

The Opinions of The Reformation Writers About Women During The Ottoman Era

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ÖZET

Cumhuriyetin ilan edilmesinden sonra kadınların bütün haklarını ardarda elde etmelerinin temelinde 1839 yılında ilan edilmiş olan Tanzimat Fermanının getirdiği reformların rolü büyüktür. Tanzimat döneminde kadının eğitimi ve kamusal hayata entegrasyonu, dönemin aydınları tarafından Batı medeniyetiyle bütünleşmenin sembolik göstergesi ve imparatorluğun kültürel problemlerini çözmenin aracı olarak kabul edilmiştir. Tanzimat dönemi boyunca kadın konusu “Batıcı” ve “Gelenekçi” gibi Osmanlı’nın iki belirgin kesimi arasında tartışma konusu oluşturmuştur. Çalışmamızda dönemin kadın meselesi üzerinde en çok duran yazarlarından Namık Kemal, Ahmet Mithat, Şemsettin Sami ve Fatma Aliye’nin eserlerindeki kadına bakış açılarını, kadın konusundaki tartışmalarını ortaya koymaya çalışacağız.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Batıcılar, Gelenekçiler, Bütünleşme, Kültürel Problemler.

ABSTRACT

At the basis of women’s achieving their rights following the declaration of the Republic, the role of the reforms proceeded by “The Reformation Order” declared in 1839 is immense. Women’s education and their integration into civil life were accepted by the intellectuals of the period as the symbolic representation of westernization and as the solution to the cultural problems of the Empire. Women’s issues during the Reformation period created a point of discussion between the two distinct poles of the Ottomans as “Westerner” and “Traditionalist”. In our study, we will reveal the points of view and discussions of Namık Kemal, Ahmet Mihtal, Şemsettin Sami and Fatma Aliye who were the writers that focused the most on women’s issues in their period.

Key Words: Westerners, Traditionalists, Integration, Cultural Problems.

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INTRODUCTION

At the basis of women's achieving their rights following the declaration of the Republic, the role of the reforms proceeded by "the Reformation Order" declared in 1839 is immense. Turks became inclined towards Western civilization during this period. The administrators of the Reformation period found it necessary to institute various reforms in the military, juridical and educational systems together with the economy of the society in order to safeguard the Empire against foreign enemies. The fact that all men living within the Imperial territories were equal, which stemmed from the regulations actualized through principles set down following the French Revolution can be cited as an example of such reforms.

However, the Reformation movement did not turn out to be that much of a success, due to an effort to sustain the conventional and new opinions. While, on the one hand, there were improvements, on the other, there were also inertia, recessions and hesitations. Beside the Islamic institutions of law, Europeanized institutions of law were established, and both types of institutions and laws were encouraged to coexist.

During the Reformation period (1839-1908), there were various changes made in relation to women, in the field of education, law and publication, especially the role of women in society as reflected in literary works or, in other words, their socio-cultural reflections in society. Women have brought with themselves the mentality that has cared for women's education and the development of the publications for women readers. "Terakki" and its supplement "Mukadderat", the first newspaper during the Ottoman period about women released in 1868, was followed by a great number of magazines and newspapers. To illustrate, Şefika Kurnaz has described 13 different types of magazines from 1868 to 1900. These publications shared some common view points, such as the importance of women having attained their right to all kinds of educational opportunities that would contribute to the development of the country, the abolishment of polygamy which was widespread among the administrators and the civil and juridical equality of women with men all of which, as requirements, were emphasized as rights for women (Kurnaz 1990 : 39-44).

Nora Şeni, who analysed women's magazines published both during the Reformation period and in the period to follow, has come to the conclusion that three basic messages were stressed through cartoons in women's magazines of the period: women's clothing, polygamy and education of young girls (Şeni 1990: 45-46).

The education of women and their integration into civil life were accepted by the intellectuals of the period as the symbolic representation of westernization and as the solution to the cultural problems of the Empire. The women's issue during the

Reformation period created a point of discussion between the two distinct poles of the Ottomans “Westerners” and “Traditionalists” (Çaha 1996 : 87).

Those who emphasized the universality of western civilization criticized, especially in literary works, the structure of marriage through, polygamy, sexual discrimination and marriage of young girls without seeing beforehand their husbands while they supported women’s educational liberation and romance. Those who considered the consequences of the reforms inspired from the west as a threat to the dominant cultural identity, however, stressed the necessity of preserving the current status of women.

