

## The Construction of Rabia as an Eastern Woman in *Sinekli Bakkal*\*

### *Sinekli Bakkal*'da Rabia'nın Doğulu Bir Kadın Olarak İnşası

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#### Abstract

Halide Edib Adivar's novel *Sinekli Bakkal*, originally written in English in 1935 under the title *The Clown and His Daughter* and published in Turkish in 1936, is one of the significant works of Turkish literature from the Republican era. The novel portrays Istanbul during the reign of Sultan Abdulhamid II through vivid scenes and draws attention, with its proposed "solutions" to the East-West conflict—a central theme of modernization literature that began with the Tanzimat period. The work opens the doors of the Eastern reality, especially that of the Eastern woman who has long fascinated the Western imagination, to the Western world. It does so by providing many details about the social life of the time, particularly through the descriptions of the formation of daily life, as exemplified by the lifestyle of the character Rabia. This study will first examine critical readings of *Sinekli Bakkal* to understand how the main character Rabia has been perceived. Then it will question the instruments Halide Edib utilizes to construct Rabia as an Eastern woman. To this end, the construction of Rabia's personality will be uncovered through an examination of the traits she inherits from her mother and father. In addition to the living conditions of her family and her neighborhood Sinekli Bakkal, her interactions with the mansion and palace circles as well as with the musician Peregrini, will be analyzed. The study aims to discuss how Halide Edib, through the character of Rabia, attempted to present an image of the Eastern woman to both Western and Eastern readers.

**Keywords:** Halide Edib Adivar, *Sinekli Bakkal*, The East-West conflict, Eastern woman, Orientalism.

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## Öz

Halide Edib Adıvar'ın (1882-1964) 1935 yılında *The Clown and His Daughter* adıyla İngilizce olarak kaleme aldığı, 1936'da da Türkçe olarak yayımladığı romanı *Sinekli Bakkal*, Cumhuriyet dönemi Türk edebiyatının önemli yapıtlarındandır. II. Abdülhamit dönemi İstanbul'unu canlı tablolarla yansıtan ve Tanzimat'la birlikte başlayan yenileşme edebiyatının temel konularından biri olan Doğu-Batı sorununa getirdiği "çözüm" önerileriyle dikkat çeken yapıtın, dönemin sosyal yaşamına ve özellikle Rabia'nın şahsında temsil edilen kadının gündelik yaşamının biçimlenişine ilişkin pek çok detayla Doğu'nun ve Batılı muhayyileyi hayli meşgul eden Doğulu kadının "gerçekliği"nin kapılarını Batı dünyasına araladığı söylenebilir. Bu incelemede öncelikle *Sinekli Bakkal* hakkında yapılan eleştirel okumaların sunduğu veriler ışığında romanın ana karakteri Rabia'nın nasıl algılanageldiği açığa çıkarılacak, sonrasında da Doğulu bir kadın olarak Rabia'nın nasıl kurgulandığı sorgulanacaktır. Bu amaçla, öncelikle Rabia'nın kişiliğinin nasıl inşa edildiği, anne ve baba tarafından tevarüs ettiği özelliklerin irdelenmesi yoluyla açığa çıkarılacaktır. Rabia'nın içine doğduğu ailedeki ve *Sinekli Bakkal*'daki yaşam koşullarının yanı sıra, konak ve saray çevresiyle ve müzisyen Peregrini'yle olan ilişkisi incelenecek ve Halide Edib'in, Rabia'nın şahsında gerek Batılı gerekse Doğulu okurlarına nasıl bir Doğulu kadın imgesi sunmayı denediği tartışılacaktır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Halide Edib Adıvar, *Sinekli Bakkal*, Doğu-Batı meselesi, Doğulu kadın, Oryantalizm.

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**Atıf/Citation:** Uygun Aytemiz, B. (2025). The construction of Rabia as an eastern woman in *Sinekli Bakkal*. *KADEM Kadın Araştırmaları Dergisi*, 11(1), 159-180. <https://doi.org/10.21798/kadem.2025.177>

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\* This article is an expanded version of the paper that was presented in Turkish at the "2nd International Congress on New Horizons in Education and Social Sciences" held in İstanbul on June 18-19, 2019.

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## Extended Abstract

Halide Edib Adıvar's (1882, Istanbul-1964, Istanbul) novel *Sinekli Bakkal*, originally written in English in 1935 under the title *The Clown and His Daughter* and published in Turkish in 1936, is one of the most important works of Turkish literature from the Republican era. This work, a product of the years the author spent abroad, focuses on the life of the main character Rabia during a period set against the backdrop of the era of Abdülhamit II. It paints a panorama of Istanbul of that time through the lives of the residents of Sinekli Bakkal Street, where Rabia was born and raised, and the characters who became part of Rabia's life.

*Sinekli Bakkal* has been extensively studied and analyzed concerning the data it provides on the East-West conflict, a central theme in the Turkish novel, particularly since the Tanzimat period. In this context, the symbolic union of Rabia and the musician Peregrini, who embraced Islam and adopted the name Osman, has been interpreted as Halide Edib's proposed resolution to the East-West conflict. However, without first examining how the character of Rabia, who stands at the center of the narrative, is constructed –along with her interpersonal relationships and, more specifically, the nature of her relationship with Peregrini– it is difficult to clearly determine how Halide Edib structures the East-West dynamic in *Sinekli Bakkal*.

