will also be included in the analysis, with the aim of addressing representational patterns concerning Ottoman Muslim women within a broader and more comparative framework. Additionally, missionary documents affiliated with the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM) are included, offering critical insight into how religiously motivated narratives contributed to—or occasionally contested—the hegemonic construction of Muslim womanhood.

2. Gender Justice and Women's Rights in the Foundational Texts of Islam

Islam is a universal religion that addresses all of humanity, advocating for justice, the eradication of oppression, and peaceful coexistence among people of diverse ethnic, cultural, and religious backgrounds (Aziz & Al-Bayati, 2019, pp. 9-11). One of the core principles of Islamic doctrine is the equality of all individuals before God, irrespective of gender. In this context, Islam affirms women's rights to participate fully in religious, educational, social, and moral spheres of life. Islam does not conceive of women as subordinate beings but rather as autonomous individuals who share equal moral and legal responsibilities with men. Women are regarded as partners in family life, bear social responsibilities, and possess inheritance rights, all of which are guaranteed in foundational Islamic texts. Notably, the early Muslim community acknowledged women's personhood and legal agency, as evident in Qur'anic verses (Kırbaşoğlu, 1997, p. 260) such as Surah al-Mumtahina (60:10), where the Prophet is commanded to seek allegiance from believing women—affirming their political and spiritual autonomy (Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı (DİB) Kur'an-ı Kerim, 2024). Similarly, Surah At-Tawbah (9:71) underscores mutual support and solidarity between believing men and women, portraying them as cooperative moral agents within society. Moreover, Surah An-Nahl (16:97) articulates that any believer—male or female—who performs righteous deeds will be rewarded equally by God, thereby establishing a theological basis for gender parity in moral and spiritual merit (DİB Kur'an-ı Kerim, 2024). In addition to scriptural support,

modern interpretations also affirm Islam's egalitarian foundations. Qasim Amin, in his seminal works *The Liberation of Women* and *The New Woman*, offers a progressive view of Islam as inherently compatible with women's autonomy and social equality. He argues that Islam, in its ideal essence, provides a framework for individual self-determination, allowing women to engage freely in economic, intellectual, and social life without subjugation to patriarchal constraints (Amin, 2000, p. 68). Rather than viewing Islam as a restrictive force, Amin interprets it as a liberating tradition that enables individuals—regardless of gender—to flourish, provided that mutual rights and responsibilities are respected. These scriptural and intellectual perspectives collectively reinforce that Islam, far from marginalizing women, envisions a complementary and cooperative gender dynamic rooted in justice, mutual respect, and shared moral agency.

Islam brought about significant reforms in the realm of women's financial and economic rights, granting them a level of autonomy that was unprecedented in the legal systems of its time. Women were given full control over their own property, income, and financial decisions, safeguarded from any male guardianship or interference (Mutahhari, 1998, p. 226). By formally recognizing women's right to legal ownership and financial independence, Islamic law not only acknowledged female agency but also offered a striking contrast to contemporary legal structures, many of which subordinated women's economic rights to male relatives or spouses. A core element of this economic framework is the institution of dowry (mahr). According to Islamic jurisprudence, *mahr* refers to a designated sum of money or property that a husband is required to provide to his wife at the time of marriage or as a deferred obligation. The Qur'an explicitly commands this practice, as in Surah An-Nisa (4:4): *"Give women their dowry (mahr) graciously, as if you were paying a debt"* (DİB Kuran'ı Kerim, 2024). This verse not only affirms the obligation but also frames *mahr* as a moral and financial right of the wife.

The principle of *mahr* is reinforced across several other Qur'anic verses: al-Baqarah 2:236–237, an-Nisa 4:4, 20–21, 24–25, al-Ma'idah 5:5, al-Ahzab 33:50, and al-Mumtahanah 60:10 (Budak-Aslantaş, 2022). These verses employ terms such as *"what you have appointed for women"* and *"what you have given to women"* to describe *mahr* as an inalienable right, one that cannot be retracted or transferred without the explicit and voluntary consent of the wife (Budak-Aslantaş, 2022, p. 42). Within this framework, *mahr* serves not only as a symbolic gesture of marital commitment but also as a practical legal mechanism for ensuring a woman's financial security and economic independence during marriage. As such, it reflects the broader Islamic commitment to upholding women's rights to ownership, agency, and dignity within both the family and society.

