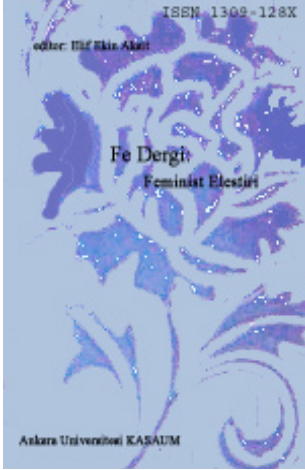


Yayımlayan: Ankara Üniversitesi KASAUM  
Adres: Kadın Sorunları Araştırma ve Uygulama Merkezi, Cebeci 06590 Ankara



Fe Dergi: Feminist Eleştiri 11, Sayı 1  
Erişim bilgileri, makale sunumu ve ayrıntılar için:  
<http://cins.ankara.edu.tr/>

***Emergence of a Discourse or New Articulations of  
Orientalist Biases: The First Ethnographies on Women  
and Islam in Turkey***

*Petek Onur*

Çevrimiçi yayına başlama tarihi: 26 Mayıs 2019

Bu makaleyi alıntılar için: Petek Onur, "Emergence of a Discourse or New Articulations of Orientalist Biases: The First Ethnographies on Women and Islam in Turkey" *Fe Dergi 11*, no. 1 (2019), 23-33.

URL: [http://cins.ankara.edu.tr/21\\_3.pdf](http://cins.ankara.edu.tr/21_3.pdf)

Bu eser akademik faaliyetlerde ve referans verilerek kullanılabilir. Hiçbir şekilde izin alınmaksızın çoğaltılamaz.

***Emergence of a Discourse or New Articulations of Orientalist Biases: The First Ethnographies on Women and Islam in Turkey***

*Petek Onur<sup>1</sup>*

The ethnographic study of the relationship between gender and Islam in Turkey has a recent history which dates back to the early 1980s. The ethnographies conducted by Carol Delaney, Julie Marcus and Nancy and Richard Tapper constitute the initial discursive period with a number of commonalities in their research questions and analysis, most important of which is a claim about how gender hierarchy is legitimized in Turkish society through Islamic premises. Based on the critiques of Western ethnocentrism, Orientalism and First World feminism and Michel Foucault's theorization of discourse, power and knowledge, this study makes a discourse analysis of the published works of these studies. It discusses the ways they are influenced by and reproduce the academic Orientalism in studying Islamic cultures in their discursive representations of Muslim women. Muslim women's agency, subjectivity and otherness in the ethnographies are highlighted as the most critical issues to be analysed in this respect. The analysis suggests that all of them represent Muslim Turkish women as victims of religion, patriarchy and traditions, fail to consider the complexity and diversity of Islamic beliefs and rites, fail to contextualize the Islamic culture they observed, and suggest the existence of a persistent and constant legitimating structure for the gender hierarchy.

Keywords: Women, Islam, Turkey, ethnography, Orientalism, discourse

**Bir Söylemin Ortaya Çıkışı veya Oryantalist Söylemin Tekrarlanan Eklemlenmeleri: Türkiye'de Kadın ve İslam üzerine İlk Etnografiler**

Türkiye'de kadın ve İslam arasındaki ilişkinin etnografik çalışmalara konu olması 1980'lerin başlarına dayanan yakın bir tarihi vardır. Carol Delaney, Julie Marcus ve Nancy ve Richard Tapper'ın yaptığı etnografik çalışmalar araştırma soruları ve analizleri bakımından sahip oldukları birçok ortak noktayla, bu alandaki ilk söylemsel dönemi oluşturur ve ortak noktalarının en önemlisi İslami kurullarla Türkiye'de toplumsal cinsiyet hiyerarşisinin nasıl meşrulaştığına dair iddialarıdır. Bu çalışma, Batılı etnomerkezcilik, Oryantalizm ve Batılı feminizme dair eleştirilere ve Michel Foucault'nun bilgi, söylem ve güç kuramsallaştırmasına dayanarak bu ilk çalışmaların yayınlarının bir söylem analizini yapmaktadır. Bunların İslam kültürlerini araştırırken akademik Oryantalizmden nasıl etkilendiklerini ve onu nasıl yeniden ürettiklerini, Müslüman kadınların söylemsel temsilleri üzerinden tartışmaktadır. Müslüman kadınların failliği, özneliği ve ötekiliği incelenmesi gereken en önemli meseleler olarak öne çıkmaktadır. Söylem analizi, bütün bu çalışmaların Müslüman Türk kadınlarını dinin, ataerkilliğin ve geleneklerin kurbanları olarak gösterdiğini, İslami inanışların ve törenlerin karmaşıklığını ve çeşitliğini dikkate almadığını, gözlemedikleri İslam kültürünü bir bağlama yerleştirmediklerini ve toplumsal cinsiyet hiyerarşisi için kalıcı ve değişmez bir meşrulaştırma yapısının varlığını öne sürdüklerini ortaya koymaktadır.

*Anahtar kelimeler: Kadın, İslam, Türkiye, etnografi, Oryantalizm, söylem*

**Introduction**

In the last two decades, there has been plenitude of studies on women and Islam in Turkey, particularly in relation to the steady rise of Islamist political movement. However, compared to the history of ethnographic works on Turkey, the interest on this subject is relatively new, especially for the Turkish researchers. The discourse emerged only in the 1980s and the early 1990s by the publications of foreign/Western scholars. The

<sup>1</sup>Dr., Başkent University, Faculty of Science and Letters, Department of Sociology (English Program)

critical issue to be considered in these initial works is the question of the extent of the influence of the prevailing Orientalist and ethnocentric perceptions which have deep roots in the origins and development of anthropological studies.

