

REVIEW ARTICLE

## Turkey's First Zoologist Prof. Dr. Fahire Battalgazi's Short But Fruitful Academic Life

A. Didem Battalgazi Uslu<sup>1</sup> 



<sup>1</sup>Istanbul Gelişim University, Faculty of Economics, Administrative and Social Sciences, Department of English Language and Literature, Istanbul, Turkey

ORCID: A.D.B.U. 0000-0002-9603-7398

Received: 14.08.2019

Revision Requested: 27.08.2019

Last Revision Received: 10.09.2019

Accepted: 13.09.2019

Correspondence: A. Didem Battalgazi Uslu  
adidemuslu@gmail.com

Citation: Battalgazi Uslu, A. D. (2019). Turkey's first zoologist Prof. Dr. Fahire Battalgazi's short but fruitful academic life. *Turkish Journal of Bioscience and Collections*, 3(2), 37-42.  
<https://doi.org/10.26650/tjbc.20190010>

### Introduction

As Niccolo Machiavelli describes the Ottoman Empire in his famous book *Prince*, the east European Ottomans were very much different from the Christians of west Europe. Erik J. Zürcher explains as follows: "The sultan represented absolute power and many of his servants, though powerful as delegates of his authority, were technically his slaves. The Ottoman system of government and of land ownership had always been geared towards preventing the emergence of power, such as an aristocracy." (Zürcher, 2004). With no aristocracy or elite class or privileged/subdued peoples, education was distributed to all peoples without an exception in the Ottoman Empire. The same mentality proceeded through the Turkish Republic of 1923 as Feroz Ahmad notes: "Kemal's aphorism of 1933 ('Happy is he who calls himself a Turk') opposed the idea of birth, blood, or

### Abstract

Prof. Dr. Fahire (Battalgil) Battalgazi was born as an Ottoman Empire subject in İstanbul at the turbulent beginning of the 20th century (1902/1905?-1948). She had a short but very successful academic career at İstanbul University and Paris Sorbonne University. Since her field of study was the fresh water fish biodiversity and systematic in Turkey she travelled a lot, inspecting the rivers of Anatolia. She was the first zoologist of Turkey and had identified 30 new fish species in 5 manuscripts between the years 1940-1944. Today 15 of her findings are valid. With this study we will be giving information about her academic career and family life.

**Keywords:** Fahire Battalgil, Fresh water fish, İstanbul Darülfünun, Female scientist, Ottoman subject, Turkish citizen

ethnicity, an idea that was popular among the fascist regimes in Germany and Italy. Anyone who lived within the borders of the new Turkey could call himself a "Turk." (Ahmad, 2005).

Prof. Dr. Fahire (Battalgil) Battalgazi (1902/1905?-1948) (Figs. 1-2) was born a subject of the Ottoman Empire in İstanbul at the troublesome beginnings of the 20th century when the Empire was at war with all the colonialists and the Ottoman non-Muslim and ethnic peoples who were provoked by the imperialists. In this historical atmosphere, Ms. Fahire had a short but very successful academic life with important scientific publications, since her field of study was the fresh water fish of Turkey. The aim of this study is to introduce a Turkish female scientist, Prof. Dr. Fahire Battalgazi, within the context of Turkish Ottoman and Turkish Republican histories.



**Figure 1.** Fahire (Battalgil) Battalgazi (1902/1905?-1948)

Compared to the Christian European women of west Europe, the Ottoman Muslim and non-Muslim women of 16<sup>th</sup>, 17<sup>th</sup>, 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries had a lot of legal rights according to Islamic laws which gave women 1 to 2 heritage rights. It was not surprising that many Christian or Jewish Ottoman women asked for the shelter of Islamic laws from the *kadı* (Islamic judge) so that they would be under financial protection. A lot of historians, travelers and researchers stress these possession rights of the Ottoman women. In Donald Quataert's words: "Thus non-Muslims often appealed to Muslim courts to gain access to the provisions of Islamic inheritance laws that absolutely guaranteed certain shares of estates to relatives- daughters, fathers, uncles, sisters. Persons who feared disinheritance or a smaller share in the will of a Christian or Jew placed themselves under Islamic law." (Quataert, 2005). Quataert also explains that on a pressure, a young woman could go to the Muslim court that would take her side, thus preventing an unwanted



