The *Turkish Woman*: An Adventure in Feminist Historiography

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*The Turkish Woman*, written in 1931 by Nezihe Muhittin, is a history of the women’s movement in Turkey, including the author’s personal contributions, views of feminism and society, and lists of women’s organizations and their activities. What makes Muhittin’s book distinctive is its narrative stance. It is a history, yet the author’s own life and experiences, her successes and failures, and her own interpretation of feminism are central to the narrative. The text moves from a critique of new trends in feminism to the historical development of the feminist movement, from personal advice for students to a class and gender analysis of Ottoman society, from emotional recollections of the women who had educated the author to democratic political visions. Since Muhittin was in fact one of the leading figures of the movement, the book can be read as a historical narrative. Yet the inclusion of the author’s voice adds another layer to the narrative. Hers is the gendered voice of an intellectual, displaying her construction of what it means to talk and think as a woman and consequently, she declared, as a feminist. As a historian, Muhittin appealed to facts, to data, and to the methods of the social sciences, some of which she also criticized. She collected, organized and presented information not only about women but also about Turkish society in general. Her use of this methodology makes an important contribution to our understanding of women’s ability to position themselves intellectually at the time. But above all, hers was a political intervention. Muhittin stated that a nation cannot be developed, democratized and civilized without grounding these aims in the lives of all groups, including women. Furthermore, she argued, these goals cannot be realized without women’s active participation and contribution. She called on the ‘new women’ to become actors and makers of their own lives and their society.

Nezihe Muhittin’s life and work has to be understood within the context of her time and culture. During the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire and the emergence of the Turkish republic, a particular moment of instability
and change, women like Muhittin were both subjects and agents, trying to construct a society in which women would be able to develop free from the oppression of religion and contribute to the welfare of the new nation-state. In explaining this process of social change, it is important to consider both the indigenous forces that paved the way and the factors that were present at the global level. It would be an error to analyze the social-cultural context of the Ottoman Empire by way of an unchanging, ahistorical, universal Islam, to ‘Orientalize’ the society and, finally, to present an evolutionary model of change towards Westernization and secularization. Instead, both the dynamic character of the Empire and global factors must be taken into consideration. Similarly, the changing position of Turkish women cannot be explained through the sudden transformation of an Oriental and Islamic totality into a Western and secular one. Rather, it must be understood in relation to the articulation of conflicting political viewpoints (religious and secular), the construction of various national identities within the Ottoman Empire and within a discourse of a universal civilization, and the prescriptions offered by Western models of agency, identity and the positivist ideology of social science that were appropriated by the intelligentsia.

Muhittin’s *The Turkish Woman* demonstrates a commitment to positivist, scientifically grounded reform in which the rights and wishes of individual women are subordinated to the general welfare of the new nation and to the larger ‘social’ domain. While Muhittin supported the economic, social and political emancipation of women through education and professional careers, she saw their social role as complementary to men’s, according to the division of labor described in Durkheimian sociology. Yet, since she did not make it clear how women might follow professional and public employment that was not segregated by gender and at the same time contribute to society by complementing men’s work, Muhittin faced a dilemma that she was not able to resolve.

Although today various points of Muhittin’s feminist ideology, such as her reliance on positivist philosophy, are out of fashion, her contributions to feminist thought and to the history of Turkish women were extensive. While the problems of society and of womanhood that Muhittin described sixty years ago have not been solved, the fervor of her feminist activism has been lost. Indeed, until recently Muhittin and her feminist contemporaries were effaced from history.²