This paper is a part of the PhD study based on the Foucaultian discourse analysis of the changing ethnographic discourse on women and Islam in Turkey. It aims to highlight the epistemological shifts and dominant perspectives which shape the discursive periods of the published ethnographic works in 1983-2016.<sup>1</sup> By analysing the representations of Muslim women in each period, the study reveals the influence of prevailing discourses in Middle Eastern women's studies, the processes of the formation of novel, counter-hegemonic, critical discourses and the major social, culture and political developments in Turkey. Among the three discursive periods defined in those terms, the ethnographic works of the first period are radically different from the others in terms of their research subjects as they clearly reflect and reproduce Orientalist perceptions of Muslim women and Islamic culture. A clear shift is evident in the next period (1994-2006) as the ethnographic works represent Muslim women as active agents who have control over their religiosity and Islamic way of life. Almost all of the ethnographic studies were conducted in big cities of Turkey, mostly in Istanbul and aimed to understand the new urban pious Muslim women and their place in the rising Islamist movement. Veiling emerges as a central phenomenon in their representations in this period. In the last period (2007-2016) the studies focus on "headscarf and *tesettür* (Islamic women's attire that covers hair, neck, and the body) as a symbol of the changing identities which are defined over their Islamic consumption patterns and on Islamist women in civil society organizations and politics" (Onur, 2019, 25)

For these reasons, this article focuses on the initial period and discusses the ways the studies are influenced by and how they reproduce the academic Orientalism in studying Islamic cultures in their representations of Muslim women. Muslim women's agency, subjectivity and otherness in the ethnographies are highlighted as the most critical issues to be analysed in this respect.

*The Seed and the Soil: Gender and Cosmology in Turkish Village* by Carol Delaney published in 1991 and *A World of Difference: Islam and Gender Hierarchy in Turkey* by Julie Marcus published in 1992 are two ethnographies which are significant for being one of the first ethnographic studies focusing on gender and Islam in Turkey. Both Delaney and Marcus aim to explain how gender hierarchy is legitimized in Turkish society through Islamic premises. However the way they depict the women in their studies is very much problematic as it has many overlaps with Orientalist representations of Islamic cultures and ethnocentric biases of First World feminism. In this discursive period there are three more publications based on a fieldwork conducted by Nancy and Richard Tapper in Eğirdir: "Gender and Religion in a Turkish Town: A Comparison of Two Types of Formal Women's Gatherings" (Tapper 1983), "The Birth of the Prophet: Ritual and Gender in Turkish Islam" (Tapper and Tapper 1987) and "Ziyaret: Gender, Movement and Exchange in a Turkish community" (Tapper 1990).

This article firstly aims to demonstrate that their arguments are very much in line with Western ethnocentric feminism that represents Muslim women as passive victims of the Islamic culture. Secondly it aims to argue that they contribute to the Orientalist discourse through maintaining an essentialist gaze at the Muslim women in the Middle East.

### **Theoretical and Methodological Framework**

The published ethnographic works analysed here have not been subjected to a selection process, as there are no other relevant works published in the period between 1983-1992, but they are grouped together to show that they have dominant common qualities that differ them from the next group of studies. These commonalities can best be understood by employing Michel Foucault's theorization of discourse which also constitutes the methodological tool of this study.

Michel Foucault defines discourse as "the general domain of all statements, sometimes as an individualizable group of statements, and sometimes as a regulated practice that accounts for a number of statements" (Foucault 1972, 80). Foucault's theorization suggests that discourse has a broader meaning than texts and statements and he elaborates the way discourses are produced with regulatory structures and the way they are circulated. Considering power and knowledge as directly related, he maintains that knowledge production is a claim for power and authority (Foucault 1981, 52). Based on this understanding of discourse and knowledge, this study employs Foucaultian discourse analysis as its method to spot the regulatory structures arising from the social scientific paradigms of colonialism and Western feminism which shape the initial ethnographic works on

women and Islam in Turkey. The analysis reveals the discursive formations of representations of Muslim women in Turkey by dwelling upon the issues of their otherness, agency and subjectivity and the issues of essentialism and Orientalism in the generated discourse. It demonstrates that certain statements and truths about Muslim women which are circulated within the discourse of colonialism and Western feminism are also circulated in these texts. The particular group of ethnographies which this article analyses are important not only because they are the first studies on the subject but also because they almost perfectly reflect the sources of concern of the post-colonial critiques about Middle Eastern women's representations in the Western academic discourse. Moreover, Foucault's concept of "will to know" which he explains as an appetite for information which is reinforced by institutions of knowledge, such as libraries and universities (Foucault 1981, 55) is also used as a methodological tool. The will to know imposes "on the knowing subject, and in some sense prior to all experience, a certain position, a certain gaze and a certain function" (p. 55). The "will to know" behind the study can directly reveal the specific power structures in the process of knowledge production. The concept is integrated in the methodology by examining the origins of the researcher's "appetite for information" and by observing the Orientalist roots of her gaze and her position. The concept is also directly related with the subject position of the researcher and the power relations between the researcher and the research subjects in the field.