In Islamic tradition, the experience of motherhood is not only recognized as biologically demanding but is also ethically sanctified. Pregnancy, childbirth, breastfeeding, and the postpartum period are understood to profoundly affect a woman's physical, emotional, and spiritual well-being. This recognition is reflected in Surah Al-Ahqaf (46:15), which reads: *"We have enjoined upon man to be kind to his parents. His mother bore him with hardship and delivered him with hardship"* (Türkçe Kur'an Mealleri, November 2024). The verse highlights not only the physical sacrifices made by mothers but also underscores the moral imperative of filial piety, gratitude, and respect towards parents, with an emphasis on maternal labour. Beyond motherhood, Islam also elevates women's intellectual and spiritual status, explicitly encouraging both men and women to seek knowledge. The Prophet Muhammad's sayings, such as *"Seeking knowledge is obligatory upon every Muslim"*

and *"Whoever follows a path in pursuit of knowledge, Allah will make the path to Paradise easy for him"*, reinforce the idea that intellectual development is a religious duty equally incumbent upon women and men (Karakuş, 2019, p. 849). This directive applies without gender distinction and forms the basis for the inclusion of women in educational and intellectual development—both in religious and secular domains.

Perhaps most comprehensively, the Prophet Muhammad's Farewell Sermon outlines the ethical, social, and legal foundations of gender relations in Islam. In this seminal address, the Prophet Muhammad emphasized that women are not merely wives or subordinates but are entrusted to men by God—referred to as *"God's trust"*. This framing elevates the husband-wife relationship from a merely contractual or social arrangement to a theologically rooted mutual responsibility (Erul, 2012, p. 592). The Qur'an also places considerable emphasis on the religious, moral, and spiritual significance of women, often presenting them as exemplars of faith, resilience, and ethical conduct. Numerous female figures appear in the Qur'anic narrative not merely as passive participants but as active moral agents whose lives embody universal virtues such as perseverance, courage, and unwavering belief. Among the most venerated figures is Maryam (Mary), the mother of the Prophet Jesus (*Isa*). She is the only woman mentioned by name multiple times in the Qur'an and is honored with a dedicated chapter—Surah Maryam. Maryam is depicted as a paragon of chastity, piety, and divine favor, serving as a spiritual model not only for women but for all believers (Harman, 2004, p. 238). Other women—such as Hawwa (Eve), the wife of the Aziz (often associated with Potiphar), the Queen of Sheba, and the mother, sister, and wife of Moses (Musa)—are also presented in the Qur'anic narrative with nuanced moral roles. These women collectively illustrate the full spectrum of human moral experience, encompassing themes of virtue and vice, strength and vulnerability, and spiritual clarity and moral conflict (Stowasser, 2005, p. 18). While not explicitly named in the Qur'an, prominent early Muslim women such as Hatice bint Hüveylid, the first wife of the Prophet Muhammad and the first female convert to Islam, are widely recognized in Islamic historiography for their significant contributions. Islamic historical sources also highlight moments in which women's voices and judgments were respected in public and legal settings. For example, when Caliph Umar proposed limiting the amount of dowry (*mahr*) in a sermon, an unnamed woman publicly challenged his interpretation by citing the Qur'an—an act that Umar accepted as valid, affirming the woman's argument (Taslaman C. & Taslaman F., 2019, p. 32-34). This episode exemplifies the early Islamic respect for women's intellectual and legal agency. Beyond private life, several women in Islamic history also engaged in political and social activism. For instance, Sakina, the daughter of Husayn ibn Ali, was known for her outspoken political stance and continuous criticism of the Umayyad dynasty. Similarly, Aisha bint Abu Bakr, a prominent companion of the Prophet and scholar of Hadith, actively participated in political affairs, most notably during the Battle of the Camel, where she challenged Caliph Ali over political grievances (Taslaman C. & Taslaman F., 2019, p. 38-39). In a broader historical context, the early Islamic period marked a significant transformation in the roles and rights of women. As Leila Ahmed (1992) argues, the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad—reflected in the Qur'an and Hadith—introduced reforms that improved the socio-legal status of women in ways unprecedented in pre-Islamic Arabia. These reforms included rights to inheritance, education, property ownership, legal participation, and marital agency—many of which were radical departures from earlier patriarchal norms and practices. Thus, both scriptural representation and historical accounts affirm that women in Islamic thought were not marginal figures, but instead held vital religious,

social, and political roles, shaping the moral and communal fabric of the early Muslim world.