Nilufer Göle has put forward the opinion that the struggle between the two poles has reached a critical point on civil and private basis of differentiation. The westerners attributed the backwardness of Ottoman society to the ignorance of women, while the traditionalists defended the argument that society would get even more corrupted with women’s presenting themselves in the public life, after the decadence of the family’s privacy. The Traditional-Islamic thinkers such as Mahmut Eşat proposed that the salvation of the Ottomans could come about with a return to Asr-ı Saadet (The era of the Prophet) while Namık Kemal, Şemsettin Sami, Fatma Aliye Hanım and Ahmet Mithat, thinkers of a more modern vein, accepted the education of women in the civil realm and their status equal to men as exemplified by a civilization project (Göle 1992 : 20 - 24).

Women as an issue was the unique theme for the thinkers of the period, almost all, of whom dealt, discussed, wrote and talked about it. Most of the writers of the period either responded to the criticism of western intellectuals directed at the Ottomans by making women an issue, or they drew a picture of a woman which would not necessitate such criticism.

Şemsettin Sami, who was one of these intellectuals responded to the criticism about Ottoman and Islamic women in one section of his work “Kadınlarımız” (Our Women), while he expounded on his beliefs (Ozankaya 1984 : 122). However, Ahmet Mithat pointed to Diplomalı Kız (The Girl with a Diploma) as an ideal which he presumed to be the real proof of modernization (Işın 1988:25).

In this study, we shall reveal the points of view of Namık Kemal, Ahmet Mithat Efendi, Şemsettin Sami and Fatma Aliye Hanım who were the writers that focused the most on the issue of women during their period, while excluding the changes in education and laws concerning women during the Reformation period. It draws attention to the fact that women were the central motifs in the novels of the period . Writers in their works endeavour to get women recognized through a multiplicity of their perspectives. They put forward various opinions concerning women and they give certain messages to women and to society. Almost all of these writers have described women as being good housewives. Although, all their works are tinged with an Islamic mentality, the

first thing they demand is that women become literate and get an education. In other words, the writers of the period are in quest of a “new family” and a “new woman”. For instance, Şinasi in his 1859 version of “Şair Evlenmesi”(Marriage of a Poet) stressed that marriage was based on mutual understanding and reciprocal agreement while he criticized marriages of young people without seeing and knowing each other. Another example is Abdülhak Hamit, who in his play “Tarık” claims that women are proof of the existence of a nation’s development. Hamit says:”You consider that being a woman is to be sterile, however, she is an orphan whose right is taken away from her”(Taşkıran 1973:34). These statements have been used in women’s magazines published also during the second Reformation period.

NAMIK KEMAL

Namik Kemal analysed the social status of women in his works. He blames women’s illiteracy and ignorance the reasons that women have been humiliated, as being inferior in Ottoman society. For this reason, he calls for a revamping of education to promote the attendance of girls in schools in order to be loved and respected with contemporary values. Most of the female characters in his novels regret that they are illiterate. For him, the illiteracy of women is one of the reasons for the gradual collapse of the family and of the nation. (Caporal 1982:59)

Namik Kemal points out the necessity for equality in education for both men and women. Ahmet Mithat also defends the same principle in his “The Philosophy of Women” (Felsefe-i Zenan) and then in his”Diplomalı Kız” (The Girl with a Diploma). Employment opportunities for women to work as nannies or as tutors were very limited in the 19th century. For this reason, it was the responsibility of the father, husband or brother to support women, since women did not have the opportunity to earn a living thus, they had to accept all conditions in the home so as not to be faced with divorce, since they would lose respect if they divorced.

Namik Kemal witnessed such situations, and therefore, he does not distinguish between education and economic opportunity while he supports equality in education. He believes that, there could be two possibilities created for women from an economic perspective: Either make radical reforms in the inheritance law so as to make women potentially capable of meeting their own needs, or create economic change . For women, to earn their own living, he proposes charity organisations to be established in order to protect them.(Dođramacı 1989 : 36-37).

Namik Kemal in his work titled “İntibah” (The Awakening) gives cross sections from the social life in İstanbul, and he distinctively criticizes the segregation between sexes. In his novel, family problems and the status of women in the family have been emphasized fre-

quently. Male oppression on women is rejected and the importance of child education is stressed. On additions, young girls who are forced by their parents to get married to elderly people in return for financial gain are criticized. Namık Kemal depicts the same theme in his novel "Zavallı Çocuk" (The Poor Boy). In his play "Vatan Yahut Silistre" (Home or Silistre) he presents that type of woman who joins the war beside men.

