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İbnü'l Hakkı Mehmed Tahir's Meşrutiyet Hanımları and Meşrutiyet Erkekleri: Consumerism, Identity and Gender in the Second Constitutional Era

Abstract

This study analyses two pamphlets written by İbnü'l-Hakkı Mehmed Tahir: *Meşrutiyet Hanımları* (Ladies of the Constitutional Era) and *Meşrutiyet Erkekleri* (Men of the Constitutional Era). The works were published during the period following the proclamation of the Second Constitutional Era - *Meşrutiyet Hanımları* in 1910-11 (Hijri 1328) and *Meşrutiyet Erkekleri* in 1911-12 (Hijri 1330). The two booklets are examined in conjunction with each other, as *Meşrutiyet Erkekleri* was written in response to *Meşrutiyet Hanımları*, the former offering critiques of women from a male perspective and the latter presenting criticisms of men from a female perspective. While addressing everyday practices such as fashion, consumption habits, and Western imitation among the Ottoman elite, Tahir advocates for an authentic rather than imitative modernization. This article aims to contextualize these themes within the socio-cultural and political framework of late Ottoman society through the lens of an Ottoman intellectual's social critique. Drawing on theoretical frameworks concerning gender, nationalism, and consumerism, the study demonstrates that Tahir's nationalist call to conscious consumption was never addressed to an undifferentiated Ottoman citizen, but carried asymmetric meanings, expectations, and consequences for women and men.

Keywords: Ottoman Society, Gender, Second Constitutional Era, History of Ottoman Thought, Social Change.

İbnü'l Hakkı Mehmed Tahir'in Meşrutiyet Hanımları ve Meşrutiyet Erkekleri: İkinci Meşrutiyet Döneminde Tüketim, Kimlik ve Toplumsal Cinsiyet

Öz

Bu çalışma, İbnü'l-Hakkı Mehmed Tahir tarafından kaleme alınan iki risaleyi incelemektedir: *Meşrutiyet Hanımları* ve *Meşrutiyet Erkekleri*. Söz konusu eserler, II. Meşrutiyet'in ilanının ardından yayımlanmış olup *Meşrutiyet Hanımları* 1910-11 (Hicri 1328), *Meşrutiyet Erkekleri* ise 1911-12 (Hicri 1330) yıllarına aittir. *Meşrutiyet Erkekleri*, *Meşrutiyet Hanımları*'na bir yanıt niteliği taşıdığından iki eser birlikte ele alınmaktadır: ilki kadınlara yönelik erkek bakış açısıyla kaleme alınmış bir eleştiri sunarken, ikincisi erkeklere yönelik kadın perspektifinden bir değerlendirme içermektedir. Mehmed Tahir, Osmanlı seçkinleri arasındaki moda, tüketim alışkanlıkları ve Batı taklitçiliği gibi gündelik pratikler üzerinden, öykünmeci değil özgün bir modernleşmeyi savunmaktadır. Makale, yazarın öne çıkardığı bu temaları, bir Osmanlı aydınının toplumsal eleştirisi bağlamında geç Osmanlı toplumunun sosyokültürel ve siyasi çerçevesi içinde ele almayı amaçlamaktadır. Toplumsal cinsiyet, milliyetçilik ve tüketimcilik üzerine kuramsal çerçevelerden hareket eden bu çalışma, Tahir'in bilinçli tüketime yönelik milliyetçi çağrısının hiçbir zaman ayırım gözetmeyen, homojen bir Osmanlı vatandaşına yönelmediğini; aksine kadınlar ve erkekler için farklı anlamlar, beklentiler ve sonuçlar taşıdığını ortaya koymaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Osmanlı Toplumu, Toplumsal Cinsiyet, İkinci Meşrutiyet Dönemi, Osmanlı Düşünce Tarihi, Toplumsal Değişim.

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1. Introduction

This study analyses two pamphlets written by İbnü'l-Hakkı Mehmed Tahir: *Meşrutiyet Hanımları* (Ladies of the Constitutional Era) and *Meşrutiyet Erkekleri* (Men of the Constitutional Era). The works were published during the period following the proclamation of the Second Constitutional Era -*Meşrutiyet Hanımları* in 1910-11 (Hijri 1328) and *Meşrutiyet Erkekleri* in 1911-12 (Hijri 1330). The two booklets are examined in conjunction with each other, as *Meşrutiyet Erkekleri* was written in response to *Meşrutiyet Hanımları*. Since *Meşrutiyet Hanımları* offers ideas and critiques of women from a male perspective, while *Meşrutiyet Erkekleri* presents views and criticisms of men from a female perspective, this approach allows for a more comprehensive understanding and a more thorough analysis of the two texts.

While addressing the everyday practices of Ottoman women and men of his time, Mehmed Tahir discusses issues of fashion, identity, and class, and advocates for a modernisation that is authentic rather than imitative. This article aims to contextualise the topics highlighted by the author within the socio-cultural and political framework of the late Ottoman society through the lens of an Ottoman intellectual's social critique. In this sense, the study contributes to the field by offering insights into the relationship between Ottoman modernisation, national identity, new consumer habits and gender roles in the Second Constitutional Period.

The booklets have been transcribed by Dr. Mustafa Dere and published under the title "Yeni Bir Toplum İnşa Etmek", along with an analytical essay (Dere, 2020). In this essay, Dere provides a valuable contextual reading of the pamphlets, evaluating the late Ottoman period's individual and societal structures within the works' historical setting. While Dere's contribution is primarily descriptive and contextual, this study takes a different approach by situating the texts within theoretical frameworks on gender and nationalism, consumerism, and modernisation. Rather than asking what the pamphlets tell us about Ottoman society in general, this study asks a more specific question: how do these texts construct, negotiate, and reproduce gendered identities and duties in the context of a nationalist modernisation project? In doing so, it moves beyond contextualisation toward critical analysis, examining not only what Tahir argues, but the ideological assumptions and structural logic underlying his critique, particularly the asymmetric burdens placed on Ottoman women and men as citizens of the constitutional order.