In pre-Islamic Arab societies, gender hierarchy was deeply entrenched, and girls were often subjected to severe discrimination and human rights violations. The birth of a daughter was frequently perceived as a source of shame, and in extreme cases, some tribes practiced female infanticide, including the literal burial of newborn girls—a brutal custom aimed at preserving patriarchal honour and avoiding perceived social disgrace (Khan, 2016, p. 12). The Qur'an explicitly condemns this practice, reflecting a radical ethical shift. In Surah Az-Zukhruf (43:16), this mentality is criticized with rhetorical force: *"Has He taken daughters out of what He has created and chosen sons for you?"* (The Noble Quran, 2024). With the advent of Islam, significant legal and moral reforms were introduced to affirm the dignity and rights of women and girls. Islam granted women rights to inheritance, education, spiritual agency, and participation in social life—rights that were unprecedented in the pre-Islamic context. However, as with many religious traditions, the interpretation and implementation of these teachings have varied across historical, social, and cultural contexts. While Islamic teachings delineate certain familial roles, these should not be conflated with structural inequality. The overarching Qur'anic message promotes gender complementarity, not domination—everyone, male or female, is responsible before God and entitled to dignity, fairness, and spiritual fulfilment.

This phenomenon of interpretive diversity is not unique to Islam. All major religious traditions—including Christianity, Judaism, and Hinduism—have exhibited variations in how women's roles have been constructed across different periods and societies. For instance, in ancient Egypt, women held positions of political and religious authority, while in medieval Europe, women were often excluded from public life, and many were persecuted under accusations of witchcraft (Mark, 2025). Islam, from its earliest revelations, sought to counter harmful pre-Islamic practices by emphasizing that men and women are equal in their humanity and spiritual potential. The Qur'an articulates clear ethical parameters for gender relations based on justice, compassion, and mutual responsibility. In conclusion, while the core of Islamic teaching affirms the equality and value of women, the degree to which these principles have been actualized has been shaped by historical contingencies, cultural reinterpretations, and local power dynamics. Understanding this distinction is essential for evaluating both the theological foundations and the socio-political realities of gender in Muslim societies.

2.1. Turkish Women: Historical Continuity

In the development of societies, the role of women is determined not only by biological sex but also by historical, political, and cultural processes. The historical development of Turkish women, in this context, is not limited solely to the Ottoman or Republican periods but reflects a multi-layered past extending back to the pre-Islamic era. In pre-Islamic Turkish societies, women were positioned not only within the family but also as essential elements of political and social structures. One of the strongest pieces of evidence of this can be found in the Orkhon Inscriptions. The Bilge Khagan Inscription states: "Above, the Turkic God arranged the blessed land of the Turks in this way. So that the Turkic nation would not perish but become a nation, he raised my father İlteriş Khagan and my mother İlbilge Khatun and seated them on the throne" (Ergin, 1989, p. 19). This clearly demonstrates that women played a legitimizing political role, not merely a symbolic one. Here, man and woman are both "seated on the throne," emphasizing the shared

responsibility of governance. Khatuns were indispensable figures in the continuity of the state and in representing public authority. Likewise, in the pre-Islamic social structure, women held responsibilities equal to those of men in public and ritual domains. With roles such as horseback riding, hunting, participating in wars, and even conducting shamanic ceremonies, women presented a multifaceted social presence not confined to domestic life (Açıl, 2016, p. 64). This reflects a cultural structure in which gender-based discrimination was not prevalent.

Although the adoption of Islam brought religious norms into influence over Turkish societies, the social status of women did not undergo a radical change. On the contrary, the woman-centered values inherited from ancient Turkish traditions were largely preserved and continued in harmony with the Islamic legal system. According to Acar (2019, p. 400), women continued to be part of social life during this period, retaining certain rights in areas such as family, education, property ownership, and law. Contrary to what is often claimed by Western orientalist narratives, women in Ottoman society were not completely passive individuals excluded from public life. Until the 19th century, although women held a more subjective and family-centered position, they enjoyed a more protected and respected status compared to women in Western societies. Evidence of women's active roles in social life prior to the Tanzimat era can be traced through limited documents such as court records, estate inventories, and foundation charters (Uğurcan, 1999, 990). Starting from the mid-19th century, as the modernization process gained momentum in the Ottoman Empire, the issue of women began to be discussed more systematically. From the late 1830s onward, women gradually began to appear in working life; and during the reign of Abdulhamid II, reformist steps were taken in the field of female education. The first girls' high school, opened in 1880, offered a comprehensive curriculum including not only religious education but also subjects like Turkish, French, German, English, music, handicrafts, and home economics, playing a significant role in transferring Western educational concepts to Ottoman women (Koç, 2012, p. 68). During this period, the aim was to increase women's presence in the public sphere through education. The National Struggle period can be considered a new threshold in the historical journey of Turkish women. Women were not only individuals providing logistical support behind the front lines but also figures who organized men, called for resistance, carried weapons, and played active roles in conflicts. This made Turkish women both the carriers and symbols of the resistance, leading to increased societal respect and appreciation (Koç, 2018, 162).