**Figure 2.** Fahire Battalgazi in the Istanbul University, Biology Department.

marriage. Analyzing Ottoman records of 16, 17, 18 and 19th centuries, Suraiya Faroqhi has lots of historical books on woman merchants and laborers who headed households and earned money. These women were taking active roles in trading and were tied to boards and guilds of trade (Faroqhi, 2002, 2007).

Suraiya Faroqhi is very surely successful in reading old Turkish documents in Arabic script which is indispensable for a historian as İlber Ortaylı thinks it is compulsory. In matters of family and women, Ortaylı points at the importance of researching the Ottoman *kadı* registers called *şeri'yye sicilleri*, travelogues and chronicles, not to fall into Orientalist stereotypings or Orientalist discourses (Ortaylı, 2004). Apart from numerous historical registrations, individual writings about the Turks were popular during all ages. Even Shakespeare and his fellow dramatists mentioned "the horrifying and infidel Turks" in lots of plays. Burçak Evren and Dilek Girgin Can give examples from the memoirs of many travellers like Lady Mary Wortley



Montague, Elisabeth Craven, Dr. Olivier, D'Ohsson, Jean Henry Abdolonyme Ubcini, La Baronne Durand de Fontmagne, Edmond de Amicis and many others, who stated that Turkish women were really very free. (Evren & Can, 1996).

The concept 'Ottoman' was a wide range identity for the subjects of the empire and 'Turk' was another embracing identity for all citizens who felt themselves a member of the new nation. Likewise women were very much elevated and respected all through the Turkish history of nomadic Göktürks and Seljuks and later the settled Ottomans and the Turkish Republic citizens. Since the spirit of wandering nomadic cultures has been in their blood vessels for ages, the nomad Turks had to be gender-free. Women and men had to take responsibilities alike during their long migrations. There could be no division of labor according to gender on perilous journeys. That free and emancipated spirit still exists as powerful urge to liberty. As a result, lots of women were educated in the harems of extended Ottoman families and later, in schools for nucleus republican households like Prof. Dr. Fahire (Battalgil) Battalgazi's. The young Fahire was an Ottoman Empire subject in İstanbul when the Ottoman Empire was called "the sick man of Europe" by the Russians during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The huge Ottoman Empire was weakened and sickened by the powerful new empires and the emergence of new science and technology. Ms Battalgazi (1902/1905?-1948) was first an Ottoman subject, then the citizen of the Turkish Republic. She had a short but very successful and enlightening academic career since her field of study was the freshwater fish of the river and lakes in Turkey. She was especially very active in her studies during the years of World War II when luckily Turkey did not enter the war this time. Hence, travelling all around her country, she identified 30 new fresh water fish species between 1940-1944 (Battalgil, 1940, 1941, 1942, 1944; Battalgazi 1944). Today 15 of them are valid. Six fish named after Fahire Battalgazi: *Cobitis battalgili*, *Cobitis fahirae*, *Chondrostoma fahirae*, *Pseudophoxinus battalgilae*, *Alburnus battalgilae*, *Gobio battalgilae*.

Ms. Fahire had a lot of last names because of historical reasons. After her birth she was called Fahire Akif, Akif being her grandfather's name, the Field Marshall Akif Pasha of the Ottoman court who was a trusted general of Sultan Abdulhamit II. Naming children with father's or grandfather's surname was an Islamic tradition: She was Fahire *binti Akif* (Akif's daughter). However the family was known as descending from the famous 8<sup>th</sup> century Seljuk hero Seyid Cafer Battalgazi. That is why they were

known as the Battalgazis for centuries and they were *seyyids*, meaning the grandchildren of the massacred grandsons of Prophet Muhammed, the innocent victims Hasan and Hüseyin. Author A. Didem Uslu has an official Ottoman document which certifies the male line of seyyid heritage with the name of her father included.