As scholarship on gender and nationalism has demonstrated, modernisation projects are never gender-neutral. The responsibilities, sacrifices, and behavioural expectations assigned to women and men within nationalist discourse are structurally different, even when both are addressed as citizens of the same nation (Walby, 2006; McClintock, 1993). Women are frequently called upon to embody cultural authenticity through dress, domestic practice, and moral conduct while men are positioned as the active agents of political and economic transformation (Yuval-Davis and Anthias, 1989; Kandiyoti, 2004). Tahir's pamphlets are a revealing instance of this dynamic: both texts address Ottoman citizens as subjects of national duty, yet the content of that duty, and the consequences of failing it, are markedly different for each gender. Reading Tahir's pamphlets through this lens not only illuminates the gendered logic of his social critique but also contributes to our understanding of how Ottoman nationalist discourse assigned asymmetric duties and identities to its male and female subjects.

The first part of the article introduces the author and his works under study. Following this, a social, cultural, and political evaluation of the period in which the works were published will be provided. This thematic analysis allows us to trace where consumerism, national identity, and gender intersect in Tahir's thought revealing that the nationalist call to conscious consumption was never addressed to an undifferentiated Ottoman citizen, but was always already a gendered prescription, carrying different meanings, expectations, and consequences for women and men.

2. Meşrutiyet Hanımları, Meşrutiyet Erkekleri

Although detailed biographical information on the author, İbn'ül Hakkı Mehmed Tahir, is scarce in the sources, it is known that he wrote several pamphlets on social, moral, and cultural issues (Akarslan, 2022, p. 718). His dedication is evident in his efforts to promote women's education and their contributions to the press, which he saw as vital to the nation's progress, actively encouraging their participation in this field. He was the proprietor of *Hanımlara Mahsus Gazete*, one of the longest-running Ottoman women's periodicals, which published over 400 issues during the reign of Sultan Abdülhamid II. In his application for the publication's license, Sadık Efendi, the Treasury Auctioneer who vouched for him, described him as a man of honour and integrity who adhered to the laws, resulting in the granting of the necessary permits for the newspaper's publication (Toska, 1994, p. 134). The fact that *Hanımlara Mahsus Gazete* was able to be published without interruption during a period of strict censorship speaks to these very qualities.

While *Meşrutiyet Hanımları* was published by *Şems Matbaası* (Şems Printing House), the publisher of *Meşrutiyet Erkekleri* is listed as "Seyyid Tahir, proprietor of İtimat Library," with the printing location recorded as *Dersâdet Tevsîî Tabagât* Press. The author introduces *Meşrutiyet Hanımları* as "the recording of a gentleman's advice to a lady within a respectable family" (Tahir, 1910, p. 4). In a brief announcement at the conclusion of the work, it is noted that "the critical responses provided by the lady" would be published under the title *Meşrutiyet Erkekleri*, which was subsequently released as promised (Tahir, 1910, p.4). Although the author did not provide specific information regarding the identities of the lady and gentleman mentioned, *Meşrutiyet Erkekleri* refers to them as educated individuals. While the man received a formal education at school, the woman noted that her education was private (Tahir, 1912, p. 8). Women from upper-class families received private education mostly in their mansions, even though girls' schools had already begun to open and were starting to spread during this period. Since the social observations and critiques address the lifestyles of elite/upper-class individuals, we can infer that the author portrays these figures as elite/upper-class members.

In *Meşrutiyet Hanımları* and *Meşrutiyet Erkekleri*, Mehmed Tahir primarily critiques the lack of national consciousness and patriotism among Ottoman men and women. He develops this central theme by discussing fashion, consumption habits, Western imitation, and identity, focusing on the elite and upper classes. Tahir underscores their detachment from ordinary people who send their sons to the front lines while critiquing their embrace of European innovations, which he believes lead the state toward disaster. He maintains these critiques by analysing the behaviours of both men and women.

The exclusive focus on elite and upper-class figures in both pamphlets is itself analytically significant, and it is no accident. The phenomena Tahir critiques alafranga fashion,

consumption of imported European goods, foreign governesses, and the adoption of Western social habits that were materially accessible only to these classes. Education, new consumer habits, and the lifestyle choices that concerned Tahir were not broadly available experiences but markers of class privilege. Lower-class Ottoman subjects were largely outside the reach of these transformations, and therefore outside the scope of this particular social critique. Similarly, the intended audience of both pamphlets was drawn from the same educated, propertied stratum being addressed. The critique is only meaningful within this social context as it speaks to those who had the means to consume differently and the social influence to set trends that filtered downward through Ottoman society. This top-down dynamic is itself a feature of the period's dominant intellectual frameworks, in which the educated and propertied classes were seen as both the primary agents and the primary objects of modernisation discourse.

Mehmed Tahir aims in *Meşrutiyet Hanımları* to instil in women a sense of responsibility for the protection and development of the nation. He outlines their duties in better serving the country, critiques their current condition, and warns of the dangers this poses for the nation. In other words, he critiques women's patriotism and offers a model for them to follow. In *Meşrutiyet Erkekleri*, while critiquing men's approach to Westernization and their diminishing sense of patriotism, Mehmed Tahir also addresses issues regarding the patriarchal system. He suggests that men neglect their responsibilities and obligations to the nation, like women do. However, unlike women, men occupy influential roles in society and wield power, positioning them as key drivers of change. In this regard, Mehmed Tahir positions men in a crucial role as the agents of change, while portraying women as passive receivers of the changes and eventual victims of the system.

While direct evidence of how *Meşrutiyet Hanımları* and *Meşrutiyet Erkekleri* were received in the contemporary press remains limited, they were published into an already active public debate. As discussed in Section 5, women's periodicals such as *Hanımlara Mahsus Gazete* and *Kadınlar Dünyası* were simultaneously running campaigns around conscious consumption, domestic production, and women's civic responsibilities that debates to which Tahir's pamphlets clearly speak. That Mehmed Tahir himself was the proprietor of *Hanımlara Mahsus Gazete* further situates these works within, rather than outside, the mainstream of Ottoman women's press culture, suggesting they were not isolated interventions but contributions to an ongoing and widely shared intellectual conversation.