Despite these historical realities, some Western feminist thinkers in the 18th and 19th centuries traced the roots of gender discrimination to Eastern societies. Figures like Mary Wollstonecraft and Elizabeth Barrett Browning positioned Islam and Eastern cultures as systems opposed to women's demands for freedom (Ezer, 2012, p. 27). This approach is considered an orientalist manifestation of Western-centric feminist discourse and conceals the historical gender inequalities present in the West. In truth, issues such as education, property rights, professional employment, moral autonomy, and freedom of dress are not exclusive to Eastern societies. These themes also formed the core struggles of feminist movements in Europe and North America throughout the 19th century, becoming the vanguard of a transformation that challenged entrenched gender structures (Roberts, 2010). With the proclamation of the Republic, there was a radical transformation in the political and social perspective towards women. Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, who appreciated the sacrifices and leadership roles assumed by women during the National

Struggle, ensured that these contributions were institutionalized through the Republican reforms (İçli, 1992, p. 69). As a result, the historical development of Turkish women should be evaluated not merely as objects of change but as subjects who carry and shape change. The roles undertaken by women in political, social, and cultural life from past to present are the strongest indicators of historical continuity and transformation.

3. Counter-Narratives to Orientalist Claims on Muslim Women's Spiritual Inferiority

The 19th century was a period marked by unprecedented global mobility, during which travel became a prominent medium through which Western intellectuals, missionaries, and adventurers engaged with the non-Western world. Travelogues and missionary accounts emerged as central texts for Western audiences seeking knowledge about distant geographies, cultures, and peoples. However, these accounts were often filtered through deeply personal lenses, shaped by the traveller's cultural background, ideological orientation, religious belief, and the broader Orientalist worldview that pervaded Western epistemologies of the East. Notably, within the literature on Muslim societies, a pervasive stereotype emerged suggesting that "women in Islam have no soul." This idea, which became especially prominent in missionary rhetoric and Orientalist texts of the 19th century, served as a discursive instrument to justify Western interventions in the Islamic world under the guise of moral and civilizational superiority.

Yet, even within 19th-century Western discourse, there were contradictory and nuanced perspectives. While some travel writers and missionaries perpetuated degrading assumptions about Muslim women—casting them as passive, oppressed, and spiritually inferior—others offered more balanced and empathetic portrayals. These contrasting views underscore the heterogeneity of Western engagement with Islam, challenging any monolithic understanding of Western Orientalism. During the 18th and 19th centuries, Orientalist scholars dedicated themselves to studying Eastern civilizations, especially the Islamic world. Although this scholarship produced valuable contributions in philology, history, and comparative religion, it also often reinforced colonial ideologies. Despite having introduced Western audiences to prominent Islamic thinkers such as Ibn Sina (Avicenna) and Omar Khayyam, Western academia gradually shifted towards narratives that downplayed Islamic contributions and relegated the religion to a static, backward role (Nogales, 1980, p. 39). Simultaneously, Protestant missionary efforts, such as those carried out by the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM), played a crucial role in shaping perceptions of Islam. Beginning in the 1820s, American missionaries in the Levant not only offered education and healthcare to local communities but also sought to interpret Islamic theology through the lens of their own Christian theological frameworks. Consequently, their reports often reflected a mixture of ethnographic observation and theological polemic, which led to distorted characterizations of Islamic gender norms (Doğan, 2013, pp. 40-42). One notable dissenting voice among 19th-century Western observers was Lucy Mary Jane Garnett, a British folklorist and traveller who visited the Ottoman Empire extensively. In her article *"Women Under Islam: Their Social Status and Legal Rights"* (1895), published in *The Eclectic Magazine of Foreign Literature, Science, and Art*, Garnett critiques widespread Western claims—such as those by Rev. N.G. Clark, who declared in 1878 that "Islam teaches that women have no soul" (Garnett, 1895, p. 5). Garnett contextualizes and refutes such assertions, noting that similar views were espoused by public figures such as Lord

Granville and Orientalist M. Servan de Luguy. However, she explicitly argues that such statements are misinformed and unjustified. She challenges the trope of Muslim women being viewed as property, asserting that while gender inequality might exist in practice, the Islamic legal and ethical tradition does not support such dehumanizing conclusions (Garnett, 1895, p. 6). In her 1895 work, Lucy M.J. Garnett provides a nuanced analysis of the status and moral agency of women in Islamic society, countering dominant Orientalist discourses of her time. Drawing upon primary Islamic sources, Garnett references specific Qur'anic verses—namely from Surah At-Tawbah, Surah Al-Ahzab, and Surah Az-Zukhruf—to argue that women are portrayed as essential moral agents within the Qur'anic ethical framework. These scriptural citations are used to underscore the theological and ethical inclusion of women in Islam.

