

## THE FIRST TURKISH WOMAN NOVELIST, FATMA ALİYE AND PATRIARCHAL SOCIAL SYSTEM

Çağlar DEMİR\*

### Abstract

Patriarchy is a social system in which men decide everything and women's views are ignored. As European countries, Ottoman society was a patriarchal, too. However, there were brave, intellectual and outspoken women citizens in Ottoman Empire. Fatma Aliye ( 1862-1936), the daughter of the significant statesman , Ahmet Cevdet Pasha, was the symbol of women liberation. She was the first woman novelist in Turkish literature. Even though she encountered handicaps in her life, she did not give up reading and writing on Islam, women rights and philosophy. She had a good command of French language. She always maintained that women were respected and independent members of the society and the moral values, traditions should be combined with contemporary life style. In that respect, her progressive ideas indicates that she was a feminist thinker and writer. The aim of this study is to shed light on her views regarding the status of women in Ottoman Empire and her social works to liberate Turkish women.

**Key words:** Fatma Aliye, Patriarchy, Ottoman Empire, Woman

### İLK TÜRK KADIN ROMANCI, FATMA ALİYE VE ATAERKİL SOSYAL SİSTEM

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### ÖZ

Ataerkil yapı, erkeklerin herşeye karar verdiği ve kadınların görüşlerinin göz ardı edildiği bir sosyal sistemdir. Avrupa ülkeleri gibi Osmanlı toplumu da ataerkil yapıda idi. Fakat, imparatorlukta cesur, entelektüel ve açık sözlü kadın vatandaşlar vardı. Önemli bir devlet adamı olan Ahmet Cevdet Paşa'nın kızı olan Fatma Semiye (1862-1936), kadınların özgürleşmesinin sembolüydü. O, Türk Edebiyatının ilk kadın romancısıydı. Hayatında zorluklarla karşılaşsa da, İslam, kadın hakları ve felsefe üzerine okumayı ve yazmayı bırakmamıştır. Fransızca diline son derece hakimdi. Daima, kadınların, toplumun saygın ve bağımsız üyeleri olmasını ve gelenek ve manevi değerlerin, çağdaş hayat tarzı ile birleştirilmesi gerektiğini savunmuştur. Aliye, kitaplarında, kadının, okumasını, dünyayı tanınmasını ve evden çıkıp sosyal hayatta yer alması gerektiğini belirtir. Bu açıdan, onun ilerici düşünceleri, kendisinin feminist bir düşünür ve yazar olduğunu gösterir. Bu çalışmanın amacı, onun Osmanlı İmparatorluğu'nda kadının statüsüne ilişkin görüşlerini ve Türk kadınlarını özgürleştirmek için yaptığı sosyal çalışmalarına ışık tutmaktır.

**Anahtar kelimeler:** Fatma Aliye, Ataerkil yapı, Osmanlı İmparatorluğu, Kadın

\* Okt. Balıkesir University, School of Foreign Languages, English lecturer,  
erkandemir508@hotmail.com

## Introduction

When Ottoman Empire is analysed, it can be stated that male supremacy prevailed in all areas of life. Especially, the period before administrative reforms in 1839, Ottoman women were spending their lives in a vicious circle, that is, her house and neighborhood. She was isolated from social life. For instance, ‘in the period of Kanuni Sultan Süleyman, women were given permission to run a public laundry. However, after a while, it was banned to run a public laundry because of the fact that there was an interaction between men and women in those places.’

There were many reasons why women became passive members of Ottoman Empire especially before Tanzimat, administrative reforms 1839. Some critics maintain that there was the effect of religion, Islam while some critics remark that the geography where Turks chose to live had a great impact on women’s lives. Settled life affected women’s role in social life. Domestic roles were given to women by the patriarchal social system. Men took public roles. According to İlber Ortaylı, patriarchal social system was the result of geographical cultural generation. Selin Dulum quotes İlber Ortaylı;

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“It is important to know the characteristic that in our society, women’s living with men was not possible unlike the lives in Germanic ( Teutonic) societies. This situation comprises almost all Mediterranean cultural generation. Muslim, Christian, and Jewish people are members of this cultural generation. For instance, when the history of Florence is analysed, in 13,14,15 th centuries, young girls spent their lives in their houses except for Sundays, when they visited the churches, being accompanied by their governesses...there are no festival tradition in most of Mediterranean-Middle East countries. Women and men in Italy rarely enjoyed themselves together in the festivals. However, in the Northern countries, they knew to enjoy themselves together.”

## Fatma Aliye and Her struggle with Patriarchy

Even though there were some positive changes in the lives of Turkish women after administrative reforms in 1839, they still had difficulties in terms of social life, such as outwear and having a job outside their homes. The first woman who expressed

women's problems in Ottoman Empire by writing novels, articles regarding social issues and gender roles in the society was Fatma Aliye. Being a daughter of Ahmet Cevdet Pasha, an intellectual statesman, she had the opportunity to learn French and read different kinds of Turkish and foreign books. She knew what meant to be a woman in a conservative society and wrote many novels to express the women's problems to create awareness in the society. In her novel, Refet (1896) she mentioned about the importance of women's education and solidarity among women. According to Aliye, a woman should have an education and a job to have no anxiety about their future. In her novel called Udi (1897), she attracts the attention of readers to women's economic freedom.