AHMET MİTHAT

Ahmet Mithat, in his novel "Felatun Bey ve Rakım Efendi" indicates that behind those who are successful and positive, we need not search for a solid and rooted family, and he insists on the fact that it is very important for individuals to educate themselves and to work hard in order to succeed. In the same novel, in a period when westernization was popular, he depicts an English family and demonstrates that westernization cannot be blamed for moral collapse, and that the west has been misunderstood. Ahmet Mithat usually emphasized middle class families with two or three members while he used wealthy families in order to criticize a spend thrift. Marriage is a subject which is stressed carefully in his novels. He deals with marriage as a subject in his novel "The Philosophy of Women" (Felsefe-i Zenan) which he wrote during the years 1870-71. It is stated that married women are slaves to their husbands and they are tortured by them (Esen 1991:4).

Another of his works "Çengi", deals with the importance of bringing up children. The child who is brought up with wrong values, and away from reality, is depicted as having an unstable character who is easily cheated in the same novel. The difficulty of marriage without mutual recognition is also stressed. In his novel entitled "Vah", he insists on the fact that the "wedding in the cradle" is harmful as it is made between two newly born children who generally don't suit each other when they grow up. He also presents the bad effects of extreme jealousy in marriage. Beautiful and lightly made up liberal minded women are depicted as usually being immoral, which brings forth a different point of view when compared with that of the period.

He criticizes traditional marriage customs which become a heavy burden both financially and psychologically in his later novel "Jön Türk" (The Young Turk). After "Çengi" he once again deals with bringing up children as his central theme which depicts children to be immoral if they are brought up by concubines. In the same novel, he states that it is essential, for an ideal girl who is about to marry, to be cultured and have no prejudices but who is modern in the good sense of the term. (Esen 1991:15-16)

When Ahmet Mithat's five novels are analysed, it becomes evident that for him, the wealth of a family is not important and that the individual has to have self determination to become successful without the help of his family, provided that he is educated.

ŞEMSETTİN SAMİ

Şemsettin Sami defends women with resolve both in family and in society in his work “Kadınlarımız” (Our Women). He believes that women are only inferior if they lack an education. This education, he says, should be given to them because women are, by no means, inferior to men in wisdom. Educated women, he writes, would bring up their children in a much more efficient manner. In other words, the education of women will eventually affect their children and even their grandchildren. “Educated women are at the basis of a society’s education. A society’s intellectual level is always in proportion to women’s intellectual level”, writes Şemsettin Sami who also supports the concept that “With the education of women all humanity will be educated.”(Ozankaya 1984:123) Furthermore, educated women are better in the professions than men for instance, they become tailors, nurses, chemists and business women. As it seen, the right of women to get an education is defended in the name of civilization while their mission of motherhood is magnified to be the sublime.

Şemsettin Sami has also stressed the problems of both polygamy and divorce, the latter being with only the consent of the husband. About divorce he says, “ while abuse of the right of divorce will lead women to misery, banning divorce will also lead to many mischiefs”(Ozankaya 1984:128). About slavery, he suggests that “slavery is not created by Islam and that Islam considers the liberation of a slave as merit and charity of the first degree”. He defends women getting a lesser share of an inheritance than man, by saying “since women will eventually get married, they have less needs. He never mentions the right of women to get a divorce. Regarding polygamy, he suggests that “the number of men and women are equal by birth, but because of wars and similar events the male population decreases and this makes polygamy an inevitable necessity” (Ozankaya 1984:128).

Moreover, Şemsettin Sami, writes that the most controversial issues of his time were polygamy, veiled women, women in society and divorce are not directly related to Islam, but that these issues emerge from ignorance about the tenets of Islam (Göle 1992:21).

He deals with the education of girls in his novel” Taaşuk-u-Talat ve Fitnat” (The Love of Talat and Fitnat). He opposes the idea of forcing girls to leave school and to lead a secluded life at home when they become mature. In the same novel, he also emphasizes the bad results of “young people getting married against their own will.”

As a result, Şemsettin Sami tries to explain even religious laws not with the assumption of considering them as “divine order” but, from the point of view of their functions and social necessities they undertake; but still, he never asks such fundamental questions about Islamic principles which do not “recognize women the right to get divorced “which gives men the right to beat their wives and why “Islamic societies did not or could not practise islamic principles” (Ozankaya 1984: 125).