3. Ottoman Modernisation and Sociocultural Transformations

The Ottoman Empire faced significant challenges in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, grappling with nationalist movements, uprisings, territorial losses, and mounting political, economic, and cultural pressures from European powers. In response, the empire initiated a series of political, military, and social reforms in search of solutions. Although these efforts initially focused on military improvements, they quickly broadened in scope. Starting with the Tanzimat era (1839–1876), European cultural influences became increasingly prominent, particularly among the ruling and elite classes.

European styles began to spread through the Ottoman Empire, first appearing in the palace and elite households before spreading to the homes of the upper-class members of the society. This influence became prevalent in various aspects of daily life, including clothing, interior

design, consumption habits, etiquette, and culinary culture, as well as language, art, literature, entertainment, and social practices. Alongside these cultural shifts, the period witnessed a redefinition of gender roles as traditional roles, and family structures became subjects of debate, particularly among the emerging Ottoman intellectual elite. These intellectuals often discussed in the press how men and women should adapt to an evolving society and the responsibilities they should take on.

While these changes transformed specific segments of Ottoman society, they also provoked a reaction among Ottoman intellectuals. The rapid social and cultural transformations during the Tanzimat period and the perceived weakening of Ottoman identity vis-à-vis European styles were unacceptable to some bureaucrats and intellectuals. Among the most vocal and systematic critics of these changes were the Young Ottomans, a group of Muslim Ottoman intellectuals and bureaucrats who received a Western-style education in state schools established to keep pace with European scientific developments. They were cultural nationalists who recognised Europe's advancements in technology and science but were critical of accepting every European innovation unconditionally. They particularly criticised Tanzimat statesmen and the Ottoman elite and upper class for their superficial engagement with European civilisation and tendency towards imitation, occasionally caricaturing these tendencies in their works. However, by the twentieth century, the perspectives of the Ottoman intellectuals on progress had been diverse. Consequently, by the time the Second Constitutional period approached, some intellectuals began to argue that progress required not only adopting Western scientific achievements but also embracing Western cultural elements.

4. New Political Strategies and Concepts in the Late Ottoman Empire

In addition to the cultural and social transformations mentioned, the late Ottoman period witnessed the arrival of new political concepts and approaches from Europe. Ideas such as constitutionalism, nation, citizenship, patriotism, individualism, and freedom emerging after the French Revolution, gained prominence through Ottoman intellectuals and the rise of the press in its modern form, beginning to shape socio-political life. Indeed, these ideas were found to have practical expression in the declaration of the First Constitutional Era in 1876 and the establishment of the first Ottoman Parliament until its suspension by Sultan Abdülhamid II. The declaration of the Second Constitution in 1908, facilitated by the Committee of Union and Progress, led to the reopening of the Parliament and the end of Abdülhamid II's absolutist policies and censorship of the press, fostering a more liberal atmosphere within the state. The lifting of censorship and control over the press sparked a rapid increase in the number and variety of newspapers, periodicals, and printed works. Along with the declaration of constitutionalism, debates emerged about the responsibilities of the nation's constituents to ensure the state's survival, with these duties being redefined.

The concept of the "citizen" gained importance as the new political subject of a centralised, modern state, and schools and the press were assigned a crucial role in shaping this new identity. Newspapers, periodicals, and books of *Malumat-ı Medeniye* (Knowledge of Civilisation) contributed to constructing and redefining citizenship (Üstel, 2001, p. 8). With the latest form of governance came definitions of rights and freedoms, sparking heated debates about the social responsibilities of men and women and the significance and status of the family. Although women's journalism and publications addressing women's issues existed

before the Second Constitutional Era, the scope and context of these discussions expanded during this period.

As will be discussed in greater detail later in this study, these two works of Mehmed Tahir not only offered a critique of society through Westernisation but also sought to contribute to defining the responsibilities of women and men during the Constitutional period toward their nation, which was grappling with wars and crises. By addressing both men and women as citizens, the works aimed to remind them of the importance of patriotism and, more specifically, what those who love their country should and should not do. In other words, they aimed to redefine their responsibilities toward the nation. The intellectual debates regarding how women and men should be defined under changing political and social conditions and their duties and responsibilities toward the nation, society, and their families became critical topics in the Ottoman press from the mid-nineteenth century onwards. Although these discussions varied in nature across different periods, they all converged on the idea that women, in their capacity, in other words, according to the roles required by and suited to their nature, should contribute to the empire's survival and be active in saving the nation.

This approach is evident in the author's motivation for why he preferred to address his female readers as "Ladies of the Constitution" as follows: "O, Constitutional Ladies! It is quite natural to address you this way, for the Constitution is not only for men; women are just as much a part of it as men" (Tahir, 1910, p.13).

By using the term "Men of the Constitution," the author addresses "all Ottoman men, and with a bit more specificity, all Muslim men" (Tahir, 1912, p. 7). This emphasis on Muslim men is because, despite the rise of separatist nationalist movements at the time, the concept of Ottoman identity still included non-Muslim elements. According to the author, unlike Muslim Ottoman men, non-Muslim Ottomans prioritised women's education and established institutions to ensure that girls received schooling from an early age. As a result, non-Muslim men fell outside the scope of the author's concerns and criticisms. This also gives us insight into the scope of his understanding of the new national identity.

As discussed, Mehmed Tahir's writings reflect his time's broader intellectual and ideological currents. The subsequent sections will critically examine the texts, delving into their themes and evaluating the works through relevant theoretical frameworks, and placing it within the broader socio-historical perspective.

5. Fashion, Consumption, and Identity

Mehmed Tahir devoted a substantial part of his work to criticising fashion and consumption habits, which he saw as damaging both to the state and national identity. He argued that the growing fascination with fashion among both women and men led not only to economic losses but also to a cultural capitulation, as national identity was increasingly shaped by foreign influences. In his view, the large sums of money spent on imported goods undermined social solidarity by funnelling Ottoman wealth into the hands of foreign manufacturers. Such habits, he believed, represented a betrayal of cultural heritage and posed a serious threat to Ottoman-Turkish Muslim identity and, ultimately, to the homeland itself.