To reveal Rabia's personality traits, it is essential to examine how her parents –Kız Tevfik and Emine, the daughter of Imam Hacı İlhami Efendi– are portrayed in the novel, as she was born from their short-lived marriage. It is essential that she is portrayed as the daughter of Emine, an avaricious and unloving woman raised by an imam with strict rules, who built her life on the fear of hell, and Tevfik, a pure and virtuous meddah (public storyteller) who knew how to enjoy life and would sacrifice himself for his friends when necessary. Rabia's personality is shaped by the traits she inherits from her mother and father, making it essential to examine their influence on her character. In the absence of her father, Rabia grows up with her mother and grandfather in an environment dominated by the strict Islamic conservatism embodied by her grandfather. Imam Hacı İlhami Efendi is not only a greedy, money-loving, and stingy man but also enforces a rigid and austere interpretation of religion. İlhami Efendi instills fear in those around him with his terrifying depiction of the afterlife and his portrayal of a "Qahhar" creator (the One whose vengeance none can withstand), a worldview his daughter Emine mirrors closely. Living under the dominance of these two figures, Rabia experiences life as an ordeal. However, her world takes on a brighter and more joyful turn when her exiled father, Tevfik, who had been sent to Gallipoli, is pardoned and returns to Istanbul. Upon learning from Sabiha Hanım, the wife of Selim Pasha –the apprehensive Minister of Police Command Forces– that Tevfik, whom she has never met, has returned from exile, Rabia feels an irresistible pull toward her father's grocery store. As a result, father and daughter, along with Tevfik's acquaintance, Cüce (Dwarf) Rakım, settle down to live together.

On the other hand, the involvement of her grandfather, Imam Hacı İlhami Efendi, followed by Mevlevi Vehbi Dede, who is portrayed as the embodiment of love and tolerance, in Rabia's education plays a crucial role in shaping her personality. The traits she inherits from her mother and grandfather lay the foundation for her "asceticism" and "abstinence", as well as her stubborn and strong-willed nature. However, with their love and tolerance, Tevfik and Vehbi Dede introduce a new dimension to her life, one characterized by warmth and acceptance. Within this framework, Rabia is ultimately constructed as the ideal synthesis of the East's contradictory mental climate, shaped by the tension between rigid discipline and compassionate wisdom.

As a writer keenly aware of the Orientalist consciousness that shapes the West's perception of the East –particularly the Eastern woman– Halide Edib, with her deep familiarity with Western civilization, can be seen as engaging in a serious reckoning with the stereotypical image of the Eastern woman in the Western imagination. Through Rabia, she challenges and undermines the long-standing Orientalist cliché that depicts Eastern women as submissive, passive, and veiled in mystery. Instead of conforming to these tropes, Rabia emerges as a strong-willed, disciplined, and capable character who is deeply rooted in her own culture yet possesses an inner autonomy that defies Western stereotypes. In Edward W. Said's (2013) seminal work, *Orientalism* is characterized as "the exploratory branch of colonialism", a concept that frames the West's efforts to Orientalize the East as a means of justifying its presence and dominance in the region. Within this framework, the Westerner, through literature, art, and intellectual discourse, constructs the East in a negative light, positioning it as the irrational, regressive, and emotionally driven counterpart to the rational, progressive, and civilized West. This binary opposition not only reinforces the perception of the East as stagnant and backward but also serves as a tool of power, shaping how the West defines itself in contrast to an imagined "Other". This ideological framework establishes the legitimate foundation for Western governance over the East, effectively resulting in its exploitation. Among the many works produced by Western travelers, painters, and writers, the Eastern woman and her way of life hold a particular fascination. In these representations, the status of women in Eastern societies is often used as a benchmark to highlight the East's perceived underdevelopment and backwardness. The harem, constructed as an eroticized and exoticized "realm of pleasure and indulgence", is an inseparable part of the Westerner's fantasy of the East. In this context, the life of Kanarya, who is raised in Selim Pasha's mansion to be presented to the palace, the conflict between Sabiha Hanım and her daughter-in-law Dürnev, who undertake Kanarya's training, the conditions under which Kanarya's marriage to Nejat Efendi take place, and the life she leads serve as a contrast to the relatively "free" life Rabia leads in *Sinekli Bakkal*. Compared to the women whose lives are "vainly" consumed, Rabia is portrayed as a character who represents local and national values, as a woman who works, produces, reads, and can make her own choices freely. Thus, Rabia

of *Sinekli Bakkal*, through the life she leads, the education she receives, and her existence in both the public and private spheres, diverges from the image of the Eastern woman imposed by the Orientalist imagination.

On the other hand, the marriage between Rabia and Peregrini has often been interpreted as Halide Edib's proposed solution to the East-West dilemma; however, it can be said that the love and marriage relationship between the two has divided critics. Berna Moran (1998) criticizes Halide Edib's proposed solution to the East-West conflict through the Rabia-Peregrini marriage, arguing that the love relationship between the two is implausible, while Cevdet Kudret and İnci Enginün accept this relationship as an inherent of the novel. Whether this marriage truly corresponds to a synthesis, or even whether Halide Edib was in search of a synthesis at all, can be determined by examining which side outweighs in their marriage. Peregrini's conversion to Islam and adoption of the name Osman to marry Rabia, his willingness to live under her conditions in *Sinekli Bakkal* –despite the difficulties he sometimes faces– and his choice to renovate and settle in the house where Rabia was born and raised after Hacı İlhami Efendi's passing, all establish him as the one making sacrifices in their relationship. However, it should not be forgotten that Rabia's life in a poor back street of Istanbul with all its authenticity attracts Peregrini, who comes from a rich and noble family, and who, under the influence of his mother, a devout Catholic, was a priest in his youth, but was later excommunicated. The Eastern way of life –especially the love, tolerance, and humanism found in Rabia's home and surroundings, as well as in the teachings of Vehbi Dede– ultimately enables this disillusioned Westerner to reconnect with the divine.

Halide Edib, through the world she constructs around Rabia, opens the doors to the “private” living spaces of women from different social classes in the East through Rabia's experiences, which begin in her grandfather's house in *Sinekli Bakkal*, extend to Selim Pasha's mansion, and then to the waterfront mansions along the Bosphorus. Through intricate details of social life, particularly as embodied by Rabia's daily experiences, *Sinekli Bakkal*, which captures the dynamic atmosphere of Istanbul during the reign of Abdülhamit II, and attracts attention with its “solutions” addressing the East-West problem –an essential theme in the modernization literature initiated by the Tanzimat era– opens the doors of the East for the West and also serves to unveil the “reality” of Eastern woman, who has long captivated the Western imagination.