FATMA ALİYE HANIM

Fatma Aliye Hanım began writing a few years after Şemsettin Sami. She is the daughter of Abdullah Cevdet Paşa and is Turkey's first woman novelist brought up with European culture. Some of her works have been translated into French, English and Arabic. Fatma Aliye Hanım has attracted attention with her polemics which she sustained against Mahmut Esat Efendi who released a series of articles on polygamy. In other words, the differences of interpreting Islam in relation to the status of women between traditionalists and westerners in the Reformation Period have gained much clarity with the polemics between the first woman writer of the period, Fatma Aliye Hanım and the traditionalist, Mahmut Esat (Taşçıoğlu 1958: 31-34). Fatma Aliye Hanım who was the first woman intellectual brought up with an education received as a mansion, has tried to refute Mahmut Esat's theses about polygamy by presenting the verses of the Quran which declare that a man could get married to only one woman (İşin 1988:155, Göle 1992: 21).

In her work "Nisvan'ı İslam" (Muslim Women) Fatma Aliye Hanım writes on women's education, fashion and make up, the place of women in society and concubines. It is composed of dialogues and contains three parts. She says that concubines can not be sold to men they do not want, that they may apply to the court in case of torture that they may demand to be sold wherever they are not content, they are to be considered as a member of the family, and finally, they are escorted by their masters with a fatherly affection when they get married. She also states that women's interaction with men has no religious obstacles provided that women wear decent and veiled clothes, and their hair not be exposed. For her, the veil, cloak and head-scarf are the customs of the recently conquered countries (Kurnaz 1990:50).

Fatma Aliye Hanım has given cross-sections from the lives of upper class families living in Istanbul in the late 19th century while depicting their problems in her novel "Muhazarat". It is emphasized in the novel that women have two sacred missions in life. House management and motherhood. It is always women who establish the order at home, and who manage the house, the servants or the maids. More than this, it has been emphasized that the woman whose husband has died is self-sufficient in the management of the house and the education of her children, whereas, the husband who has lost his wife cannot sustain these (Esen 1991: 37-39).

Also, divorce is a central motif in the novel which suggests it to be a very difficult attempt to undertake for women who are mostly depicted as obliged to stay in the undesired husband's house. Meanwhile, concubines are also stressed as having an important impact on family life.

CONCLUSION

It is observed that the education of women and the drawbacks of polygamy are dealt with mostly in the literary works of the Reformation period. Moreover, the writers of the Reformation concentrated on refined prostitutes and slave women, in their works. The message that these writers wanted to give to society, is that, these women are also sensitive, dignified and wise.

According to the writers of the period, the practise has deviated from the rules. Otherwise, Islam “does not present and obstacle for civilized development”, neither is it against women’s rights. Şemsettin Sami says, “progress of Islamic societies depends on the education of women. Islamic societies have to abandon their customs and traditions for sufficient development and culture, and they should liberate their women within the tolerable boundries of Islam, while they take painstaking care in education and training” (Ozankaya 1984: 128).

The status of women and responsibilites in society were discussed during the Reformation period, in their relation to deretmining the limits and dimensions of west-ernization. The writers of the period (such as Namık Kemal and Ahmet Mithat) who philosophized about the distinction between East and West with such concept as “Şark - Garp” and “Alaturkalık - Alafrangalık”, were constantly emphasizing the necessity to turn to the west, while the good and evil aspects (materialistic and spiritual) of western civilization were to be sorted out. They especially emphasized that Islam was not an obstacle for progress. To illustrate this, Namık Kemal, who is a milestone of the period, neither a complete fundamentalist, nor oriental, nor westerner, emphasized both “the conservatism of the previous generations” and “the imitative tendency of the younger generation” as drawbacks (Berkes 1973 : 267).

Another characteristic of the period is the emergence of women writers who put forward ideas about women, opened discussions, wrote novels and articles, and published in magazines. For instance, Fatma Aliye Hanım, is one of them and she may be the most important of all.

To conclude, during the period from the Reformation to the War of Independence, the only objective of the writers who defended women, was to elevate women to the level of having equal rights with men, to prove that women are by no means enferior to men, and to work to rise educated, virtuous, good mothers and wives, together with good Islamic generations. However, there is not a single implication about the Turkish - Ottoman women in attaining their political rights and having their presence filt in economic issues (Altındal 1985: 128).

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