Mehmed Tahir's critique of fashion habits and their negative consequences is part of the debates concerning Westernisation/modernisation, national identity, and nationalism from the second half of the nineteenth century. As briefly mentioned above, imported European

consumer goods and daily practices began to enter the lives of upper and middle-class Ottoman Muslims. During this period, urban Muslim Ottoman clothing rapidly transitioned towards a European style. Clothing emerged as one of the most controversial elements of Ottoman modernisation, symbolising a significant shift in cultural identity. While foreign goods had been present in the Ottoman market before the nineteenth century, the advancement of industrialisation in Europe and the establishment of free trade agreements with European states led to a marked increase in the dominance of European products within the market. Additionally, the increase in the number of European settlers in Istanbul during the Crimean War (1853-56) contributed to the Europeanisation of Istanbul's social life and consumption habits (Exertzoglou, 2003).

The Ottoman Empire's loss of power in military and political terms relative to Europe was also a significant factor. Simmel's concepts of 'psychological inclination towards imitation' and 'tendency towards social equalisation' (Simmel, 1904, pp.132-133) help us to interpret the popularity of European culture and fashion among Ottoman elites and upper classes, as well as the tendency for fashion forms to spread from 'the stronger' to 'the less powerful.' According to Simmel, fashion offers an opportunity for social equality through imitation because imitation "makes possible an expedient test of power without a personal and creative application but is displayed easily and smoothly, because its content is a given quantity" (Simmel, 1904, pp. 131-132). We can observe this shift during Sultan Mahmud II's reign when extensive reforms occurred. A notable aspect of these reforms was the overhaul of bureaucratic dress codes. The rapidly growing civil servant class saw their attire transformed as traditional garments were replaced by European-style trousers, shirts, and jackets, with the fez adopted as headwear.

Consumption Studies, which explore consumption histories of societies and cultures, have demonstrated the importance of consumption habits in shaping collective identities and influencing political, social, economic, and cultural patterns. As a part of this culture, issues related to clothing and fashion go beyond mere discussions about attire; they have complex moral, ideological, economic, and cultural implications (Miller, 2005; Quataert, 2000). As noted by Nancy Micklewright in her study, shifts in attire serve as indicators of broader social changes. The adoption of European styles in consumption within the Ottoman Empire brought about changes in values and habits (Micklewright, 1989).

Mehmed Tahir's criticisms of clothing and consumption reflect his concerns about a society undergoing transformation due to modernisation and facing threats from internal and external enemies. His critiques also highlight the importance of integrating women into the processes of collective identity-building and national defence. In this context, he emphasised the economic and moral implications of fashion and attire, linking them to issues of identity and patriotism.

Tahir addresses the issue of fashion and consumption as a form of a battle for women, which he calls the "war of peacetime" (*vakt-i sulh muharebesi*), a struggle to be undertaken when not on the battlefield:

"One does not only fight the enemy with swords, bullets, or cannons. Every person, every child of the homeland, ensures the protection of their country from enemy attacks at every moment through their actions. This is a fearless yet effective, and more heartfelt, kind of war." (Tahir, 1910, p.1)

The author reminds women who cannot join the frontlines that they, too, share in the responsibility of serving the nation, just as men do. While acknowledging the charitable contributions of wealthy families in support of the military and those in need, the author stresses that this broader national struggle cannot be sustained through modest financial donations alone (Tahir, 1910, p. 9). He suggests that this battle is far more comprehensive, requiring a conscious way of living. According to him, one of the main issues concerning women is their lack of patriotism in this struggle. He criticises women for their ignorance, noting not only their lack of emotional attachment to national identity but also their unfamiliarity with even the most basic geographical and historical knowledge of their own country. He attributes this superficiality to their preoccupation with vanity and indulgence, which he sees because of Ottoman men's longstanding neglect of women's education (Tahir, 1912, p. 8).

According to Mehmed Tahir, one of the main causes of women's current condition, which is already under criticism, is the excessive consumption habits of "elegant and wealthy ladies," driven by their fascination with *alafranga*¹ lifestyles. In their pursuit of these Westernised styles, they sacrificed considerable financial resources, which further exposed them to widespread critique. Firstly, women were deprived of "Turkish sentiment and Turkish clothing" in favour of European fashions. This situation leads to the "corruption of their manners along with their attire and, consequently, a further reduction in their wealth alongside their morality" (Tahir, 1910, p. 12). They fell short in patriotism and service by spending their money on foreign vendors and tailors rather than their compatriots and those in need. The enemy aimed to destroy moral virtues and make people forget patriotic feelings through these means. To avoid this, the author suggests adopting a warlike mindset during peacetime, that is, to develop a consciousness of "fighting behind the lines" and diligently work for the homeland while being aware of one's "civil duties" (Tahir, 1910, p. 17)

Until the late nineteenth century, a significant portion of Ottoman society would wear the fabrics for their clothing at home on their looms and cut and sew their garments themselves. Ready-made clothing was yet to be widespread, and going to a tailor to have clothes made was not an option for most people to afford. However, from the second half of the nineteenth century onwards, wearing dresses tailored by foreign tailors in Istanbul from English fabrics and in line with the latest fashions became a symbol of prestige and status. These foreign tailors, called "*modistre*"s, dominated the clothing market. All the female tailors in Istanbul were of Christian or Jewish Ottoman origin (Karakışla, 2014, pp. 12-16).

By the end of the century, fashion habits had moved beyond being solely an upper-class culture and began to be embraced by broader segments of society. However, its adoption by families with limited financial means led to economic hardship for those with modest incomes, making it a social issue widely discussed in literature and the press. Articles and news about the limits of fashion, its harms, and the influence of fashion trends received significant attention in literary and press circles, particularly in periodicals prepared for women, with substantial contributions from female writers (Van Os, 2014).