As Edward Said discusses in his seminal work, Orientalism is "a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction between 'the Orient' and (most of the time) 'the Occident'", and "a Western style of dominating, restructuring and having authority over the Orient" (Said 1978, 2-3). A wide range of literary works, art works, and scholarly works of the academic fields specialized in the Orient and political sciences concerning the region all constitute the Orientalist discourse. Even though it should be regarded as the foundation of an extended knowledge on the Middle East and Islam, scholarly Orientalism is justly criticized for exerting epistemological violence through attributing an authority to the Western scholar and othering the Oriental subjects. It establishes a hierarchical and power relation between the producers of the representations of the Orient and the represented Oriental subjects. Ascribing inferior characteristics, such as being despotic, tribal, patriarchal, stagnant and traditional, to the Orient and considering these characteristics as inherent, natural, and essential to their culture and beliefs justifies the hierarchy. It should be noted that Orientalism and its essentialism was very much articulated to the practices of colonialism and justification of colonial domination.

The area of the study of Middle Eastern women was critically assessed by Nikki R. Keddie a year after the publication of *Orientalism*. Defining the first problem as the lack of the scholarly historical work on the subject, Keddie argues that this is not surprising considering the lack of theoretical and methodological sophistication in the field of Middle Eastern history. (Keddie, 1979, 225). Furthermore, and I believe as important as the first point, she argues that "assumption that the Qur'an, the Traditions of the Prophet, and the writings of theologians and jurists were the main determinants of women's position" should be considered as hindrance to profound study of women's history in the Middle East (227). She notes that this is a continuation of the tendency of the academic Orientalism which primarily study theology, language and literature as well as traditions as the main representations of the reality of the Middle East and draws attention to the complex social structure of Middle Eastern societies in terms of class, influences of modernization and urbanization, living conditions, division of labour and the growth of their market economies.

Many scholars of Middle Eastern women's studies have dwelled upon how Orientalism overlaps with the academic writings of Western, first world feminism on Muslim women in the Middle East until the 1990s. Some of the major critiques are very much relevant for the critical discourse analysis of this study. For instance Marnia Lazreg elaborates the academic writings on Algerian women by the US, European and Algerian feminists in her article "Feminism and Difference: The Perils of Writing as a Woman on Women in Algeria" (1988). Lazreg considers Algeria as an ideal case to illustrate the intersection between colonialism, social sciences and discourse on Middle Eastern women. She argues that Orientalist knowledge about Islamic societies, which focuses on religion/tradition paradigm and has roots in French colonial epistemology, influences the prevailing perceptions of the Middle East. Western academic writings about the Middle Eastern women tend to reproduce these perceptions and assumptions. "A reductive, ahistorical conception of women" is created within this framework and Islam becomes the main explanatory factor with its rites and traditions of veiling, seclusion, and so on. The practice of veiling has a particular significance in this conception as an essential symbol of womanhood on the one hand. On the other hand it becomes the target of researchers' "mistrust" which makes them define it as "a hiding device" (Lazreg 1988, 85). Lazreg also stresses that this understanding maintains its place in academic feminism without facing criticism even though it has striking weaknesses. Furthermore, she

notes that Algerian women are “subsumed” under the categories of Islamic, Arab or Middle Eastern women (87) which also serves the othering of the women who are categorized.

Chandra Mohanty is another scholar who dwells upon the reductionism of Western, First World feminism. She draws attention to how Islam is perceived as an ideology which is not influenced by economic and social conditions of Muslim societies and how women are thought to be affected from this ideology in the same way despite their social differences (Mohanty 1999). Secondly, she opposes the idea that patriarchal familial systems and the kinship structure are the fundamental reasons of women’s oppression and subordination as well as the idea that the patriarchal kinship structure is the same in every Arab and Muslim society (1999, 309). She also rejects the idea of the neglect of the agency of women within the kinship structure. All in all, as Mohanty also exhibits, knowledge about Muslim women in these societies was produced in an essentialist, reductionist and ethnocentric way until it was challenged by the emergence of local, indigenous, Islamic, alternative feminisms.

The discourse about women’s status in Muslim societies until the 1990s is also discussed comprehensively by Valentine M. Moghadam (1993). As she rightly points out, in this discourse, it is widely accepted that women have a secondary status in gender hierarchy according to theology of Islam. Women’s place is defined within the private sphere, home, and their role is defined as a mother and a wife whereas men is defined as the breadwinner who also has the right of divorce. The notion of family honour, which is protected by men, strictly reinforces sex segregation and controls women’s behaviours and mobility. The discourse reproduces the argument that the beliefs about women’s inferiority to men and the Islamic legitimations of this inferiority propagate the hindrances to gender equality.

The processes of decolonization and independence movements also brought along a paradigm shift in the epistemology of the Middle East and other formerly colonized territories. By the influence of poststructuralist and postmodern theories in Europe, postcolonial theory built a theoretical framework through which the former ethnocentric colonial discourse is harshly criticized. Feminist postcolonial theorists’ intervention to this framework has been addressing women’s subordination by nationalist, anti-colonial projects and their problematic representation in the First World feminist discourse (Onur, 2016, 87). While the above mentioned arguments by Lazreg, Mohanty and Moghadam should be contextualized within this shift, the studies which comprise the first discursive period of the ethnographic discourse on women and Islam in Turkey stay outside of the new paradigm in many respects.