**Keywords:** Halide Edib Adivar, *Sinekli Bakkal*, The East-West conflict, Eastern woman, Orientalism.

## Introduction

*Sinekli Bakkal*, a canonical novel of Halide Edib Adivar (1882, Istanbul-1964, Istanbul), was originally written in English in 1935 with the title of *The Clown and His Daughter*.<sup>1</sup> Published in Turkish in 1936, the novel became one of the most important works of Turkish literature from the Republican era. This work, a product of the years the author spent abroad, focuses on the life of the main character Rabia against the backdrop of the period of Abdülhamit II, while also depicting a panorama of Istanbul of that era through the lives of the residents of Sinekli Bakkal Street, where Rabia was born and raised, and through the lives of some other characters who became part of Rabia's life. Halide Edib presents a plethora of characters, experiences, and lives that reflect her profound yearning for her native city, highlighting both her emotional attachment and the boundaries of her artistic prowess during her time abroad. The work has been extensively studied and analyzed regarding the data it provides on the East-West conflict, a central issue in the Turkish novel since the Tanzimat period. Within this framework, the symbolic marriage of the musician Peregrini, who marries Rabia after being a Muslim and adopts the name Osman, is interpreted as Halide Edib's suggested resolution to the East-West conflict. Recep, born as a result of this marriage, can be considered the embodiment of East-West synthesis. It appears impossible to elucidate Halide Edib's construction of the East-West relationship in *Sinekli Bakkal* without initially examining the characterization of Rabia, the central figure of the text, alongside her interpersonal dynamics and the nature of her relationship with Peregrini.

### An Eastern Synthesis: Rabia

To reveal Rabia's personality traits, it is essential to examine how her parents –Kız Tevfik and Emine, the daughter of Imam Hacı İlhami Efendi– are portrayed in the novel, as she was born from their short-lived marriage. It is essential that she is portrayed as the daughter of Emine, an avaricious and unloving woman raised by an imam with strict rules, who built her life on the fear of hell, and Tevfik, a pure and virtuous meddah (public

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<sup>1</sup> All excerpts from *Sinekli Bakkal* included in this article were translated by the author of the article.

storyteller) who knew how to enjoy life and would sacrifice himself for his friends when necessary.<sup>2</sup> Rabia's personality is shaped by the traits she inherits from her mother and father, making it essential to examine their influence on her character. In the absence of her father, Rabia grows up with her mother and grandfather in an environment dominated by the strict Islamic conservatism embodied by her grandfather. Imam Hacı İlhami Efendi is not only a greedy, money-loving, and stingy man but also enforces a rigid and austere interpretation of religion.<sup>3</sup> He is so narrow-minded that even the rag doll Rabia eagerly sews with her own hands is deemed unacceptable and thrown into the fire, and she is severely punished for her innocent desire. İlhami Efendi instills fear in those around him with his terrifying depiction of the afterlife and his portrayal of a "Qahhar" creator (the One whose vengeance none can withstand), a worldview his daughter Emine mirrors closely. Living under the dominance of these two figures, Rabia experiences life as an ordeal. However, her world takes on a brighter and more joyful turn when her exiled father, Tevfik, who had been sent to Gallipoli, is pardoned and returns to Istanbul.

Upon learning from Sabiha Hanım, the wife of Selim Pasha –the apprehensive Minister of Police Command Forces– that Tevfik, whom she has never met, has returned from exile, Rabia feels an irresistible pull

<sup>2</sup> At this point, it is useful to remember the sacrifices Tevfik makes for Selim Pasha's son Hilmi. Tevfik goes to the French Post Office disguised as a woman to collect the documents sent to Hilmi from abroad, but he is caught by a sleuth because of the hair on his hands. Tevfik is interrogated by Muzafer the Eye-Puncher, and despite all the violence he is subjected to, he does not betray Hilmi, whom he knows as a friend, and for this reason he is exiled. Tevfik goes to Damascus with Hilmi, where he helps Hilmi escape to Europe and is sent to Taif as a prisoner.

<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, towards the end of the text, Peregrini goes to visit Hacı İlhami Efendi and "[sees] pots and water in them beyond the courtyard. A few sparrows and a pigeon are hopping beneath the Imam's feet.] The friendship of this man, whose faith is his grudge, with birds seems a bit strange to Osman" (Edib Adıvar, 2000, 349). His testimony during his last visit is even more interesting. The Imam, who was too ill to leave his bed, said to Osman, "Give the devil some breadcrumbs." Indeed, there are breadcrumbs on a plate next to his bed, and "[s]parrow, [...] entering through the window, jumps from the window to the cushion with a flick of its little tail, making one feel that whoever is in the room is so accustomed to it that it will not run away" (Edib Adıvar, 2000, 383). By drawing attention to this relationship, Halide Edib favors even Hacı İlhami Efendi, who is negated from the beginning to the end of the text, and by delicately opening the window to his privacy with Peregrini's testimony, she seems to continue to investigate the secret of the mystery called human being.

toward her father's grocery store. As a result, father and daughter, along with Tevfik's acquaintance, Cüce Rakım, settle down to live together. With the support of Selim Pasha, they realize their desire on the condition that Rabia gives her grandfather, İlhami Efendi, the money she earns from reciting the *mawlid* and *Qur'an*. The lines that Peregrini observes on Rabia's face, reflecting both the traces of her past and the marks of her new life, symbolically reveal how the contrasting influences of Emine and Hacı İlhami Efendi, as well as Vehbi Dede, Tevfik, and Rakım –who represent her newfound world– are inscribed upon her visage. In a sense, these marks illustrate how Rabia's personality is shaped:

*"Because her old and new life seemed like two layers of civilization superimposed on top of each other, but far from completely destroying each other. The expression on the face of the kid, whose desire to live was trapped inside her like a gunpowder cellar, was not completely erased. [T]he expression was calm and serious. [...] It seemed as if the cheerful mask of her new life had been covered over the sorrowful face of her old life like a transparent silk veil. The combination of these opposite things on that young face constituted the whole mystery, the differentness that worked like magic of this.*

*[...] The girl had a tendency towards **asceticism, a spiritual abstinence**, the ability to think quickly and make sound decisions. These were all the result of the hard struggle and strict upbringing of the early years and the accumulation of hereditary influences from Imam and Emine. She had inherited many strong things from her mother, whom she hated so much" (Edib Adıvar, 2000, pp. 110-112, emphasis by the author).*

Similarly, the involvement of Rabia's grandfather, Imam Hacı İlhami Efendi, followed by Mevlevi Vehbi Dede, who is portrayed as the embodiment of love and tolerance, in Rabia's education plays a crucial role in shaping her personality. The traits she inherits from her mother and grandfather lay the foundation for her "asceticism" and "abstinence" (Edib Adıvar, 2000, p. 112), as well as her stubborn and strong-willed nature. However, with their love and tolerance, Tevfik and Vehbi Dede introduce a new dimension to her life, one characterized by warmth and acceptance. Within this framework, Rabia is ultimately constructed as the ideal synthesis of the East's contradictory mental climate, shaped by the tension between rigid discipline and compassionate wisdom.



Growing up away from her father and under the oppressive upbringing of her grandfather and mother, Rabia soon gains recognition from her grandfather for the talent she inherited from her father –a talent he, of course, would never admit came from Tevfik. She is raised as a *hafız* (one who knows the *Qur'an* by heart) and becomes one of Istanbul's renowned reciters from a young age. Thanks to this talent, she catches the attention of Sabiha Hanım and begins frequenting Selim Pasha's mansion. Life in this mansion opens the doors to a new world for Rabia, allowing her to become a student of Vehbi Dede, meet Peregrini, and engage in the intellectual discussions of Young Turk Hilmi and his friends.

After recognizing Rabia's potential, Selim Pasha's son, Hilmi, suggests introducing her to the talented musician Peregrini so she can become a world-class musician. However, it is Peregrini who ultimately resolves the conflict between the father, who wishes to entrust Rabia's training to Vehbi Dede, and his son, who envisions a different path for her. Upon meeting Rabia for the first time, Peregrini immediately notices how different she is from the European-style, wealthy girls he usually teaches: "They were all like straw-paper copies of European children, whereas this girl, with her three tight auburn braids, her fair face, and her chickpea-colored scarf, is a local example brought into being by the *centuries-long evolution/perfection of the civilization and culture of the city Istanbul!*" (Edib Adivar, 2000, pp. 72-73, emphasis by the author) Although deeply moved by her talent, Peregrini, who considers Rabia a symbol of Eastern civilization, says: "No, give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar [as an idiom "Give the devil his due"], and what belongs to Allah should be given to Allah... I belong to Caesar's clan; I belong to Satan's clan. The child belongs to Allah, let her stay where she is" (Edib Adivar, 2000, p. 76). Thus, he leaves Rabia's training to Vehbi Dede. The prudence he displays here is remarkable and foreshadows the stance he will adopt toward the East/Easterner throughout the text. Eastern life –especially the love, tolerance, and humanism found in Rabia's home and surroundings, as well as in Vehbi Dede's teachings– will also allow this disillusioned Westerner to reunite with the Creator.

## On the Side of the East in the Eternal Conflict

Halide Edib's early novels, such as *Raik'in Annesi* (1909), *Seviyye Talip* (1910), *Handan* (1912) and *Son Eseri* (1913), predominantly explore themes of individual love and psychological depth, particularly through their central female characters. In these works, the primary focus is on the love experiences and emotional struggles of women, highlighting their inner conflicts, societal limitations, and aspirations. As a writer actively engaged in women's rights debates during the Second Constitutional Era, Halide Edib uses these characters to construct and define the "ideal woman". These women are often depicted as strong, self-aware, and intellectually engaged, balancing Western education and refinement with a commitment to national values. This duality reflects the broader cultural and ideological shifts in Ottoman-Turkish society at the time, where modernization and tradition were in constant negotiation. Through her early works, Edib not only documents the struggles of women seeking autonomy but also imagines what an empowered yet culturally rooted female identity might look like within the changing social landscape of the late Ottoman period. In Berna Moran's words, these women are, "[...] above all, women who have a strong personality, who defend their rights, who have received Western upbringing, but who do not seek Westernization in clothing, who are talented in a branch of art such as painting or music, who speak a foreign language, who are cultured and attractive" (1998, p. 119, translation by the author). Especially in *Yeni Turan* (1912), *Ateşten Gömlek* (1922) and *Vurun Kahpeye* (1923), Halide Edib shifts her focus from individual love stories to the construction of a "new ideal woman", shaped by the political and social conditions of the era. These novels reflect the impact of the National Struggle on women's roles, emphasizing their active participation in the public sphere. The ideal women in these novels –such as Kaya, Ayşe, and Aliye– are portrayed as strong, patriotic characters who fight for independence as "sisters". They transcend traditional gender roles and become symbols of national resistance, standing side by side with men as teachers, nurses, and warriors. Their sexual identities are downplayed in favor of their role as "sisters in arms", reinforcing the idea that women's true value lies in their service to the nation. In particular, *Ateşten Gömlek's* Ayşe

is glorified through associations with the flag, dignity, and homeland, becoming a symbol of the nation's struggle for independence.<sup>4</sup> In terms of their characteristics, Edib Adivar's "ideal women" can be described as the "women who are both Westernized and adhere to their national values, who are both educated and free, and who are meticulous about dignity and strong in their morals" (Moran, 1998, p. 119, translation by the author). Given this background, how can we interpret the following scene from *Sinekli Bakkal*, where the main character Rabia and Handan, engage in a confrontation?