Garnett further supports her argument by invoking hadith literature, including sayings such as "Paradise lies at the feet of mothers" and "He who mistreats his wife is under the curse of Allah." Garnett (1895, p. 11) highlights the moral status and legal protections Islam grants to women, especially in family and marriage. She interprets the requirement of two witnesses in Islamic marriage as recognition of women's consent and legal agency. Her perspective challenges orientalist views, offering a balanced, source-based account of women's rights in Ottoman Islamic society. Garnett (1895, p. 12) emphasizes that Islamic law grants women clear legal rights in matters like dowry, marriage, and divorce. She underscores that women retain their property and receive the dower upon divorce, reflecting economic autonomy. More broadly, she presents Islamic family law as a core component of the broader Islamic legal tradition, highlighting its role in protecting women's rights. Charrad (2011, p. 420) explains that Islamic family law shapes gender roles while also reinforcing broader social structures. The concept of *mahr* (bridal gift) serves as a protective financial mechanism for women. Ortaylı (2009, p. 57) notes that when the *mahr* amount is unclear, it is assessed based on the woman's social norms, ensuring fairness and preventing exploitation by male relatives.

In *Life in Turkey* (1912), Sir Edwin Pears cites the remarks of British archaeologist Sir William Ramsay, who articulates a deeply critical view of the status of women in Islamic societies. Ramsay contends that *"the fatal error of Islam, namely the low esteem in which women are held,"* originates, at least in part, as a reaction to the Christian veneration of the Virgin Mary, particularly the doctrine of *Theotokos*—Mary as the "Mother of God" (Ramsay, 1912, p. 37). Ramsay further argues that this perceived devaluation of women poses a fundamental obstacle to social and civilizational progress in Muslim-majority societies, specifically Ottoman Turkey. He suggests that the lack of a stable and nurturing family structure—what he deems essential for societal advancement—is a direct consequence of the way women are viewed (Ramsay, 1912, p. 36–37). However, such assertions must be situated within the broader context of 19th-century Orientalist discourse, which often projected European cultural anxieties onto Islamic societies through reductive generalizations. Scholars like Leslie Peirce (1993) challenge this depiction by demonstrating that Ottoman women, particularly those in the imperial harem, held significant political, legal, and symbolic power. Far from being voiceless or undervalued, many women in the Ottoman elite exercised direct influence over governance, public architecture, and dynastic continuity. Likewise, Lady Mary Wortley Montagu—writing nearly two centuries before Ramsay—offered a contrasting view of Ottoman women, noting their social autonomy, legal protections, and control over property. These counter-narratives complicate Ramsay's portrayal and reveal that

perceptions of Muslim women's status varied widely among Western observers, depending on their ideological commitments, access to local contexts, and degree of cultural engagement.

Ramsay's position reflects a broader 19th and early 20th-century Western discourse, which equated gender equality with modernity and civilizational superiority. His argument not only pathologizes Islamic views on gender but also constructs a civilizational hierarchy wherein Christianity, symbolized by the cult of Mary, is positioned as morally and culturally superior. This contrast is further emphasized by Vuola (2019), who notes that the figure of Mary—through ecumenically accepted doctrines of divine motherhood and perpetual virginity—played a central role in shaping Western ideals of womanhood. Ramsay's invocation of this symbol serves to elevate Christian gender norms while casting Islamic gender roles as deficient. Moreover, his claim that Turks believed women to lack souls or possess inferior souls exemplifies a recurring trope within Orientalist literature: the dehumanization of Muslim women to validate the alleged moral and cultural stagnation of Islamic societies (Ramsay, 1912, p. 36). Such assertions are consistent with what Edward Said (2003) defines as *Orientalism*—the process by which the West constructs the East as an inferior "Other," often through generalized and reductive narratives that serve colonial or ideological agendas. In this light, Ramsay's critique of Islam and Turkish society must be read not only as a cultural judgment but also as a reflection of imperial epistemologies that sought to legitimize Western dominance through claims of civilizational superiority, especially via discourses surrounding gender and modernity.