### ***The Seed and the Soil: Gender and Cosmology in Turkish Village***

In the ethnographies by Carol Delaney and Julie Marcus, there are significant common points that are in line with Orientalist ethnographic discourse on Muslim women. Muslim Turkish women are represented as victims of religion, patriarchy and traditions without any agency. The authors rely on comparisons and contrasts of East/West divide as well as Islam and Christianity which in turn implies a cultural hierarchy and othering of women while the complexity and diversity of Islamic beliefs and rites as well as women’s subjectivities regarding these beliefs and rites are overlooked. Having an essentialist perspective, they ignore the historical, social, cultural and political contexts that deeply influence the way Islam is lived. They also suggest that there is a persistent and constant structure that legitimates the Islamic gender hierarchy. The common notions through which they build up their arguments are the spatial and conceptual distinctions of inside and outside, purity and pollution and being open or covered.

Carol Delaney’ study *The Seed and the Soil: Gender and Cosmology in Turkish Village* (1991) is an ethnography that she has carried out in a village in Central Anatolia. The main thesis of the study is based on the cosmological belief and idea that the seed’s the ability to generate life is what bestows men power and soil’s ability to nurture is associated with women’s passive role in creation. This thesis suggests an emphasis on men’s agency while ignoring women’s. Delaney explains the gender hierarchy in Turkish village based on this perception.<sup>2</sup>

The book presents a very detailed ethnographic account of village life in Turkey especially in terms of cultural symbolism and can be considered as an important contribution to the anthropological knowledge on Turkey. The chapters which symbolically represent concentric circles of human life starting from the body and reaching out the household, village, nation and the global Islamic community explain the cosmological hierarchy and how it organizes social life. The first chapter addresses the theory of procreation and illustrates its

expressions in the practices about body care, sexual activity, birth, childcare and childrearing. The second chapter introduces wedding rituals and marriage with a special emphasis on honour code. And then, in the next chapter she mainly deals with how procreation theory explicates the villager's understandings of relatedness on the basis of descent and how these relations are significant and determining in expressions of affection and authority. The fourth chapter which offers a conceptualization of various spaces, namely the household, the village and the nation, provides a further analysis of procreation symbols. Based on this analysis, Delaney explains the household sexual division of labour and the rhetoric of Turkish nationalism. Though it is also manifest in previous chapters, it is in this chapter that she highlights the notion of inside/outside distinction in which interior spaces are associated with the female body and outside is associated with the male body. Preserving the division between inside and outside is essential to maintain purity and honour in all the concentric circles that she describes. The last chapter describes Islam as the most inclusive frame and discusses its cosmological system with a set of rituals.

Orientalist aspects can easily be detected in *The Seed and the Soil*. Firstly, the will to know and the research questions of Delaney are basically derived from her thorough investigation of religious texts of monotheistic religions and this is evident in the fact that she uses verses from Bible and Koran and especially the myth of Abraham's sacrifice of his son to support her arguments. Such a paradigm that gives priority to religious explanations as representations of reality, isolates the culture from its social context and depicts a static picture of the social phenomena in an essentialist way. Even though she presents a detailed account of the historical developments in Turkey about the tension between laicism and Islamism, their influence on the village customs and beliefs is not elaborated.

Secondly, Delaney rests her analysis on a cosmological point of reference throughout the book and this is the second dimension that makes her explanations significantly essentialist. Strongly claiming that the gender hierarchy in Islam is linked to beliefs about procreation, Delaney clearly argues in the first chapter:

a man's power and authority, in short, his value as a man, derives from his power to generate life. His honour, however, depends on his ability to guarantee that a child is from his own seed (Delaney, 1987). This in turn depends on his ability to control 'his' woman (Delaney 1991, 39).

Moreover, in Islam "man's procreative role appears to be analogous to God" (34). Thus, as she argues, man becomes the owner of woman, children, the animals and the land. In contrast, women or the feminine becomes symbolically identified with the created, they are associated with the mundane and the soil, they lack the power to create. This world view suggests that woman must be covered and enclosed, just like the land is enclosed, to guarantee that the children are from the seeds of her husband. Women are not self contained, their bodies are naturally "open" and must be bound, closed and contained by social measures (38). She not only suggests a general explanation for various social phenomena at the individual, family, village, nation and Muslim community levels, but also grounds this explanation on an unchanging essence, a religious dogma. Her argumentation also neglects women's agency and reproduces the representations of Muslim women as passive victims of a patriarchal and sexist religion. Women's possibilities negotiation and individual differences in the levels of negotiation are ignored. Besides, she fails to contextualize the religious discourse that diffuses into almost every aspect of social and cultural life as well as functions in the reproduction of gender hierarchy neglecting the question of how religious practices and beliefs are influenced by social, economic, historical and cultural factors. Clearly Delaney's analytical perspective is informed by Orientalist anthropology of the Middle Eastern women.