While fashion habits were not entirely rejected in these discussions, there was an effort to promote public awareness among women about becoming conscious consumers. This

¹ "Alafranga" can be translated as "European" or "Western-style." It refers to a preference for or adoption of European customs, styles, or influences, particularly in fashion, lifestyle, or manners.

included dressing according to religious rules and national customs and avoiding unhealthy (such as corsets) or extravagant fashion trends. Additionally, efforts were made to transform women from consumers to producers, encouraging the use of domestic products and aiming to break the monopoly of foreign tailors. These activities were promoted through the women's press. For example, *Hanımlara Mahsus Gazete*, which began publication in 1895, regularly featured dress patterns and designs, promoted *Singer* sewing machines, and published translations of their manuals to encourage women to sew their own clothes. The newspaper also opened the *Hanımlara Mahsus Gazete Terzihanesi*, offering services at lower prices than foreign tailors and ensuring that Muslim women's money stayed within a local business. Similarly, *Kadınlar Dünyası* magazine opened a tailor shop with similar goals, initiating debates about the nationalisation of women's clothing and running campaigns to promote the use of domestic goods (Karaman, 2016, pp. 245-300).

As examined above, in *Meşrutiyet Hanımları*, the author addresses how women's fashion and consumption habits damage the national economy and identity. He later examines the same issue for men in *Meşrutiyet Erkekleri*. However, before discussing men's fashion consumption, he addresses the root cause of the greater economic and cultural problems that also led women to "change their appearance and dress to this extent" (Tahir, 1912, pp. 16-17). This root cause lies in the economic privileges, or capitulations, that Ottoman men granted to European powers in the past. These men were statesmen who, unaware of the long-term consequences of their actions, enabled European powers to exploit the Ottoman Empire's resources at will, leaving future generations to bear the burden. Over time, it was once again Ottoman men—sent abroad to learn from Europe's "progress and development", who returned not only with knowledge but also with imitation and "immorality," which, in this view, marked the beginning of the empire's decline. Thus, it was ultimately men's actions that contributed most significantly to the overall weakening of the empire (Tahir, 1912, pp. 16-17).

Additionally, the author contends that fashion should not be a subject of criticism directed at women alone. Although women were often scrutinised for their consumption habits through a patriotic and nationalist lens, men's relationship with fashion was also subject to critical examination. In *Meşrutiyet Erkekleri*, through the voice of an Ottoman lady, Mehmed Tahir critiques the tendency to blame women exclusively for their fashion habits. He argues that men's preoccupation with fashion, including clothing, accessories, and even grooming practices such as makeup and facial hair, makes it unjust to blame solely women. Just as women are criticised for allegedly undermining Islamic and Ottoman morals through their adoption of fashion trends, men who wear European-style trousers, vests, starched shirts, and stiff collars should be subject to the same scrutiny. Like women, men frequently shopped at foreign-owned stores and therefore bore equal responsibility in what the text frames as an "economic war." The author suggests that if men actively participate in this struggle, the women who "follow men" and feel "compelled to imitate them" will likewise be drawn into the effort (Tahir, 1912, p. 24).

In her analysis of characters in Tanzimat-era novels, Deniz Kandiyoti demonstrates that late Ottoman novelists often portrayed the men of the period with a mocking and harsh tone while depicting women as powerless and passive victims, subject to unwanted treatment due to the challenges of the system. In response to the Westernisation patterns of the Tanzimat bureaucrats, intellectuals, and elites, the movement led by the Young Ottomans used two

figures as objects of critique in their works: the dandy, extravagant, and foolish men, and the fashion-obsessed women. Kandiyoti convincingly argues that “male novelists frequently adopted a moralistic tone and sometimes the heroine’s point of view, in their denunciation of these social ills” (Kandiyoti, 1988, pp. 35-50). Ahmet Midhat’s *Felatun Bey* is a good example where the protagonist misinterprets Westernisation as adopting a life of indulgence, finding himself in ridiculous situations due to his poor command of foreign languages. In the same story, the *alafranga* daughter of the household, Mihriban, has abandoned traditional crafts and immersed herself in superficial pursuits like grooming, dressing up, and playing the piano. Similar character types appear in many works by Ahmet Midhat, as well as in Recaizade Ekrem’s *Araba Sevdası* (Love of Carriage), and Hüseyin Rahmi Gürpınar’s *Şık* (Chic), *Mürebbiye* (Nanny), and *Kadın Erkekleşince* (When Women Masculinised). Şerif Mardin also addresses this reaction in his article on nineteenth-century Ottoman urban cultural life, where he analyses Tanzimat literature, particularly the Tanzimat novel. Mardin argues that Tanzimat culture was marked by extravagance, over-consumption, and a fast-paced lifestyle, which the Young Ottomans critiqued from patriotic and moral perspectives. They contended that true progress and civilisation extended beyond merely imitating Western customs. In this context, Ottoman women faced criticism for their overt adoption of Western fashion, deemed immoral for compromising Islamic modesty, and for abandoning traditional practices like sewing and embroidery in favour of consumer culture (Mardin, 1974).

In this regard, we can say Mehmed Tahir’s descriptions parallel those in Tanzimat novels and the language he uses mirrors this caricaturing, portraying both “The *Meşrutiyet*-era ladies, who have learned a few words of French, speak it even in their own homes, unaware of how they insult their country and compatriots due to their ignorance” (Tahir, 1910, p. 10) and “The *Meşrutiyet*-era men, who couldn’t even speak French or German properly in class, trained themselves to speak like Europeans, pursing their lips, casting sidelong glances, mimicking their mannerisms rather than their knowledge or productivity, trying only to look the part, not live it” (Tahir, 1912, p. 24).

Mehmed Tahir’s portrayal of women as passive victims of a male-dominated social order aligns with Kandiyoti’s analysis of Tanzimat-era literature. The author suggests that if women had not been subjugated by “the iron grip of men” and denied their strength, civilisation could have reached a higher and more distinct level. Yet because such oppressive power has held them down, women have been deprived of the ability to contribute to civilisation in a manner befitting their potential. As a result, they merely follow men like shadows, with their advancement in knowledge, thought, and morality entirely dependent on that of men (Tahir, 1912, p. 3). Mehmed Tahir articulates this view clearly through the voice of the lady in *Meşrutiyet Erkekleri*, who states: “Please admit that in our country, women are like shadows chasing after men, compelled to imitate them. And only then place the blame not on women, but on men” (Tahir, 1912, p. 24). Ultimately, Mehmed Tahir portrays women as victims of a social system built and maintained by men. Within a world shaped by male authority, women can only assert themselves within the limits set for them. Alongside the policies and social systems constructed by men, Ottoman Muslim men’s negligence towards women’s education and rights leaves women trapped in a state of incapacity, unable to change their circumstances.