In his travel account published in 1833, *Sketches of Turkey in 1831 and 1832*, James E. De Kay, who accompanied an American diplomatic mission as a ship's physician, challenges a widespread Orientalist stereotype regarding the alleged belief among Muslims that women lack souls. De Kay notes, *"It is gravely stated, and repeated by every traveller in this country, that the Turks firmly believe their females to have no souls"* (Kay, 1833, p. 263). Disturbed by this claim, he recounts an encounter with an elderly Turkish man whom he questioned on the matter. The man reportedly reacted with a mixture of condescension and amusement, especially upon learning that such misconceptions were being disseminated throughout Europe. In response, the man cited verses from the Qur'an to refute the claim, particularly Surah Ar-Ra'd (Chapter 13) and Surah Al-Ahzab (Chapter 33), which explicitly affirm the equal spiritual and moral capacities of men and women (Kay, 1833, p. 263). These verses— *"Verily, the Muslims of both sexes… Allah has prepared for them forgiveness and a great reward"*—emphasize the moral parity between genders in Islamic theology, directly undermining the belief that Islam denies women spiritual status. De Kay also observes that the veil, often framed in Western discourse as a symbol of oppression, has parallels in biblical tradition, further problematizing reductive comparisons between Christianity and Islam on the issue of women's status. Despite his attempts to provide a more balanced and document-based portrayal of Ottoman Muslim society, De Kay was met with criticism from European readers who accused him of defending the Turks and misunderstanding their traditions. However, his ethnographic observations challenge dominant narratives of the time. For instance, during a picnic with Turkish women in the countryside outside Constantinople, De Kay remarked on the degree of freedom and social visibility afforded to middle-class women. He noted that they appeared to "enjoy more freedom than those in other European countries or in America" (Marr, 2006, p. 268), a statement that subverts the common trope of Muslim

women's absolute seclusion and lack of agency. His use of Islamic textual references and first-hand social observations challenges the hegemonic discourse that portrayed Muslim societies as inherently misogynistic, thereby contributing to a counter-discursive strand within 19th-century Western travel literature.

While De Kay approached the matter through ethnographic observation and Qur'anic reference, Lydia Maria Child addressed it through feminist theology and textual critique." Lydia Maria Child, a 19th-century American women's rights activist and prominent abolitionist, offered a critical perspective that challenged dominant Western misconceptions about the spiritual status of women in Islam. In contrast to widespread claims—often rooted in Orientalist discourse—that Islam denies women a soul or spiritual agency, Child argued that such beliefs are not explicitly found in the Qur'anic text. Rather, they stem from certain interpretations of *hadith* literature. She cites a hadith attributed to the Prophet Muhammad stating, *"Whoever does good deeds, whether male or female, will go to heaven,"* and points out that Muslim women actively participate in religious rituals, including pilgrimage and prayer (Child, 1840, p. 68). Her emphasis on interpretative context in approaching religious texts represents an early and significant move toward deconstructing the essentialist portrayals of Muslim women in 19th-century Western thought. Child's analysis highlights a crucial methodological insight: that theological texts must be understood within their exegetical and historical contexts, rather than through isolated or ideologically motivated readings. In doing so, she affirms that women are recognized in Islamic theology as moral agents and spiritual beings capable of salvation and divine reward, thereby directly challenging reductionist and Islamophobic narratives.

Similarly, Alexander Van Millingen—writing in the early 20th century—acknowledges the presence of spiritually active women within Ottoman religious life. He cites Qur'anic expressions such as *"believing men and believing women," "righteous men and righteous women,"* and *"patient men and patient women"* as evidence of the equal moral standing of both genders in Islam (Millingen, 1906, p. 242). Millingen observes that elderly women could be seen praying in mosques even outside regular prayer times, and he notes the existence of special religious services held exclusively for women in large mosques and within the imperial harem during Ramadan (Millingen, 1906, p. 243). Yet, despite documenting these spiritual roles and spaces, Millingen offers a more ambivalent conclusion. He concedes that while Islamic societies uphold certain honourable views of women in theory and practice, the overarching social framework is still shaped by patriarchal structures that tend to marginalize women (Millingen, 1906, p. 244). Importantly, Millingen situates these issues not as uniquely Islamic but as part of a universal pattern of gender inequality found across religious and cultural traditions. His acknowledgment of the global and systemic nature of patriarchy marks a partial departure from the more one-dimensional critiques often found in Orientalist literature. Together, Child and Millingen contribute to a counter-narrative that recognizes the complexity of gender relations in Islamic societies. Rather than subscribing to binary tropes of oppression versus liberation, their writings invite more nuanced readings of both Islamic theology and the sociocultural realities of Muslim communities.

One of the enduring misconceptions that has contributed to the belief that women are spiritually and socially inferior in Islam is the practice of polygamy. In Western popular imagination, particularly during the 19th and early 20th centuries, the assumption that every Muslim man had four wives was widespread. This essentialist view, however,