Covering and veiling constitute a fundamental element of her analysis starting from the chapter about the body in which she states that girls, unlike boys, "are covered in layers of baggy clothes and several headscarves and enclosed in the 'stone veil' (Bouhdiba 1985, 36) of the house" (97). Regarding the wedding rituals she states "Everything of value has a cover", "At the same time one could also say that the physical nature of the objects is concealed as if there is something obscene about the naked instrumentality of the objects" (p. 145). Delaney's analysis and interpretation owes much to the colonial perception of the Eastern women and the veil and circulates its claims of truths. The discussion of Meyda Yeğenoğlu (2003) offers a strong critique of this perception on unveiling and the Western gaze arguing that the veil is considered as a obstruction between the Western gaze and desire and the body of the Eastern woman. The veil disappoints the Western gaze and make the Westerner question it ruthlessly (Yeğenoğlu, 2003). Delaney starts this questioning with the inner circle of her

analysis, namely the body, continues with the household and then transfers it to her analysis of Islam in general. For instance, for Delaney, “the house, as a material earth structure that encloses and protects its members, is analogous to female body”:

Ideally it should be kept *kapalı* (closed) to the outside world, an inner sanctuary. The boundary between inside/outside is well marked... It is represented or ‘covered’ by the man who defends its purity (Delaney 1991, 114).

The village is also symbolically a female body, just like a womb protects the baby, it protects and encloses the dwellers, the insiders, in Orientalist perception the veil comes to be an essential part of the ontology of the East. The concept of veil and its use as a metaphor are attributed a key role in the Orientalist writings when describing the foundations of being Oriental (Yeğenoğlu 2003). On the other hand, the transparency of the West, as argued by Michel Foucault (1980), is a legacy of the Enlightenment and marks the Western civilization. The concealment of the East behind veils not only renders the Orient female, but also essentially differ it from the West. Moreover, the hidden world is imagined and fantasized by the Western subject as a world of obscenity, sexuality and eroticism. *The Seed and the Soil* illustrates the symbolic relationship between covering, female sexuality and obscenity, an argument that Delaney refers to many times. Male circumcision is one of these subjects. She notes:

as *sünnet* (circumcision) marks the transition of a boy into a gendered world, of which marriage is the fulfilment, so I believe there is an event that marks the transition to a gendered world for a girl, namely ‘covering’ (Delaney 1991, 87).

Then she continues with her interpretation of the association between hair and female sexuality: “The headscarf binds and covers her hair and symbolically binds her sexuality” (88). Male sexuality is allowed to be explicit while female sexuality is hidden under the layers of clothes, veils and behind the household walls. Delaney’s presumptions on Islam and sexuality becomes manifest in the most extreme level in the last chapter where she claims that Ka’ba stone at Mecca is symbolically female as some Muslims agree, has “a remarkable resemblance to a vagina” (307) and its covering is a veil, too. Construction of female sexuality in relation to the concept of veil is another dimension of the othering of Muslim women in the book. Veil functions as a strong marker of being non-Western, being the “other” within the Islamic culture and being “other” with respect to the Western civilization and the Western women.

Delaney’s ethnographic approach leaves no space to social transitions and historical developments, isolates the village from external influences and present women in the village as passive victims of Islamic gender hierarchy. Essentialism is coupled with overgeneralizations as she fails to acknowledge the wide range of cultural diversity in Turkey as she swiftly jumps into conclusions about Turkish village. Such an understanding also means suggesting that in every village the lives of women are shaped by the same form of Islamic gender hierarchy, they live Islam in the same way, which is definitely a reductionist misunderstanding. It assumes that the Islamic world view is understood and internalized in the same way by every women in Turkish villages and Islam is “a major obstacle to change” (322). Considering that Delaney’s ethnography critically lacks women’s voices, their own words and expressions, we can conclude that the study perpetuates the Orientalist, colonial and Euro-centric feminist approaches that deny Muslim women’s agency and subjectivity.

### ***A World of Difference: Islam and Gender Hierarchy in Turkey***

*A World of Difference* is based on an ethnography conducted by Julie Marcus in İzmir, with a will to know arising from the aim of challenging Orientalist constructions of the Middle Eastern women in the travel literature. The book diverges from *The Seed and the Soil* with this aim but it fails to achieve it in many respects.

The first part of the book reviews the travel literature by Western travelers on İzmir, and here Marcus presents her critical approach. She agrees with Edward Said in seeing the Orient as constructed in an essential way by the West and thus with this study she aims to find a “better approximation” (Marcus 1992, 21) by rejecting the question of representation and drawing attention to the issue of gender. In chapter which focuses on the history of İzmir, she shows that history writing is gendered, essentially masculine and renders “the dominated

groups as feminine” (31) and that the feminization of the other goes hand in hand with the West’s obsession with the veil and the *harem*.

Chapters five to nine are about the ethnographic study Marcus conducted in Turkey, the details of which are not provided. Chapter five introduces her main arguments in the analysis of her ethnographic data and how the gender hierarchy is established in Islam. Marcus disagrees with the idea that considers Koran as the main explanatory factor in Muslim women’s subordination. Yet, she argues:

Rather than determining the attitudes to women, Koran can be used to legitimate particular acts or sets of conditions that concern women (and it frequently is) but this use of Kuran is part of the politics of the operation of gender hierarchy in daily life, a part of the way in which gender hierarchy and sexuality are negotiated and enforced; it cannot provide an explanation of it (p. 64).