Turks are the amalgamation of the peoples of Central Asian steppes, Mediterranean basin, Middle Eastern deserts and central and eastern Europe. They are respectful and adaptable to all religions. In the history of the Turks, the nomadic Turks of the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> centuries had shamanistic and mystical religious practices before they converted to Islam. Some Turks had even become Budists. Because of this colorful hybridism of religions, their identity became quite different than Judeo-Christians or Muslim Arabs. The free-spirited and easy-going Turks were nomadic peoples with different tribes, clans and gatherings. They were very talented soldiers who were hired all over Asian cultures (like China, India, Mongolia, Iran, Byzantium, etc) and were enthusiastic about forging States or Empires. According to Justin McCarthy's ideas on their practice of Islam: "Turkish Muslims showed a desire to extend religion beyond the realm of Islamic legalities into a mystical communion with God. Mysticism remained a basic part of Turkish religion, and in times this mystical orientation was even recognized by the Islamic establishment as being legitimate, if always somewhat suspect, part of true religion." (McCarthy, 1997).

The great Eurasian empire, the Ottoman Empire had lasted quite a long time in history, from 1299 to 1918. After the collapse of the empire, The Turkish War of Independence saved the Turks from the invader colonialists, with their bloody war in order to be free and establish a nation. With the Turkish Republic of 1923, as the last name law of the State citizenship was established, Ms. Fahire's family and relatives preferred to call themselves "Battalgazi." However for a short time, they had to change their last names and the family was split into various last names such as Battal, Battalgil and Benderli. After 1940's they received their Battalgazi name legally. As a result of all these historical events, Fahire was for some time Miss Fahire Akif, then Ms. Fahire Battalgil in academic literature and at last Prof. Dr. Fahire Battalgazi all over the zoology circles.

Fahire Battalgazi started her education in Damascus, Syria, which was an Ottoman Province at the time and she went to the French Dame-de-Sion School there. During those years, American and French missionary schools were all over the Ottoman Empire for the good of

the Christian and Armenian children. The sweet brunette girl Fahire's father, Prof. Dr. Ethem Akif Battalgazi had been promoted as a president at the Damascus University which was founded by Sultan Abdulhamit's orders in 1903, only five years before he was dethroned. Sultan Hamit's aim was to compete with the Christian missionaries, in order to support his own *millet* population (Atasoy, 1945). With the opportunity to live among the Arabs and French nuns, Fahire and her eldest sister Bedia learned French and Arabic fluently in Damascus where their grandfather had been previously a governor for some years. The father Dr. Ethem Akif was very keen about his daughters' education and he hired tutors so that the girls would learn the French and Arabic cultures. Author A. Didem Uslu's father, the cardio-vascular surgeon of 1960s, '70s and '80s was Prof. Dr. M. Sabih Battalgazi was Prof. Dr. Fahire Battalgazi's first generation cousin. Fahire's father Dr. Ethem Akif and Sabih's father, the military mechanical engineer Hamdi Akif were brothers, Hamdi being the senior (1873-1942).

On their way back to İstanbul, Fahire's father Dr. Ethem who had also studied both law and medicine, was a forensics medical surgeon who would have three more daughters with 1910s whom he valued so much. Their names were altogether Bedia, Fahire, Neriman, Mualla, Mübeccel. Five brunette and blonde intellectual women! Altogether as five diligent ladies of the young Turkish Republic, they received higher education and became respected journalists, lawyers and academics in their careers during 1940s and '50s.

Beginning with 18<sup>th</sup> century, the Eurocentric stereotyping tried to endorse the ideas of "segregated households; silenced, ignorant, inactive, uneducated and secluded Turkish women; veiled women; harem and polygamy. The gendered Eurocentric mind with positional superiority cannot visualize the positive and different aspects of Ottoman mentality which is based upon the mystic Sufi tradition. Turks' famous *harem* perception was in fact not segregation or seclusion of women but a space for the division of the gender powers. Women are strongly face to face with men although their life style is different. Not only imperial harem, but all the architecture in the grand Ottoman territory was designed separately for men and women, harem being the home and girls' school and the space of private life of the family, unlike *selamlık* which was the public space for men and visitors.