Sometime after their marriage, Rabia and Peregrini go out to Beyoğlu, the Westernized, cosmopolitan center of Istanbul, together. This scene holds a significant position in the novel. Through this visit to Beyoğlu by her characters, Halide Edib extends a salutation to Handan, the main character of one of her first novels, and through the encounter between Rabia and Handan –it should be remembered that there is no acquaintance between the two– Handan and her niece are positioned as the object of a critical discourse from Rabia's perspective:

*"Ahead of them, two young women approached them, walking as if they were staggering on their high heels. Their chador skirts were tight, their capes short, their veils thin. They both greeted Osman as they passed.*

*- Who are they, Osman?*

*- Asım Bey's daughter Handan, Hüsnü Pasha's wife. The other is her niece.*

*- How much they have tried to resemble European women. Rakım imitates a monkey better than they imitate European women.*

*- Are you jealous, dear Rabia?*

*- Who? Me? Hah ha...*

*The truth was that she was obviously not jealous. She thought herself too superior to even entertain the idea of comparing herself to them. She had looked at them like a jeweler looks at false diamonds that are being passed off as genuine diamonds" (Edib Adivar, 2000, p. 340).*

<sup>4</sup> For a detailed discussion, see Kandiyoti, D. (1997). *Cariyeler, bacılar, yurttaşlar: Kimlikler ve toplumsal dönüşümler* (A. Bora et al. Trans.). Metis Yayınları; Uygun-Aytemiz, B. (2001). *Halide Edib-Adivar ve feminist yazın*. (Unpublished Master's Thesis). Bilkent University Institute of Economics and Social Sciences.

It is interesting that this encounter has largely escaped the attention of critics analyzing *Sinekli Bakkal*. This moment is significant because it exemplifies the evolution of Halide Edib's views on women's freedom and the relationship between Westernization and womanhood from *Handan* (1912) to *Sinekli Bakkal* (1936). In *Handan*, the titular character is conceived as the "ideal woman". However, in *Sinekli Bakkal*, Rabia is positioned as her opposite, representing an alternative model of ideal womanhood –one that is deeply rooted in Eastern values and Islamic tradition. By framing Rabia as an "other" to Handan, Halide Edib criticizes the type of women who strive to imitate European lifestyles, reducing them to mere "false diamonds", imitations of true value rather than the authentic brilliance she ascribes to Rabia. This shift in perspective reflects a broader ideological transformation in Edib's thought, moving from an earlier belief in Westernized female empowerment to a later vision in which women's strength and dignity are tied to their adherence to cultural and spiritual heritage rather than external Western influences.<sup>5</sup>

As a writer keenly aware of the Orientalist consciousness that shapes the West's perception of the East –particularly the Eastern woman– Halide Edib, with her deep familiarity with Western civilization, can be seen as engaging in a serious reckoning with the stereotypical image of the Eastern woman in the Western imagination. Through Rabia, she challenges and undermines the long-standing Orientalist cliché that depicts Eastern women as submissive, passive, and veiled in mystery. Instead of conforming to these tropes, Rabia emerges as a strong-willed, disciplined, and capable character who is deeply rooted in her own culture yet possesses an inner autonomy that defies Western stereotypes.

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<sup>5</sup> At this point, there is a striking difference between the English and Turkish versions of the text. In *The Clown and His Daughter*, published in 1935, the women encountered in Beyoğlu are not Handan and her "niece". In the English text, Halide Edib constructs this moment of encounter as follows: "The people took them for a provincial couple. She laughed as she pointed to three young women who came towards them wobbling on high heels. They were elaborately made-up, and wore very short capes and very tight skirts. All three nodded to Osman and passed on. "Who are they?" she asked. "Pupils of mine; rather pretty, eh?" He watched her face for a sign of jealousy. It was full of scorn. "Uncle Rakim imitates monkeys better than they ape European women" (Edib, 1935, p. 284). At this point, the author's critical view of her own authorship, which she opens the door to readers who are familiar with her work, is striking.

In Edward W. Said's (2013) seminal work, orientalism<sup>6</sup> is characterized as "the exploratory branch of colonialism", a concept that frames the West's efforts to Orientalize the East as a means of justifying its presence and dominance in the region. Within this framework, the Westerner, through literature, art, and intellectual discourse, constructs the East in a negative light, positioning it as the irrational, regressive, and emotionally driven counterpart to the rational, progressive, and civilized West. This binary opposition not only reinforces the perception of the East as stagnant and backward but also serves as a tool of power, shaping how the West defines itself in contrast to an imagined "Other". This ideological framework establishes the legitimate foundation for Western governance over the East, effectively resulting in its exploitation. Among the many works produced by Western travelers, painters, and writers, the Eastern woman and her way of life hold a particular fascination. In these representations, the status of women in Eastern societies is often used as a benchmark to highlight the East's perceived underdevelopment and backwardness. The harem, constructed as an eroticized and exoticized "realm of pleasure and indulgence", is an inseparable part of the Westerner's fantasy of the East. In this context, the life of Kanarya, who is raised in Selim Pasha's mansion to be presented to the palace, the conflict between Sabiha Hanım and her daughter-in-law Dürnev, who undertake Kanarya's training, the conditions under which Kanarya's marriage to Nejat Efendi takes place, and the life she leads serve as a contrast to the relatively "free" life Rabia leads in Sinekli Bakkal. Compared to the women whose lives are "vainly" consumed, Rabia is portrayed as a character who represents local and national values, as a woman who works, produces, reads, and can make her own choices freely. Thus, Rabia of *Sinekli Bakkal*, through the life she leads, the education she receives, and her existence in both the public and private spheres, diverges from the image of the Eastern woman imposed by the Orientalist imagination.