Then, by referring to Koran, she adds that in Islamic male view, all believers are equal before God but “men are in charge of women” (p. 64). *Umma*, the Muslim community of believers perpetuates this doctrine of equality. While trying to escape from the trap of essentialism, Marcus seems to neglect women’s agency and maintains her position in her analysis of Islamic rites. Furthermore, men regard women’s beliefs as superstition when these beliefs challenge the orthodox male view of Islam. Limitations on women’s fulfilment of the five obligations of Islam according to the purity/ pollution law is another aspect of gender hierarchy which Marcus discusses. For Marcus, this explains the logic underlying the gender hierarchy of Islam, for “pollution must be removed for an individual to be sufficiently pure for prayer and other religious duties” (p. 72). However, she explains, periods of menstruation and giving birth are considered to be impure, causing pollution and women are not only disallowed to fulfill their religious obligations at those times but also their impurity causes them to have a subordinate position in the gender hierarchy. On the other hand, men’s pollution is considered to be voluntary. The pollution law defines the inside/outside distinction of the body, “as two entirely separate domains, domains which must be kept entirely separate and distinct if purity is to be maintained” (p. 73). In Islamic traditions the impossibility for women to preserve their physical purities during menstruation and giving birth ascribes them an intrinsically inferior status with respect to men.

*A World of Difference* suggests in the chapters presenting the ethnographic data that the fixed nature of human biology turns into the basis of a fixed gender hierarchy in Islam. This presumption, which is also shared by Carol Delaney, is clearly essentialist and makes the agency of women an impossibility. It also implies a bias that associates the Orient with being uncivilized, being close to the state of nature in contrast to the civilized, progressive, Western societies. The ethnographic knowledge offered in the book also circulates statements about the relationship between Islam and gender hierarchy in Muslim societies, the significance of the distinction of inside/outside and the determining role of sexual bodies, which are also circulated in *The Seed and the Soil* and Eurocentric feminist discourse on women in Muslim societies.

Both scholars define the household as a female space but Marcus describes women’s religious practices in the household as more egalitarian than men’s practices in the public mosque. She opens to discussion the argument that spatial segregation empowers women even if it provides a limited amelioration and for this purpose she focuses on Turkish women’s Islamic rites as she attempts to shatter the stereotype of subordinated and passive Muslim women. Marcus sees the household as the “spatial centre for women’s public, sociable and religious lives” and firstly describes women’s *mevluts* which take place in this domain. *Mevlut*, “a formal performance of the medieval poem, the Mevlid-i Şerif, describing the birth and life of Muhammed” (125), is practised at homes on religiously important days. She describes it as a rite which reflects a female and egalitarian world view and also a rite approved by men. As for the visits to a shrine, a tradition which women created themselves, Marcus notes that men find it un-Islamic and superstitious. The shrine is a women’s space in public but actually perpetuates women’s peripheralization and cannot change the gender hierarchy. She explains the hierarchical model as follows:

For reasons which are clear from the analysis of Islamic pollution law and its use in producing a sexual division of space, I came to consider that the sacred structure of Turkish culture (...) represented a dominant but male, model of society. In gendering Turner’s sociological model, I sought female structural sacred centres to correspond to the male ones, on the basis of an analysis of women’s ritual symbolism locating them in the household and at women’s shrines. I also considered that some



hierarchy had to be injected into this view of social world, and that the male and female models differed in their boundedness (p.162).

This analysis of rites can be considered as a reproduction of the representations of Muslim women subordinated by patriarchal orthodoxy of Islam. The gender hierarchy which is justified by human biology, as Marcus explains, operates in various aspects of women's practice of their religion, including their shrine visits. The shortcomings of analysing gender inequality with references to biological differences and Islamic orthodoxy are obvious, as I already discussed in reviewing *The Seed and the Soil*. More importantly, this text demonstrates that it circulates as a discursive practice, as a commonly accepted truth about gender inequality in Turkish society in particular and Middle Eastern women's studies in general. On the other hand, Marcus depicts a women's world which is egalitarian and universal, which praises motherhood and giving birth to a child in opposition to the male view that perceives women's biology as polluting. Nevertheless, this picture neglects the possibility of any respect to women's religiosity by the men in their families and perceives a rigid framework of domination which fails to challenge Orientalist representations of Muslim women and thus to find "a better approximation".

### *The Eğirdir Study*

British anthropologists Nancy Tapper and Richard Tapper's ethnographic research in Eğırdir town in south west Anatolia is the third study in this discursive period. The research is published in three articles, all of which focus on the rituals, rites and gender in Islam.

The first article "Gender and Religion in a Turkish Town: A Comparison of Two Types of Formal Women's Gatherings" is written by Nancy Tapper (1983) based on her first five weeks of fieldwork in Eğırdir. She notes that the article is part of the discourse explaining the role of religion, and particularly "religious beliefs and practices and conceptual systems" in shaping women's lives (Tapper 1983, 71). The article presents a comparison of two types of women's gatherings in Eğırdir: reception days, afternoon gatherings among friends, kin and neighbours which have a secular and egalitarian nature and *mevluts*.

The structure of reception days expresses an equality among middle class women, while the actual content of the meetings differentiates them, both among themselves and from other women in the community. In both respects women are separated from each other and identified in terms of their attachments to men. The structure of *mevluts* is unequal and implicitly admits the status differentiation between families in the community; nonetheless the content of the *mevlut* meetings unambiguously focuses on feminine support, solidarity and equality (p. 76).