ignores the legal and historical complexity of Islamic family law and its nuanced stance on polygamy. While Islam does permit up to four wives, this is strictly conditional upon fair treatment and the husband's ability to maintain justice among his wives—an ethical requirement that is difficult to fulfil and thus often discourages the practice. As Hak (2008, p. 143) illustrates, polygamy was not an Islamic invention; it was practiced by pre-Islamic Arabs, as well as by Jews, Christians, Babylonians, Abyssinians, Persians, and indigenous communities across Africa, Australia, and India. Even in contemporary times, polygamy remains restricted or outlawed in several Muslim-majority nations through modern legislative measures (Hak, 2008, p. 144). Historical evidence also suggests that polygamy was rarely observed in Ottoman society, contrary to the Western stereotype. Western travellers and observers who visited the empire often noted the discrepancy between the stereotype and actual social practices. British traveller Grace Ellison, for example, challenges the myth that Muslim men uniformly treated women as property. She stresses that the Prophet Muhammad introduced reforms that limited the number of wives a man could take, aiming to curb the practice of unlimited marriage that existed in pre-Islamic Arabia. Moreover, Ellison emphasizes the Prophet's sermons and moral teachings that upheld the dignity and rights of women, arguing that these reforms served to protect rather than degrade them (Ellison, 2017, p. 117). Alongside American missionary Patrick, she further contends that certain practices attributed to Islam, such as polygamy or veiling, were in fact cultural legacies inherited from Byzantine society, not inherent to Islamic doctrine (Müderrisoğlu, 2021, p. 195).

Similarly, Ferriman Z. Duckett provides a strong rebuttal to the notion that Islam relegates women to the status of slaves. He quotes the Prophet Muhammad: *"Allah's curse is on the man who rejects his wife without reason,"* and highlights Muhammad's active efforts to improve women's social and religious conditions (Duckett, 1911, p. 100). Duckett critiques the views expressed in *The North American Magazine* by the Duchess of Marlborough, who claimed that Muslims viewed women as psychologically akin to animals and denied them redemption (Duckett, 1911, p. 101). He identifies such assertions as part of a dehumanizing Orientalist narrative that historically justified colonial and patriarchal interventions into Muslim societies. In contrast, Duckett presents evidence from Ottoman sources and women themselves to challenge these claims. He refers to a customary Friday sermon prayer that invokes blessings upon *"all devoted and believing women, living and dead"* (Duckett, 1911, p. 101), underscoring the spiritual value accorded to women in Islamic practice. Furthermore, Duckett cites Selma Hanım, sister of Ottoman Parliament President Ahmet Rıza Bey, who stated at the World Women's Congress in 1900: *"The freedom and safety of Turkish women are sufficiently secured by the country's civil and religious laws"* (Duckett, 1911, p. 102). Together, these perspectives offer a counter-narrative to Orientalist generalizations, demonstrating that Islam and Islamic societies historically recognized women's moral agency, legal rights, and spiritual equality. While patriarchal structures undoubtedly existed—as they did across all societies—Western critiques often misrepresented Islamic teachings by conflating cultural practices with religious doctrine and by overlooking Muslim women's own voices.

During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, numerous Western intellectuals and travellers challenged widespread Orientalist assumptions about Muslim women's status, particularly the persistent notion that Islam degrades or denies women a soul or spiritual agency. Among these voices, Will Seymour Monroe stands out for his critical interrogation of these claims. Although he acknowledges encountering such assertions in

various texts on Islam, Monroe openly questions the validity of the belief that women are soulless (Monroe, 1907, p. 100). He highlights Islamic teachings affirming that *both men and women are promised the joys of heaven*, and underscores women's religious rights, including the right to initiate divorce and enjoy religious and social protections, as evidence of the inclusiveness of Islamic doctrine. Similarly, Richard Davey emphasizes the Prophet Muhammad's reforms regarding women's property rights. He notes that Islamic law grants women absolute control over their personal property and requires the return of all dowries and any financial contributions they brought into the marriage upon divorce (Davey, 1907, pp. 90–92). While Davey initially defends these protections, he later reflects deep-seated Orientalist biases by quoting Stanley Lane Poole, who declares: *"The fatal stain of Islam is the degradation of women"* (Davey, 1907, p. 100). Poole attributes this degradation to socio-economic pressures, including the institutionalization of polygamy and gender imbalances. Such views exemplify the Orientalist tendency to universalize cultural practices and interpret them as immutable features of Islamic civilization—often ignoring regional variation and historical context.

The symbolic language used by Hester Donaldson Jenkins in her work *Behind Turkish Bars* (1911) also reflects this Orientalist paradigm. The "bars" of the harem were often misread by Western observers as physical and metaphorical prisons, despite their protective and status-oriented functions in Ottoman society. These misrepresentations prompted resistance not only from scholars but also from intellectual Muslim women. Fatma Aliye, in her article on early Islamic women, contests the view that Islam devalues women, asserting instead that it honours their contributions and agency (Koç, 2019, p. 208). She showcases biographies of influential Muslim women to rebut Western claims of Islamic misogyny. This defence of Islamic values is echoed in Necip Fazıl Kısakürek, who sharply distinguishes Islamic principles from local cultural customs. In *İdeolocya Örgüsü*, he writes: *"Locking women behind cages and in harems… is not something that Islamic norms prescribe"* (Kısakürek, 2021, p. 37). While acknowledging the historical realities of restrictive gender practices, Kısakürek emphasizes that these are distortions, not foundations, of Islamic law.