<sup>6</sup> In its most general definition, "Orientalism (Fr. orientalisme), as a way of thinking and a field of specialization, includes, firstly, the variable historical and cultural relationship between Europe and Asia; secondly, the scientific discipline in the West, which, since the first half of the XIX century, refers to the specialization in the study of various Eastern cultures and traditions; and thirdly, ideological assumptions, images and imaginary illustrations about the region of the world referred to as the East" (Bulut, n.d.). Oryantalizm. <https://islamansiklopedisi.org.tr/oryantalizm>, translation belongs to the author.)

She is a determined and independent woman who has contributed to her family's livelihood through her art since childhood, has the will to shape her life as she desires, makes her own choices in relationships with men, and directs her romantic affairs. Without emphasizing her sexual identity, she captivates those around her. She is strong enough to put Sabit Beyağabey, the bully and head firefighter of Sinekli Bakkal, in his place when necessary, earning his respect. In her flirtation with Bilal, the nephew of Selim Pasha's chief gardener, she maintains full control "with all her purity". She resolutely rejects the marriage proposal of Galip Bey, a friend of Hilmi, whom everyone considers an unmissable match. And she ultimately captivates Peregrini, an intellectual musician in his forties, proving herself to be a woman of strong will and freedom.

### **The Story of a Love / Marriage**

The marriage between Rabia and Peregrini has often been interpreted as Halide Edib's proposed solution to the East-West dilemma; however, it can be said that the love and marriage relationship between the two has divided critics. Berna Moran argues that their romantic relationship is not sufficiently "developed" and considers it a "weak aspect of the novel". According to him, the love between the characters is far from being "convincing"; "we cannot really find in the novel the passion that could make the noble pianist accept Islam and a neighborhood life" (1998, p. 134). On the other hand, Cevdet Kudret interprets this union with the phrase "thus, the West and the East are united", while İnci Enginün expresses that "the marriage of Rabia and Osman (Peregrini), who embody the positive elements of both worlds, constitutes the first step towards a synthesis" (Cited in Moran, 1998, pp. 131-132). Briefly, Berna Moran, who states, "To be honest, I don't think we are talking about a synthesis of East and West" (1998, p. 132), criticizes Halide Edib's proposed solution to the East-West conflict through Rabia and Peregrini's marriage, arguing that their romantic relationship is far from convincing. In contrast, Cevdet Kudret and İnci Enginün accept this relationship as an inherent reality of the novel.

Whether this marriage truly corresponds to a synthesis, or even whether Halide Edib was in search of a synthesis at all, can be determined by

examining which side outweighs in their marriage. To this end, the construction of the Rabia-Peregrini relationship must be analyzed from their first encounter to the realization of their marriage, as well as the resolution of conflicts over their shared living space after marriage, leading up to the birth of their son, Recep.

One evening in the fourth year of her attendance at the mansion, Selim Pasha asks Rabia, “How about withdrawing from the shop now, Ablâ?” (Edib Adivar, 2000, p. 139). Through Pasha’s thoughts, Rabia’s physical traits, as well as her personality, are presented in comparison to those of the other women living in the mansion:

*“What could he say? How could he tell her that she had grown up, that she had become beautiful, that she was now a danger for the young men of the neighborhood? Though, in truth, this was something that could be said to this girl. In her deep voice, in her stubborn nature, there was the balance and strength of a man who had been properly raised. How different she was from the women Pasha was used to seeing in the mansion—women who constantly displayed their femininity, who tried to exploit it. Yet, she possessed a charm that pleased both the eye and the heart. Without embellishment, without blush, without powder, without kohl! There was a certain elegance in her tightly braided hair. Her narrow hips, like those of a boy, the subtle, unassuming curves of her shoulders and chest—all of these gave her the wild allure of a young rose sapling” (Edib Adivar, 2000, p. 139).*

At the age of fifteen, the issue of Rabia’s marriage has begun to occupy those around her. She is aware of the effect her changing body has on others, and beyond that, she is beginning to sense new desires and inclinations, which first draw her toward Bilal, with whom she has previously clashed. It is clear that her ease in their relationship surprises Bilal and, more than that, unsettles him; however, the narrator explains Rabia’s agency through her innocence. On the other hand, Bayram Ağa, who has different ambitions for his nephew –seeing such upward mobility as natural within the unique democratic structure of the Ottoman system and at the very least envisioning Bilal as the son-in-law of a Selim Pasha– is disturbed by their growing closeness. His confrontation with Selim Pasha and the

latter's response to his words are particularly noteworthy. Bayram Ağa's intervention abruptly cuts off Rabia's relationship with Bilal; Bilal is sent off into his new life, accompanied by the echoes of Rabia's voice calling out "*Aman Bilal Oğlan*" [Oh, Bilal Boy] throughout the mansion and Sinekli Bakkal Street, as he prepares to marry Pasha's daughter, Mihri. Bayram Ağa has achieved his goal. His nephew, whom Selim Pasha deemed suitable to send to Galatasaray Sultani for education, has now become the pasha's son-in-law. However, what appears to be a victory for Bayram Ağa is, in reality, a loss, as made clear through Selim Pasha's thoughts. He reflects that if "that brave, that clever, that charming Rabia" harbored even the slightest affection for Bilal, then he "would have certainly brought them together [...]. The first right of choice belongs to Rabia" (Edib Adıvar, 2000, p. 159). His decision to take Bilal as his son-in-law would only come after learning of Rabia's feelings for him.