She argues that these gatherings may obscure two conflicting issues in their status as women and believers. While women are valued as mothers and wives in Islamic belief and rites, in practice they are subordinated and differentiated on the basis of the status of the men they are attached to. In this respect, the study reproduces the discourse on the status of women in the Middle East until the 1990s which widely accepts that women have an subordinate status compared to men in Islamic theology and women are defined within the household and on the basis of their roles as wives and mothers. (Moghadam, 1993). Furthermore, Tapper suggests that women use their authority arising from their value in Islamic belief for perpetuating gender inequality and seclusion as they educate their sons. Nancy Tapper offers a multi-dimensional perspective by articulating various factors such as class, local culture, Turkish state secularism and religious orthodoxy and this perspective saves the knowledge she produces from being essentialist. Using previous ethnographic studies instead of religious texts is another significant choice that Tapper makes in this respect. Besides, she explains women's subordination in the intersection of their status in Islam and their status which is determined by their husband's status and this explanation is another factor that differs Tapper from Delaney and Marcus who present a unidimensional analysis of gender inequality. Tapper also attributes agency to women in their gatherings while acknowledging the power of Islamic orthodoxy and patriarchy on women's social life and religious practices. However the lack of women's voices is also noticeable as a weakness in her text and thus emerges as a neglect of their subjectivity. The ethnographic knowledge presented in this article reveals neither how women understand,

perceive and interpret the assumed egalitarian femininity in *mevluts* nor possible variations at the individual level.

The second article based on this fieldwork “The Birth of the Prophet: Ritual and Gender in Turkish Islam” (1987) written by Nancy and Richard Tapper also examines *mevluts* in Eğirdir. It has a critical approach to the orthodox Islam/popular Islam dichotomy, which *A World of Difference* suggests in explaining gender hierarchy in Turkish society. Criticizing prevalent Orientalist tendency to present certain Islamic beliefs and rites as orthodox for being defended mostly by male, literate elites, the Tapper and Tapper argue “The religious activities of men cannot be explained solely in terms of their degree of ‘orthodoxy’, and those of women should not be dismissed *a priori* peripheral to those of men” (69). They suggest that there is “an intrinsic relation between gender and religious orthodoxy” (69) and anthropology of Islam fails to consider the connectedness and plurality in Islamic practices in a gender perspective. Thus, their will to know is in line with the same critique of feminist postcolonial theorists in the 1980s. The article should not be considered as essentialist as it contextualizes the ethnographic data within Eğirdir’s social, economic and political environment. The dwellers of the town are described as people who are republicans, pious Muslims and voters of center right parties. They are homogenous in terms of their social classes and the main economic activity is based on apple orchards. Tappers’ comparison of a men’s *mevlut* in mosque and women’s *mevlut* in a house in Eğirdir show that the ritual has a different meaning and structure for men and women. Men consider it less Islamic while women value it more. Men’s *mevluts*, which are short and formal, take place in specific cornerstone occasions -death, birth, marriage, circumcision, and *Kandil* nights- whereas women’s *mevluts*, which are longer, ceremonial and emotional, only take place in occasions of death. Women’s subjectivity is part of the ethnographic data with their feelings and thoughts about their rituals. For instance, Tapper notes that women believe that their rituals show how they are “more caring and consciously religious than men. Women sometimes add that they need to be more religious than men because they have been told (by men of religious establishment) that they are more sinful than men” (p. 76). This statement presents women’s feelings and perceptions about their religiosity. The authors underline self-expression and leadership in women’s rites which can be understood as indications of women’s agency and subjectivity, but it should be noted that absence of men can be a facilitating factor in these.

Nancy Tapper provides a further analysis of gender differences in Islamic rites in the third article “Ziyaret: gender movement and exchange in a Turkish community” (1990). *Ziyaret* refers to three movements: picnics and shrine visits (pilgrimage) of men and women together and shrine visits of women without the presence of men. In line with Marcus, Tapper argues that Islam creates a structural gender hierarchy but she explains this hierarchy with the concept of respect (*saygı, hürmet* in Turkish). Respect is perpetuated and practiced in etiquette and together with the rules of mobility, it shapes the gender relations. Particularly, respect for God is at the basis of all social relations. Like Delaney and Marcus, Tapper also notes that women are perceived as close to nature and men are associated with reason and thus women must discipline and control themselves for achieving the salvation of God (239). The ideology of respect for God and respect for men justifies the gender hierarchy, gives women a limited autonomy and mobility in their pilgrimage and maintains and reproduces their subordination at the same time.

These three articles refrain from reproducing representations of Islam as an all-encompassing and unified order by focusing how the differences in women’s and men’s rites as well as women’s beliefs in particular. It is also significant that they acknowledge the influence of secular ideology of the Turkish state in shaping the Islamic orthodoxy. Moreover, conceptualization of respect adds a novel dimension in the analysis of gender hierarchy. All these aspects distance Tappers’ ethnographic discourse from essentialist Orientalism in addition to its emphasis on women’s self-expression, mobility, egalitarianism and social differences. Yet, the articles represent Muslim women as women who accept and adhere to the gender hierarchy by justifying it on Islamic grounds. The authors use the word “intrinsic” in several places to describe the legitimation of women’s subordination which implies an essential, fixed nature in the gender hierarchy. Women’s agency is limited within the boundaries of this nature.

## Conclusion

All studies in this discursive period agree on the need to develop a gender perspective to the anthropology of Islam and thus their wills to know are shaped on the basis of this gap in the knowledge production. There is a common discursive formation in all the studies which asserts that Islamic culture cannot be fully analysed and

understood without addressing the issue of gender and for this reason they are particularly important contributions to the anthropological knowledge on Muslim societies in the Middle East.