Recent scholarship also emphasizes the agency of Ottoman women within Islamic legal structures. Edicts issued by Ottoman rulers and administrative authorities protected women's property, inheritance, marriage, and divorce rights. For instance, the *Istanbul Kadi registers* from the 16th and 17th centuries reveal that women frequently accessed local courts for business transactions such as renting, buying, and legal disputes—suggesting significant legal visibility (Gümrükçüoğlu, 2020, p. 290). Although Islamic family law was undeniably patriarchal in structure—e.g., through unilateral male divorce (*talaq*), polygamy, and concubinage—women often used Islamic courts to contest and negotiate these patriarchal limitations (Tuğ, 2023, p. 466).

In sum, while Western critiques often portrayed Islamic gender relations as unchanging and oppressive, the historical record and reformist voices—both Western and Muslim—paint a more complex picture. Women in the Ottoman Empire were not passive subjects of religious patriarchy but active participants in legal and social life, navigating both their rights and constraints. The essentialist idea that Islam inherently oppresses women fails to account for the diverse legal, cultural, and temporal experiences of Muslim women.

4. Conclusion

This study has critically engaged with 19th and early 20th-century Western discourses concerning the status of women in Islam, particularly focusing on the pervasive and misinformed claim that Muslim women are spiritually inferior or lack a soul. Through a close reading of primary religious sources—especially the Qur'an—it becomes clear that such assertions have no theological basis. The Qur'an explicitly affirms that all human beings, regardless of gender, are created from a single soul and repeatedly assures both believing men and women of equal moral responsibility and equal reward in the afterlife. These core principles of spiritual equality, justice, and human dignity are foundational to Islamic theology, yet have often been ignored or distorted in Western narratives shaped by colonial, patriarchal, and Orientalist frameworks.

Western travel literature and missionary accounts of the 19th century commonly portrayed Muslim women as veiled, silenced, oppressed, and spiritually marginalized. These portrayals served not only to reinforce Western notions of cultural superiority but also to legitimize colonial projects under the guise of "civilizing" Eastern societies. However, when these narratives are subjected to critical scrutiny, a more complex picture emerges. Not all Western observers adhered to these reductive tropes. Figures such as Lydia Maria Child, Will Seymour Monroe, Grace Ellison, Ferriman Duckett, and others provided more balanced or revisionist views, often drawing directly on Qur'anic texts, legal practices, and ethnographic observations. They highlighted women's religious duties (e.g., prayer, pilgrimage), legal rights (e.g., property ownership, divorce), and their participation in social and cultural life, particularly in the Ottoman Empire. Furthermore, Ottoman legal archives and court records demonstrate that women actively engaged with the judicial system. Women frequently appeared before courts to file lawsuits, manage financial transactions, secure inheritances, and initiate or respond to divorce proceedings. These practices reveal a legal consciousness and agency that sharply contrasts with the passive image often projected in Orientalist writings. The study also situates gender debates within a broader historical and comparative context. It acknowledges that restrictive practices such as polygamy or veiling were not unique to Islamic societies, nor uniformly enforced; similar gender hierarchies existed across Christian, Jewish, and secular Western societies. Scholars like Monroe and Ellison argued that these practices often reflected local cultural traditions or Byzantine legacies, rather than the core teachings of Islam. Intellectual Muslim women such as Fatma Aliye likewise contested Western claims by reasserting women's central roles in Islamic history and law. Thinkers like Necip Fazıl Kısakürek emphasized that oppressive practices attributed to Islam were often cultural distortions, not scriptural mandates.

Ultimately, this research contributes to a deeper and more nuanced understanding of women's roles in Islamic societies. It challenges essentialist binaries that depict the West as emancipatory and Islam as inherently oppressive. Instead, it reveals how Muslim women navigated complex religious, legal, and social terrains with agency and resilience. The findings also call attention to the importance of interpretive context in religious scholarship and urge future researchers to move beyond stereotypes by engaging with historical evidence, legal documentation, and indigenous voices. In doing so, the study lays a foundation for further interdisciplinary scholarship at the intersection of Islamic studies, gender history, and postcolonial theory. It affirms that any attempt to assess the position of women in Islam must consider not only normative texts but also the historical

practices, legal frameworks, and lived experiences that have shaped Muslim societies across time. This approach is essential for producing more accurate, ethical, and inclusive academic work that resists both religious essentialism and cultural relativism and instead advocates for gender justice grounded in both faith and historical complexity.

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