This portrayal of women as passive victims in *Meşrutiyet Hanımları* and *Meşrutiyet Erkekleri* fails to fully capture the broader reality of women’s increasing public and intellectual

involvement as the Second Constitutional Era approached. While Tahir stresses women's dependence on men for progress, a growing number of Ottoman women were actively engaging with public discourse, particularly through the press and social organisations, becoming agents of change (Çakır, 1994; Frierson, 1995). Women's magazines and newspapers flourished during this period, with many women contributors raising their voices on education, civic rights, and social reform. These women, including schoolteachers, authors, and philanthropists, advocated for women's education and participation in the nation's progress, challenging the notion that their societal role should merely reflect the will of men. By using the press to challenge traditional gender roles, women asserted their own stake in the empire's future. Thus, while Tahir's critique of both men and women reflects the anxieties of a particular segment of Ottoman society, it largely ignores women's increasing public presence and political engagement.

6. Production, Consumption, and *Alafranga*

In our study, we have discussed how a segment of Ottoman society faced criticism for their superficial understanding of the West and moral issues related to "Super-Westernization,"² which were popular topics of discussion in the press and literature. Ottoman intellectuals who criticised the excessive adoption of Western culture were not fundamentally opposed to Westernisation. They believed that "positive" aspects could be adopted to the extent that they aligned with Islamic principles and Ottoman-Turkish traditions, and they emphasised the importance of keeping pace with technological and scientific advancements. What they opposed was the acceptance of all things Western without a true understanding of European civilisation and its practices (Mardin, 1974).

In this context, Ottoman intellectuals redefined and interpreted traditional female roles, such as motherhood and housewifery, considering contemporary scientific trends of the period. Intellectuals portray an idealised society in which upper-class women reclaim household and childcare responsibilities previously delegated to cooks, servants, and governesses. The "Westernised" woman, engrossed in consumption, fashion, and Western habits, neglected traditional crafts such as knitting and sewing, leading to economic and cultural erosion. By delegating the responsibilities of child-rearing and moral development to governesses, she entrusted the upbringing of future members of Ottoman society to foreigners. These circumstances undoubtedly contributed to the weakening of Ottoman society and left the homeland vulnerable to foreign threats.

As mentioned briefly above, according to the author, the reason for Ottoman women's tendency "to stray into such dead ends, preparing themselves and their homeland for disaster and destitution" lies with well-to-do ladies and their enthusiasm for *alafranga*. These women admired European fashions, purchased and advertised them, and consequently, these fashions gradually spread from the upper classes to the rest of society. We have discussed how criticism of fashion and consumption is framed in this context. The author refers to women's traditional occupations of sewing, embroidery, and weaving as "*iẖtisâsât-ı âliye*" (noble arts) and identifies the abandonment of these crafts as one of the main reasons for falling into the vortex of fashion and consumption. The author criticises Ottoman women not only for enriching foreign factories

² The term "Super-Westernisation," as coined by Şerif Mardin in his analysis of the period, refers to the excessive adoption of Western practices.

by spending their wealth in Beyoğlu stores, thereby causing harm to their homeland but also for spending their money on bad quality products priced far above their worth. By contrasting the high-quality, long-lasting fabrics produced at home in the past with the cheaper, easily torn fabrics worn by contemporary women, the author emphasises the impact of being a producer rather than a consumer on individuals and society. According to the author, living this way in the past would have led to a happy life without the need for foreign goods and “would have upheld the values of Turkishness and Ottomanism with simplicity and honour” (Tahir, 1910, p. 12).

The issue of being a producer versus a consumer is addressed in *Meşrutiyet Erkekleri* in the context of men, focusing not only on consumption habits but also on the professions they have chosen. Tahir criticises Muslim Ottoman men for not fully embracing various branches of industry, turning away from trade, and showing little interest in commerce. According to the author, while there were only a few Muslim men engaged in occupations like grocery, baking, and trading activities, predominantly undertaken by Christians, there were forty to fifty thousand civil servants who did not perform their duties effectively. Although the author does not delve deeply into this topic, the criticism points to Ottoman men’s preference for bureaucratic positions over being productive contributors. This preference has led to a lack of development in industry, agriculture, and crafts (Tahir, 1912, pp. 24-25).

The Second Constitutional Era was a period marked by differing views on progress. During the reign of Sultan Abdulhamid II, popular opinion on progress was that European technology and culture should be considered separate elements, advocating for the acceptance of technological and technical superiority while remaining distant from cultural aspects. However, as the Second Constitutional Era approached, figures later described by historians as “Westernists” (Garpçılar) -such as Abdullah Cevdet- began to advocate for a complete adoption of Western civilisation, including not only its science and technology but also its cultural and moral values.

Mehmed Tahir diverged in several ways from his Westernist contemporaries, and his views are more closely aligned with the stance of the Young Ottomans. According to him, Westernisation should involve adopting “beneficial” aspects while rejecting “harmful” ones and integrating foreign elements in a manner consistent with national elements or reconfiguring them to align with national values. Maintaining traditional values is essential. Since adopting European culture would imply abandoning one’s own culture, aligning with the enemy, and recognising the enemy’s superiority, it is necessary to avoid mere imitation and use a filter of national elements.

Mehmed Tahir intended to convey this message to women through the example of Japanese women. The invocation of Japan as an alternative model of modernisation was not unique to Mehmed Tahir. It was indeed one of the modernisation strategies that gained particular currency during the reign of Abdülhamid II, as the Ottoman defeat in the Russo-Japanese War of 1905 elevated Japan to the status of a non-Western power that had successfully modernised without losing its cultural identity (Worringer, 2004, pp. 219-220). For Ottoman intellectuals seeking a path between wholesale Westernisation and stagnation, Japan offered a compelling proof of concept: a society that had absorbed European technology and organisation while preserving its own traditions, values, and national character.