Fatma Aliye was married with a captain, Mehmet Faik Bey unwillingly because of family's insistence and the suppression of society. His intellectual level was lower than Fatma Aliye. At the early years of their marriage, he didn't want her to improve herself intellectually. After he returned from his post in Konya, his views about her wife's intellectual pursuits changed and supported her to publish her articles and novels. She reflected her unhappiness in marriage life through her novel, Enin (1912) in which her heroine was interested in natural sciences. She was also engaged. However, her fiance cheated her and she left him.

All her novels reflect her own attitudes towards the patriarchy, marriage, and women's independence. She strongly supports women's education and getting out of their houses and having a job. In those times, women weren't asked to marry with the men they chose. Family decided on "the match". Aliye was against those kinds of arranged marriages. All these gender issues which Aliye remarks in her novels indicate that she is a pioneering women figure who thinks beyond her society and blends the tradition, religion with modernity masterly.

Serpil Çakıl, an academic in University of İstanbul, states that;

"The fact that the Ottoman Empire was ruled by Sharia (Islamic law) had an impact not only on religious, but also cultural life. The dominant ideology of the period aimed at synthesis between Islam and the West and the resulting civilizationism found its way into Fatma Aliye's views on women and women's rights. She placed primary

importance on the family and regarded women as the driving force of civilization via their roles as mothers, emphasizing the need for women's education, raising the problem of women's freedom and responsibilities in the family and in society and demanding rights for women within these prescribed boundaries. Some of her arguments, calling for sexual equality as well as the preservation of gender differences, reflected widespread currents of nineteenth century European feminist thought.”(Dulum, 2006:15)

All feminist thinkers support women's education and economic independence. What they believe is that women's freedom passes from education and a profession. Women can only feel free if they have a job and economic power. Virginia Woolf, a prominent English literary critic and woman writer is in accord with Fatma Aliye regarding economic freedom of women;

“All I could do was to offer you an opinion upon a minor point- a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write a fiction; and that, as you will see, leaves the great problem of true nature of woman and the true nature of fiction unsolved.” (Woolf,1992:4)

On the other hand, some women writers maintain that in spite of the fact a woman is economically independent, she may not have freedom. They may still be under control of their men as Naomi Black states;

“Women writers, the freest of all women professionals, are still constrained by their own attitudes, their limited experience, and most seriously, the conventional morality controlled by men. Even economic independence in the form of an inherited or earned income will not liberate them entirely.” (Black,2004)

There is an undeniable fact that Fatma Aliye was a feminist woman who was brought up in a conservative and intellectual family. When her childhood is analysed, one can see the hardships she encountered. The period which she lived through was full of problems such as “arranged marriage, polygamy, infidelity, not being able to return to the family home, or concubinage.” (Türe,2011:46)

Fatma Aliye was against polygamy. Most of male writers, such as Mahmut Esat maintained that polygamy was necessary in terms of the morality of society. He viewed polygamy as an antidote to moral depravity. However, Aliye strongly disagreed with Mahmut Esat and stated;

“Islam does not order polygamy, and when it is permitted it must be presented in what circumstances this permission is given.”<sup>1</sup> Her having discussion with male intellectuals regarding polygamy indicates that she is against male dominated society.”According to Aliye, Islam orders woman and man equality. She wrote *Nisvan-ı İslam* in order to discuss the status of women in marriage and social life in Ottoman Islam world. She emphasizes that Islam gives great importance to women and patriarchal structure of the society can be challenged through Islam. Ansev Demirhan remarks that;

**“Nisvan-ı İslam reveals Aliye’s understanding of Muslim women as possessors of cultural capital and agents of change. Both in her decision to write on this topic and in the book itself, Aliye shows how Muslim women can be cultural ambassadors who actively seek out acquaintances and social interaction with European women as a means of correcting European misconceptions on Muslim women and Muslim societies. Aliye’s ability to write on the relationship between women and Islam, for Muslim women like her, was a way to stake intellectual space and influence cultural change. Fatma Aliye’s use of Islam as a corroborating agent to challenge patriarchal structures suggests that women have constructed Islamic tradition in order to experience equitable treatment regardless of one’s gender.” (Demirhan, 20014:19)**

Fatma Aliye discusses the status of women in marriage and social life in Ottoman Islam world.

Fatma Aliye strongly believed in the equality and equity between man and woman. According to her, Islam, the religion of muslim people provides women with

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<sup>1</sup> Defne Karakaya, *Patriarchal Bargain: Fatma Aliye’s Strategies of Writing in Ahmet Cevdet Pasha and His time*, Central European University, Budapest, Hungary, 2009, page 9

the rights that make them equal with men. She maintains that there are prejudgements towards Islam and misconceptions about the approach of Islam towards women. Islam gives great value to women and supports women's rights. Hilal Demir quotes Fatma Aliye;

“The law that Islam grants for women is enough to make them happy.” (Demir, 2013:1061)

Fatma Aliye thinks that the male dominated society enserfed the rights of women. In Ottoman empire, the scholars, intellectual people ignored women. Aliye criticizes intellectual people and asks; ‘is the development of society possible if the intellectual people don't say and write anything regarding women?’ (Demir, 2013:1061) During her life, she always wanted all women to be literate and have wide knowledge about every issue.

### **Conclusion**

It is important to specify that Fatma Aliye integrated tradition, religion and modernism in her life. Her works, conferences regarding women's education can be seen as a challenge to patriarchal way of life. She never gave up writing and reading though she faced with difficulties in her family and social life. Through her novels and conferences, she aimed to enlighten women about their rights, the value of education, and economic independence. Even though she is not seen as a feminist writer, her struggle with patriarchy, her views in her novels, and conferences signify that she contributed a lot to Turkish women's liberation and education.

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