For many centuries, the language of the colonial powers was very strong, shaming the Turks with prejudices. Besides, the importance of liberal fathers and

founding fathers was always subordinated by stereotypings or easy generalizations of Orientalism. In reality, paternalistic/maternalistic protection for girls was a result of the female emancipation as an indigenous pre-Islamic Turkic tradition. Godfrey Goodwin stresses the importance of Muslim Ottoman women as follows: "Throughout Ottoman history, the emphasis on male dominance was challenged by the importance of the matriarch, whose presence is overt among the Turcoman tribes." Goodwin continues "The women's intelligence and knowledge were not wasted and they joined the conversation without restraint. A woman of strong character might even dominate it." (Goodwin, 2006).

A class of independent minded women and men supported the education of all women, one of whom was Fahire Battalgazi. The loss of the Empire did not call for imperialistic nostalgia but a desire to progress nationwide. From the sultanic regime of the multiethnic and multicultural Ottoman Empire to Turkish national consciousness, 1920s, '30s, '40s, '50s and '60s were the crescendo of woman rights for the women of the Turkish Republic. That is why today, no matter what geared activities are attempted, there are a lot of businesswomen and careered women in Turkey. Women of this nation are very fortunate that they did not fight for their rights like the women of the "Western culture." The women of Turkey were bestowed their rights in 1920s by the intellectual men and nation founders of that generation. It is very interesting and correctly diagnosed by Carter Vaughn Findley who calls this period "women under state feminism." (Findley, 2010).

Fahire's higher education starting at "İstanbul Darülfünun" (former name of modern İstanbul University) was completed in 1926 when she asked the Ministry of Education for a job to teach biology. She was appointed in the small Tercan village which was in those years included in the borders of the eastern city of Erzurum. Being a city girl, she enjoyed her teaching in the country side and became a headmistress of the school. When she was appointed an assistant at İstanbul Darülfünun, she inclined towards zoology and fresh water fish. Visiting Sorbonne University in 1931, she continued her studies day and night in the Department of Zoology and at the Institute of the Comparative Anatomies. Coming back to İstanbul, she had a chance to organize her future career since it was the time of the Reform of İstanbul University in 1933 under the leadership of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk and senior academics. Also she worked a short time as an acting biology teacher at the Eyüp Middle School in



**Figure 3.** Fahire Battalgazi with Eyüp Middle School Students, İstanbul.



**Figure 4.** Fahire Battalgazi with her Students in Istanbul University, Biology Department, Süleymaniye-İstanbul.

İstanbul. Her happy photos with the girl and boy students show the viewers the content and hope of a new forged nation (Figs. 3-4).

It was an interesting fortune of the foundation of the Turkish Republic which intersected with the exile or escaping of a lot of German and French scientists from the war to come. With the 1930s, Turkey was enlightened by these professors and İstanbul University profited from their scientific background a lot. '20s and '30s were the construction and refreshing years for the Turks after the collapse of their 619-year-old Ottoman Empire and after

the defeat of War World I (1914-1918). Tragedies of human loss, especially with the war in Gelibolu (1915) to save the Mother Land (*Anadolu*) from the colonialists was a horrible experience and agonizing remembrance. During the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, millions of migrants swept into Anatolia (Asia Minor) from the Balkans, from Aegean islands, from Crimea, and the Caucasus Mountains of the Black Sea. When the painful war times were over, the reconstruction of Turkey was on the way in all areas with 1923.



During the lessons at İstanbul University in 1920s and '30s, the students could listen to the German or French teachers as a pier translated the lectures. Prof. Dr. Andree Naville (1895-1937) and Prof. Dr. Curt Kosswig (1903-1982) were the well-known teachers of Biology at İstanbul University whose lectures were translated by Fahire and some other Turkish students, with foreign language speaking abilities. During her duty as a translator, Fahire started her PhD with A. Naville and terminated her dissertation with Curt Kosswig on Naville's death. Her PhD work was the first written dissertation by a female academic. With 1940s, her academic publications were like the sparkling water falls until her death in 1948 (İshakoğlu-Kadioğlu, S., 1998).