In Tahir's rendering, the Japanese woman becomes the embodiment of this selective modernisation. Sent to Europe for education, she returns having absorbed European knowledge in clothing, manners, industry but chooses to wear her traditional dress and applies what she has learned in a manner consistent with her own culture. This figure is rhetorically powerful precisely because she has been exposed to the West and consciously rejected its superficial allure, returning not as an imitator but as a selective agent. The implicit contrast with the Ottoman woman is pointed: Ottoman women, who had not even travelled to Europe, had nonetheless adopted its most harmful customs and behaviours, as though cultural surrender required no direct contact at all (Tahir, 1910, p. 17).

The gendered dimension of this comparison is significant. Tahir frames Japanese modernisation as an achievement accomplished *through* women. It was Japanese women's disciplined navigation of Western influence that built a civilised society rapidly. This positions women not merely as beneficiaries of modernisation but as its cultural guardians, responsible for filtering what enters and what is preserved. In *Meşrutiyet Erkekleri*, the parallel comparison for men completes the picture: Japanese men are praised for guiding and supporting women's education and advancement, modelling the kind of responsible male leadership Tahir finds absent among Ottoman men (Tahir, 1912, p. 13). Together, the two examples construct an idealised division of gendered national duty: men as educators and guides, women as culturally anchored agents of transmission that mirrors Tahir's broader argument about the asymmetric responsibilities of Ottoman citizens.

He also criticises men for imitating not the beneficial aspects that would contribute to the country's welfare but rather the harmful, decadent, and wasteful aspects of foreign cultures, mistakenly believing that such imitation represents progress. For instance, while the number of machines that could facilitate agricultural work is limited, pianos have become a staple in nearly every home. Families that cannot afford a piano are still trying to acquire one, even if it means borrowing or paying in instalments. Similarly, while many submarines are used to defend European countries, there is not even one in the Ottoman Empire.

In contrast, "useless" technological devices like gramophones and cameras have entered even the poorest households. Since the reign of Sultan Mahmud II, men who went to Europe to learn about its progress and power returned, having brought back all the ills instead of the good aspects of civilisation. In doing so, they inadvertently aided foreigners who sought to corrupt Ottoman morals and attitudes. In other words, merely acquiring Western technology was insufficient; only the technology beneficial to the country should have been adopted.

7. Cultural Change and Moral Issues

One of the topics addressed and critiqued in *Meşrutiyet Hanımları* and *Meşrutiyet Erkekleri* is the moral state of women and men. In *Meşrutiyet Hanımları*, the dissatisfaction caused by women's behaviour at social venues is expressed. Although not explicitly stated, it implicitly suggests that the behaviour of these women in public places is a form of immodesty, in contrast to the "chaste" image of the old Ottoman women. The author describes how former Ottoman women adhered to national customs by dressing modestly in traditional garments like the *çarşaf* or *ferace* and refrained from displaying adornments on these outer garments. Unlike contemporary women, who were criticised for their behaviour in public spaces, these women of the past only got dressed and groomed when at home and only with their handiwork. Thus,

the deficiency noted in *Meşrutiyet* ladies is the lack of such modesty and restraint. Similarly, the discussion about foreign merchants marketing Western products and items to Ottoman women while referring to them as “items used by the lowest, most immoral women of Europe” also indirectly associates Ottoman women who value these products with moral issues (Tahir, 1910, p. 12).

The subject of women’s clothing has been ideologically framed in terms of morality and honour in the Ottoman context. Unlike men, women’s public appearances and activities have been imbued with symbolic meanings in most instances. Numerous edicts and regulations were issued to enforce restrictions on women’s clothing and visibility, and they were carefully monitored to prevent the perceived disruption of social order (*fitnah*). Consequently, women were expected to behave modestly in public spaces, with their attire a significant component of this expectation. Public spaces were designed primarily for men’s active use, and regulations were implemented to maintain this status quo, with little significant change observed until the Second Constitutional Era (Schick, 2010; Van Os, 1999).

Following the declaration of the Second Constitutional Era in 1908, the relatively more permissive atmosphere led to increased female participation in public life and greater diversity in women’s outerwear. However, ideological and moral anxieties about women’s public visibility had not entirely disappeared. Contemporary newspapers report incidents of harassment against women based on their clothing and presence in public spaces. These concerns are further reflected in official measures, such as the 1910 request by the *Şeyhülislam* for the Ministry of the Interior to identify women acting against propriety and national morality, and a 1912 directive urging heads of families to caution women who failed to comply with religious norms and national customs (van Os, 1999, pp. 302-303).

Therefore, it is evident that Mehmet Tahir also harboured similar concerns about women who were immodest in their clothing and behaviour. However, in *Meşrutiyet Erkekleri*, he attributes the reason for this situation to men. He explains the desire of women to follow fashion and imitate Western styles by the fact that Ottoman men returning from Europe either brought back European women or showed a preference for foreign women in their own country. This eventually led to a situation where Ottoman women, under the guardianship and dependency of men, were compelled to mimic ‘heavily made-up and elaborately dressed’ foreign women to gain men’s approval and devotion. If they failed to do so, they risked financial ruin, which, due to men’s tastes, further pushed women into precarious moral situations (Tahir, 1912, pp. 20-22).

This situation is explicitly articulated in *Meşrutiyet Erkekleri*: “This situation arises from the fact that our men do not regard women as human beings. More precisely, they view us, women, as nothing more than instruments of idle entertainment (*âlât-ı lehv-ü tarab*) such as the oud, violin, or piano. Had our men valued us, not for their pleasures, but for our humanity, the Ottoman Empire would have established grand universities for women today. In turn, this would have enabled men to achieve both material and spiritual prosperity, and the nation itself would not have faced the challenges it now confronts (Tahir, 1910, p. 20).