Rabia's marriage also occupies the residents of Sinekli Bakkal Street. Through her encounter with Sabit Beyağabey, who stands against her to put her in her place for defying the neighborhood's traditions with her very existence, it becomes clear that Rabia cannot unite her life with any man from her own class. Neither Bilal nor Sabit Beyağabey, the neighborhood's ruffian, is her equal. After all, as previously mentioned, Rabia is the finest example of the evolution of a civilization, manifested in the backstreets of Istanbul. This is also embodied through Bilal's perception of her: "Rabia, for him, was *a kind of symbol of a mature and prosperous city that he both resented and adored. He could feel in his very bones that the uniqueness in her speech and gaze was the work of a sophisticated civilization developed over centuries*" (Edib Adıvar, 2000, p. 152, emphasis by the author). This young man from Rumelia wishes to take Rabia as his wife, seeing her as the epitome of the civilization she symbolizes. However, it is evident that a character as distinguished as Rabia –who has internalized not only the influence of her father Tefvik but also the values represented by her grandfather, mother, and, on a higher level, Vehbi Dede– can only be the "partner" of an artist like herself.

In fact, the first clues that Rabia has fallen for Peregrini emerge when she asks Sabiha Hanım whether a Muslim girl can marry a non-Muslim man. Following Pasha's conversation implying that Rabia has reached the age of



seclusion, during one of their “now concert-like lessons” in Hilmi’s room, Peregrini, “while gazing at Rabia almost without seeing her, suddenly realize[s] that the head which once barely reached the piano four years ago now looks over the room from above it. Struck by an unexpected truth, he [is] overcome with excitement.” Noticing the newfound gaze in the pianist’s eyes, “Rabia’s cheeks take on the hue of a rare, aged wine.” At this pivotal moment in their relationship, when they first discover each other with new eyes as “man” and “woman,” Rabia “understands that Peregrini has suddenly realized she has grown up, that she is now a woman, and feels the same strange sense of shame that Adam must have felt when he first saw himself naked in the Garden of Eden.” Inside the pianist, meanwhile, “the feeling of sin that befalls a man who enters a sacred temple with unclean feet” suddenly arises, so much so that his eyes instinctively search for a refuge in Vehbi Dede (Edib Adivar, 2000, pp. 141-142).<sup>7</sup>

The introduction of Tevfik’s second exile immediately after the scene where Rabia and Peregrini first confront each other as “man” and “woman” serves a functional purpose in the narrative structure. In the absence of her father, Rabia is drawn into a new social environment through Vehbi Dede and Peregrini, both of whom take it upon themselves to protect and guide her. Following Selim Pasha’s mansion, the doors of the waterside mansions belonging to Second Chamberlain Satvet Bey and Kanarya’s husband, Sultan’s nephew Nejat Efendi, also open to her. Through this, Rabia gains the opportunity to witness the lifestyle of the upper class, even that of the palace itself. The contrast between the life Rabia leads in

<sup>7</sup> Halide Edib’s choice to refer to the parable of Adam and Eve in order to structure Rabia’s feelings while constructing this scene is interesting. According to the parable both in *the Torah* and *the Qur’an*, Adam and Eve, who are placed in the Garden of Eden, will be able to enjoy all the blessings of paradise except the fruit of a single tree. However, *the Torah* refers to this tree as “the tree of knowledge of good and evil” and the “serpent” tempts Eve with the promise that if they eat the fruit of the tree, their eyes will be opened and they will become like Allah by knowing good and evil (2, 17). In *the Qur’an*, the name of the tree is not mentioned and, the promise of the “devil” is that they will stay in paradise forever if they reach for the “forbidden fruit”. In this framework, the fact that the female subject of the scene is equipped with the embarrassment of Adam, who knows his nakedness, and the male subject is equipped with “the sense of sin of the man who enters the worshipping place with dirty feet” shows how the agent / subject relationship is produced in the case of Rabia-Peregrini.

Sinekli Bakkal with her father and Cüce Rakım and the social structures of women in mansions and palace circles provides Halide Edib with a means to present the living conditions of an Eastern woman to her readers, setting aside, of course, the harem system of the upper classes.

The fact that Rabia and Peregrini's marriage takes place after Peregrini loses his mother signifies that the Italian musician, following this loss, is fully prepared to sever his ties with the world into which he was born, marking his sense of "homelessness". At this very moment, Rabia and the environment in which he has spent years witnessing her growth offer him a new "home" where he can take root. On the other hand, their relationship is explored from multiple angles, countering criticisms that it lacks depth or merely represents Halide Edib's simplistic resolution to the East-West dilemma. Rabia's fears –especially after marriage– of losing Peregrini or being abandoned by him, as well as her attempts to almost monopolize her husband, are skillfully portrayed. Through this, Rabia's psychology is intricately developed, adding depth to her character. Peregrini's conversion to Islam and adoption of the name Osman in order to marry Rabia, his willingness to live under her conditions in Sinekli Bakkal –despite the difficulties he sometimes faces– and his choice to renovate and settle in the house where Rabia was born and raised after Hacı İlhami Efendi's passing, all establish him as the one making sacrifices in their relationship. However, it should not be forgotten that Rabia's life in a poor back street of Istanbul with all its authenticity attracts Peregrini, who comes from a rich and noble family, and who, under the influence of his mother, a devout Catholic, was a priest in his youth, but was later excommunicated. In the scene where Peregrini confronts Cüce Rakım, he says:

*"No, I am not a Muslim. You know those priests who retreat into monasteries? I am one of them. But now, I am more of a Muslim. I have been living among you for fifteen years. Language, religion, nationality are nothing but the spiritual atmosphere of people. The spiritual atmosphere of the West is too cold for me, I seek tranquility and healing in the climate of the Orient..." [...] "I belong to no religion. But if I were to adopt one, it would undoubtedly be Islam. I find the individual shaped by the Islamic community closer to myself"* (Edib Adıvar, 2000, pp. 108-09).

His words reveal why he ultimately favors the East in his comparison between the West and the East. The warmth and sincerity of human relationships in the East become the primary elements that attract the artist, offering him a sense of belonging and emotional refuge.