Coming to her marital status, Dr. Fahire Battalgazi was married to a gynaecologist from a well known family of İstanbul but when the marriage did not seem happy Fahire divorced her husband, never to get married once more. During those years Turkey was still quite traditional and divorce was not common but she chose to live single with her dad and deal only with her zoology studies and her fresh water fish. She was in her early forties when she died during a brain operation. Although Turkish medical doctors are very talented and skillful, brain operations were most probably quite risky, hard and mortal at the time. Her death during the operation was one of the many tragedies of the Battalgazi family. However her academic publications are the pride of her country and relatives.

**Financial Support:** This study was not funded by a specific project grant.

## References

- Ahmad, F. (2005). *Turkey: The Quest for Identity*. Oxford: Oneworld, 2005, 89.
- Atasoy, A. R. (1945). *Şam Türk Tıbbiye Mektebi Tarihi*. Milli Mecmua Basımevi, T.C. İstanbul Üniversitesi, Tıp Tarihi Enstitüsü, 30.
- Battalgazi, F. (1944). Türkiye'de yeni ve az tanınmış balıklar. Poissons nouveaux et peu connus de la Turquie. *Revue de la Faculté des Sciences de l'Université d'Istanbul*, Série B: Sciences Naturelles, 9(4), 299–305.
- Battalgil, F. (1940). Yeni bir Cyprinid nev'i. Eine neue Cyprinidenart. *Revue de la Faculté des Sciences de l'Université d'Istanbul*, Série B: Sciences Naturelles, 5(1-2), 74–77.
- Battalgil, F. (1941). Türkiyenin tatlı su balıkları (İstanbul Üniversitesi Hayvanat Enstitüsü Koleksiyonu). Les poissons des eaux douces de la Turquie. (Collection de l'Institut de Zoologie de l'Université d'Istanbul.). *Revue de la Faculté des Sciences de l'Université d'Istanbul*, Série B: Sciences Naturelles, 6(1-2), 170–186.
- Battalgil, F. (1942). Türkiye Tatlı Su Balıkları Hakkında. Contribution à la connaissance des poissons des eaux douces de la Turquie. *Revue de la Faculté des Sciences de l'Université d'Istanbul*, Série B: Sciences Naturelles, 7(4), 287–306.
- Battalgil, F. (1944). Türkiye'de yeni tatlı su balıkları. Nouveaux poissons des eaux douces de la Turquie. *Revue de la Faculté des Sciences de l'Université d'Istanbul*, Série B: Sciences Naturelles, 9(2), 126–133.
- Evren, B., & Can, D. G. (1996). *Osmanlı Kadını ve Yabancı Gezginler. Ottoman Women and Foreign Travellers*. Ray Sigorta.
- Faroqhi, S. (2002). Stories of Ottoman men and women, establishing status, establishing control. İstanbul: Eren Yayıncılık.
- Faroqhi, S. (2007). Subjects of the Sultan, culture and daily life in the Ottoman Empire. London: I.B. Tauris.
- Findley, C. V. (2010). Turkey, Islam, nationalism and modernity: A history. USA: Yale University Press.
- Goodwin, G. (2006). The private world of Ottoman women. London: Saqi Essentials.
- İshakoğlu Kadioğlu, S. (1998). İstanbul Üniversitesi Fen Fakültesi Tarihçesi (1900-1946). İstanbul: İ.Ü. Basımevi ve Film Merkezi.
- McCarthy, J. (1997). The Ottoman Turks: An introductory history to 1923. London and New York: Longman, 7.
- Ortaylı, İ. (2004). Ottoman studies. İstanbul: İstanbul Bilgi University Press, 157.
- Quataert, D. (2005). The Ottoman Empire 1700-1922. Cambridge University Press, 178.
- Zürcher, E.J. (2004). Turkey: A modern history. London: I.B. Tauris, 13.