In this passage, the author not only holds men responsible for the plight of women but also blames them for women’s objectification and marginalisation in the context of national salvation. The author also connects men’s general approach to modernisation and their

attitudes toward women. Just as Ottoman men mainly preferred entertainment technology from Europe over useful ones for the country and themselves, they also viewed women as mere 'instruments of amusement and entertainment' (*âlat-ı lehv-ü tarab*) rather than as individuals whose education and advancement could be modelled after European standards. Consequently, they directed women's life choices in ways that led them to fall into undesirable situations. In other words, according to the author, since men perceived women as objects of amusement rather than individuals, women, who depended on men and sought to win their approval, devoted themselves to fashion and make-up.

As briefly mentioned in the previous section of the article, one of the primary causes of cultural and moral decay was seen as the foreign governesses. The practice of upper-class women delegating their maternal responsibilities to governesses, as a new urban phenomenon, was criticised as a significant factor contributing to societal problems. In the nineteenth century, hiring governesses, often French, to teach children foreign languages or piano and provide Western-style education became popular among the elite (Ulu, 2014, p. 602). These governesses enjoyed better conditions and respect compared to other household staff. Over time, this trend became a status symbol and a part of family life. However, this practice also led to problems, such as hiring governesses without proper pedagogical skills simply because they were French or employing unqualified women who forged documents to secure these positions (Ulu, 2014, pp. 603-605). The Ottoman intellectuals addressed this issue as a problem of identity and culture in their stories and novels. They depicted governesses as morally problematic figures who destabilised family structures, led children to grow up detached from Ottoman culture and identity, and instilled Western admiration. Mehmed Tahir described these governesses as "instructors who alienate us from our nation," criticising high-salaried Ottoman officials for hiring such individuals and aiding in the erosion of national identity. One of the main issues is not just the hiring of European governesses, but the superficiality behind it. The criticism is that the only requirement for hiring a governess was her foreign background, with no consideration for other factors. According to the author, one of the reasons for women's moral decline was the influence of European governesses who often seen as the most immoral individuals, even expelled from Europe and encouraged a lifestyle focused on pleasure and entertainment. Another aspect of the problem that harmed both families and society was that these governesses caused women to neglect or forget their maternal responsibilities (Tahir, 1912, p. 21).

8. Conclusion

Our analysis of Mehmed Tahir's works reveals that the period's discourses on modernisation, fashion and consumption, morality, and gender roles are closely intertwined with national identity, economy, and patriotism. Mehmed Tahir offered observations and critiques to improve the nation's state by addressing the conditions of both women and men. He argued that the behaviour and lifestyles of both genders, amidst wars and economic and cultural threats, contribute nothing but harm to the country.

The author identifies the lack of focus on women's education as the primary issue leading to other problems. Although Tahir criticises both women and men, he places the greater share of responsibility on (male) authorities, portraying women as victims of a patriarchal social order.

According to the author, the solution lies in advancing without severing ties with the past while preserving one's essence, national, and moral character. For this, men should lead the change due to their broader resources and greater power than women. Instead of consuming European fashions, they should implement innovations that boost production, industry, and agriculture and support women's education while guiding their development. On the other hand, women should engage in education rather than focusing on fashion and entertainment and consciously move away from lifestyles that threaten and lead to the downfall of their nation. Ottoman women and men must recognise that patriotism entails protecting their country not only by fighting on the battlefield but also by refraining from providing economic support through consumption and avoiding emotional or psychological ties by adopting European culture. Only in this way can the nation strengthen and overcome its difficult times. If Ottoman Muslim men changed their preferences and actions, women would follow them, and society would transform positively eventually. Mehmed Tahir concludes *Meşrutiyet Erkekleri* by addressing men directly, expressing this situation in the following words on behalf of women:

"In summary, our (women's) progress—intellectually, mentally, and morally—depends on your actions (men's). As you advance, we will follow in your wake. However, if you regress, we too will inevitably head towards disaster, and you will follow us into the abyss. Thus, all of us will be doomed to eternal ruin. Therefore, you must immediately begin to fully understand and fulfil your genuine duties to protect all your citizens from calamity."
(Tahir, 1912, ss. 30-31)

Mehmed Tahir's works, *Meşrutiyet Hanımları* and *Meşrutiyet Erkekleri*, clearly give the lion's share of responsibility for societal decline and the nation's salvation to men while portraying women mainly as passive victims of the male-dominated system. This portrayal reflects a broader patriarchal perspective common in the late Ottoman intellectual landscape, where men were seen as the primary agents of change, holding both power and agency. At the same time, women were relegated to a passive role.

Tahir's emphasis on men as the drivers of reform and modernisation aligns with the period's dominant gender ideologies. Men are expected to lead by improving themselves adopting productive European practices while rejecting its corrupting influences, and women are depicted as following in their wake. From a critical perspective, this not only minimises women's potential agency and existing visibility but also creates a problematic dichotomy: men are positioned as the solution to societal problems, while women are portrayed as subjects whose conduct merely reflects the state of male leadership. Tahir suggests that women only stray into moral decline because they are forced to emulate the frivolous behaviours of European women, driven by men's desire for such foreign influences. Although we recognise that his criticisms targeted a specific segment of society, his framing overlooks women's existing agency at the time. It also underscores the growing reality of women's agency in the social, cultural, and political spheres.

In conclusion, in his works *Meşrutiyet Hanımları* and *Meşrutiyet Erkekleri*, Mehmed Tahir warned and criticised both women and men about what and how they should change, and outlined their duties in saving their country from disaster. In this sense, it is possible to say that his views deviated from the Westernization trend of the Constitutional Era and continued the cultural nationalism and "selective Westernization" discourse of the Young Ottomans.

The entanglement of consumerism, national identity, and gender in Tahir's social critique is not incidental. It reflects the deeper truth that in the late Ottoman context, as elsewhere, the project of building a modern nation was always simultaneously a project of defining, disciplining, and deploying its women and men. Consequently, this analysis within the sociocultural and sociopolitical context provides an opportunity to discuss the nuances of Ottoman modernisation in terms of cultural change, identity, nationalism and gender.

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