Through Rabia in *Sinekli Bakkal*, Halide Edib subverts the image of the Eastern woman that is often constructed as the “other” in many Western Orientalist texts. In Rabia’s character, she portrays a woman who is strong-willed, resolute in her choices, capable of influencing and transforming the man in her life, guiding his decisions, and even making him submit to her own will. Indeed, this woman is positioned as a wife who not only renames the man but also rebirths him defining the conditions of his new life. More importantly, this woman –contrary to the frequent depictions in Orientalist texts– removes the Western man’s authority to represent the East and the Eastern world. Through her, Halide Edib illustrates that the voice of the Eastern world can only truly be heard through the East itself, emphasizing the autonomy and agency of the Eastern subject. In this context, it is not surprising that Rabia is the one who finds the melody Peregrini has been searching for in his composition “The Enchanted Well”. During their first visit to Rabia’s grandfather’s house with her after his death, Osman observes this house, which he has previously visited to get to know and help the Imam, with a new perspective in the light of his wife’s experience of the house. He decides to name the opera “The Enchanted Well”, in which he tries to describe the essence of the East and the Eastern experience, after Rabia takes him by the hand and drags him to the “well beneath the arch of a cobwebbed, dark hearth” where she says, “If you draw forty buckets of water after midnight, on the fortieth one, a fairy will appear and bring treasures” (Edib Adivar, 2000, p. 405). In this visit, when Rabia enters the room where she once slept with her mother and begins rocking the cradle, singing a lullaby, she realizes that she is pregnant: “And a new life, still shapeless in Rabia’s womb, slowly stirred. Very lightly, almost imperceptibly so... A tiny, frightened droplet of life wanting to hide! Rabia’s heart raced. She knew she was pregnant” (Edib Adivar, 2000, 406). These two “works” that have begun to ferment in Peregrini’s mind and Rabia’s womb –as Rabia aptly puts it, “[t]he boy I will give birth to will be named Recep, and the child that Osman will give birth to will be named The Enchanted Well” (Edib Adivar, 2000, p. 433)– intertwine the torturous creative processes of both artists.

Towards the end of her difficult pregnancy, Rabia becomes a witness to the life experience of İkbâl Hanım, the wet-nurse of Satvet Bey, the Second Chamberlain, who comes to visit her. This elderly Circassian woman tells Rabia how they fled the Russian oppression in the Caucasus and settled near Sapanca, how she was left alone with her three-month-old son Toktamış because her husband was martyred in the Russo-Turkish war, and how she was “sold” to the waterside mansion, leaving her own son behind to be a wet-nurse to the Chamberlain who had lost his mother. The impact of this experience on Rabia is expressed in the words “Captivity is a very ugly thing... To separate a mother from her child like that... What cruelty!” (Edib Adıvar, 2000, p. 434) The young woman, who has resolved to give birth to her child despite the risks, becomes a witness to the sounds coming from Osman’s room after İkbâl Hanım leaves. The musician, working on “The Enchanted Well”, is unable to find the notes for the song of the fairy emerging from the well is supposed to sing. When Rabia discovers the melody for the fairy’s song and shares it with her husband, she feels the peace of delivering “a precious legacy to its rightful owner.” This moment also marks a shift in Peregrini’s perception of their relationship: “He looked at Rabia with an entirely new expression in his eyes. Until now, he had never felt so deeply and clearly the presence behind the flesh and bone of the girl’s body. She was not just his lover, his wife. She was his eternal companion, understanding life as he did” (Edib Adıvar, 2000, p. 438).

## Conclusion

In her work *Halide Edip Türk Modernleşmesi ve Feminizm* (*Halide Edip Turkish Modernization and Feminism*), Ayşe Durakbaşa analyzes Halide Edib’s correspondence with Grace Ellison, quoting the following anecdote:

*“I asked Halide Hanım, perhaps the most active and famous of Turkish women, on behalf of one of our leading suffragette societies, how we, as English women, could help Turkish women in their progress. ‘Tell them,’ she said to me, ‘to rid themselves of the misunderstood word ‘harem,’ and refer to us as women living in ‘Turkish homes.’ Tell them to try to dispel the disgusting atmosphere that word has imposed on our lives. Tell them to explain how we truly live’”* (quoted from Ellison by Durakbaşa, 2000, p. 209, translation by the author).

It can be said that the author, who requested Grace Ellison to “narrate how they truly lived”, personally took on the task of narrating this “truth” through Rabia’s life story. Halide Edib opens the door to the “private” living spaces of women from different social classes of the East through the world she constructs around Rabia and Rabia’s experience that begins in her grandfather’s house in Sinekli Bakkal and extends to Selim Pasha’s mansion and then to the waterside mansions on the Bosphorus. Through intricate details of social life, particularly as embodied by Rabia’s daily experiences, *Sinekli Bakkal*, which captures the dynamic atmosphere of Istanbul during the reign of Abdülhamit II, and attracts attention with its “solutions” addressing the East-West problem –an essential theme in the modernization literature initiated by the Tanzimat era– opens the doors of the East for the West and also serves to unveil the “reality” of Eastern woman, who has long captivated the Western imagination.

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**Acknowledgments:** The author declares no acknowledgment.

**Ethical Approval:** This study does not require ethics committee approval.

**Declaration of Interests:** The author declares no competing interests.

**Peer-review:** Externally peer-reviewed.

**Financial Support:** The author declares that this study received no financial support.

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**Teşekkür:** Yazar teşekkür beyan etmemiştir.

**Etik Beyan:** Bu araştırma etik beyan gerektirmemektedir.

**Çıkar Çatışması Beyanı:** Yazar çıkar çatışması beyan etmemiştir.

**Hakem Değerlendirmesi:** Dış bağımsız çift kör hakemli.

**Finansal Destek:** Yazar bu çalışma için finansal destek almadığını beyan etmiştir

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