It is possible to recognize and point out circulated statements and representations of gender and Islam in Turkey, the most important of which is the assertion that Islam establishes a gender hierarchy. All the studies confidently suggest that Islamic orthodoxy and patriarchal traditions oppress women and have a tendency to see this subordination as an inherent, fixed, and inevitable condition for women despite the fact that women have their own spaces where they practice their religion, occasions and opportunities for self-expression, leadership, and mobility. Considering these commonalities, it is evident that Orientalist and First World feminist discourses have influenced the way women's subjectivities are described in terms of their inferior status in the Islamic gender hierarchy. Besides, the representations of Muslim women in this discursive period are attributed a very limited agency to change the gender inequalities.

The aim of this review has been to highlight some fallacies that has contributed to the perpetuation of a discourse, a way of knowledge production that represents Muslim women merely within the boundaries of religion/tradition paradigm, as the ultimate other of the Western subject, as the signifier of Oriental despotism, as victims who lack the agency to resist oppression. I believe that elaborating the way Islam is articulated to nationalist discourse, state ideologies, national and international economic developments has proved that there are considerable the differences in women's conditions in Turkey and the Middle East. Moreover women's capacities of altering their social environments, adopting to or initiating social changes cannot be ignored and is not ignored in the contemporary Middle East feminist discourse.

The vitality of shattering the authority of the researcher and giving voice to women's accounts of how they experience gender inequalities is also evident. Methodology of the social sciences and knowledge production have been profoundly influenced by the emerging emphasis on the reflexivity of the researcher and multivocality of the ethnographic texts. I consider these two aspects essential for the formation of a counter-discourse against Orientalism as well as the building of a common ground for transnational dialogues of feminist theory which will overcome the alterity of the Muslim women and the essentialism and Eurocentricism in the discourse about them. Besides, as long as the researcher keeps the distance with the research subjects and, in Trinh T. Minh-Ha's words, "speak about" them rather than "speak by" them, the authority of the researcher will not be shattered (Chen, 1992, p. 87). Speaking by involves "a speaking that does not objectify, does not point to an object as if it is distant from the speaking subject or absent from the speaking place. A speaking that reflects on itself and can come very close to a subject without, however, seizing or claiming it" (p. 87) and it is much more than a methodological standpoint but "an attitude in life, a way of positioning oneself in relation to the world" (p. 87).

<sup>1</sup>Petek Onur (2016), *Changing Discourse on Women and Islam in Turkey* in *Ethnographic Studies*, Middle East Technical University, Institute of Social Sciences, unpublished PhD thesis.

<sup>2</sup>Five years before the publication of the book, Delaney presents her main thesis in the article entitled "The Meaning of Paternity and the Virgin Birth Debate" (1985). While noting that these beliefs of procreation are not unique to Islam and Turkish culture but very prevalent in Judeo-Christian culture, she focuses on their essential role in creating a gendered world in Turkish culture.

## References

- Delaney, Carol, The meaning of paternity and the virgin birth debate. *Man*, 21, no. 3, (1986): 494-513.
- Delaney, Carol. *The seed and the soil: Gender and cosmology in Turkish village*. Berkeley, etc: University of California Press. 1991
- Foucault, Michel, *The Archaeology of knowledge: Translated from the French by AM Sheridan Smith*. Pantheon Books, 1972.
- Foucault, Michel, *Power/knowledge: Selected interviews and other writings, 1972-1977*. Random House LLC, 1980.
- Foucault, Michel, "The order of discourse," In *Untying the Text*, R. Young (ed.), 48-79, Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981.
- Keddie, Nikki. R., *Women in the Middle East: Past and Present*, Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2007.
- Lazreg, Marnia, "Feminism and Difference: The Perils of Writing as a Woman on Women", *Feminist Studies*, 14, no.1, (1988): 81-107.
- Marcus, Julie, *A world of difference: Islam and gender hierarchy in Turkey*. London & New Jersey: Zed Books, 1992.
- Minh-ha, Trinh T. "Speaking Nearby; Interview by Nancy Chen." *Visualizing Theory: Selected Essays from Visual Anthropology Review*, (1994):1990-1994.
- Moghadam, Valentine, *Modernizing Women: Gender and Social Change in the Middle East*, Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner, 1993.
- Mohanty, C. T. "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses". In *Theories of Race and Racism* L. Back, & J. Salmons (ed.s), 302-323. London: Routledge, 1999.
- Onur, Petek, *Changing Discourse on Women and Islam in Turkey* in *Ethnographic Studies*, Middle East Technical University, Institute of Social Sciences, unpublished PhD thesis, 2016.
- Said, Edward, *Orientalism*, New York: Vintage Books. (Original work published 1978), 1994.
- Tapper, Nancy and Richard, "The Birth of the Prophet: Ritual and Gender in Turkish Islam", *Man, New Series*, 22, no.1, (1987): 69-92.
- Tapper, Nancy, "Gender and Religion an a Turkish Town: A Comparison of Two Types of Formal Women's Gatherings". In *Women's religious experience*. P. Holden, (ed.), London: Croom Helm. 1983.
- Tapper, Nancy. "Ziyaret: Gender, Movement, and Exchange in A Turkish Community". 135-147, In *Muslim Travellers: Pilgrimage, Migration, and the Religious Imagination*, D. F. Eickelman & J. Piscatori (ed.s) London, Routledge, 1990.
- Yeğenoğlu, Meyda. *Sömürgeci Fantaziler: Oryantalist Söylemde Kültürel ve Cinsel Fark*. Istanbul: Metis, 2003.