Reading Muhittin’s text demands that we ask certain questions that emerge from grounding particular histories of feminism within a global context, and develop new analytical tools to undertake such a task.³ The heterogeneity of these histories, their autonomy from the West, and their geographical, historical and cultural specificity must be emphasized, while at the same time their place within a ‘world balance of power’ is understood.⁴ I attempt in this essay to bring together Denise Riley’s approach to the construction of the ‘social’ category of ‘women’ in the nineteenth and early twentieth-century West with Roland Robertson’s ‘globalization’ approach, which traces
the appropriation of Western models of agency, nationhood, 'humanity' and 'civilization' by particular identities as the world became a single social-cultural space during that period. Riley points to the ways in which issues of education, health and welfare were problematized around the issue of womanhood and within the newly created domain of the 'social'. Following Riley, I would argue that modernity for the Third World implied that women would be integrated into the category of the 'social' in the Western manner. However, the goal of modernization, while bringing women into the public sphere, meant taking an anti-imperialist and nationalist stance, and therefore constructing 'women' via essentialist nationalist or religious identities. By confronting this double construction, both Western and indigenous, I believe, one can escape an approach that depends on a single model of Westernization, and instead emphasize the dynamic, heterogeneous, and culturally, geographically, and historically specific contexts of particular feminist histories.

Riley argues that what we have come to name as 'Woman' has changed over time, in relation to such concepts as Nature, Class, Reason or Humanity, which have histories of their own and which were also constructed in relation to each other. For example, in the nineteenth century the category of 'women' was defined through the disciplines of medicine and the new social sciences: sociology, economics, neurology, psychiatry and psychology. 'The resulting modern “women” is arguably the result of long processes of closure which have been hammered out, by infinite mutual references, from all sides of these classifying studies; closures which were then both underwritten and cross-examined by nineteenth- and twentieth-century feminisms, as they took up, or respecified, or dismissed these productions of “women”.'

Riley observes that, in the West, women were 're-aligned' or 're-mapped' in relation to the category of the social, while men were not. She shows that the problematic relationship construed by the social sciences between the individual and society presupposed man-the-individual as distinct from the category of the social. Men are in the position of facing this 'already feminized' society, rather than constituting it. In other words, men were 'dragged in' to society, as well as into history, and conceptualized as ethical, self-reflexive subjects. Women, on the other hand, were never thoroughly conceived as individual, but presumed to represent social necessity and to be adequately identified within the social. Therefore, in the nineteenth-century West, it was in their 'social'ness that women came to accept their self-definition, and they assumed this definition in relation to (actually in distinction from) a 'political' one. A similar pattern can be traced not only in Europe but also throughout the non-European world. However, although the category of 'women' was globally constituted as 'social', outside Europe its relationship to the realm of the 'political' differed from the European model, resulting in different feminisms.

The construction of national identities required the definition of the nation-state, its past, present and future, within a cultural system. In Homi
Bhabha's words, the nation emerged 'as a system of cultural signification, as the representation of the social life rather than the discipline of social polity. . . .' Within nationalist narratives, not only did new concepts such as 'progress and reform' and 'culture and civilization', concepts of the 'modern' world, become definitive, but a reinterpretation of the community also became necessary. That is, there was a longing for those 'traditions' that would rewrite communities' essential identities. According to Robertson, becoming modern and at the same time searching for a distinct identity and history, that is, constituting narratives on both exogeny (the Other, the West, or Westernization) and endogeny (particular-communal-national identities), are interrelated aspects of the same process and cannot be explained independently of each other.

The construction of 'modern women' in various parts of the world should also be understood as part of these larger and dual social-cultural configurations, rather than simply as Westernization. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in the Third World, the category 'women' was constructed primarily within the discourse of modernity and civilization and in relation to the categories of the 'social' and the 'communal-national'. The grand narratives of the social sciences, such as progress and reform, were employed to bring 'women' into the category of the 'social'. For example, in the nineteenth century, girls' schools and training colleges were opened and women began entering the universities. Issues of health care, child care, and philanthropy were integrated into the idea of the 'new women'. The 'family' became more like a Western nuclear family; roles were defined through complementary and patriarchal gender norms rather than through the social conventions that had regulated family patterns in the past.

When the modernization of women and the family had been integrated into the various nationalisms, the identities of the new nations were often defined by the lost and forgotten women who embodied an earlier, uncorrupted community. For example, reformers in India looked to Hindu women as a communal conscience, in Egypt to those within a reformed Islam, and in Turkey to the women of a pre-Islamic Turkic past. In this way, the image of the 'modern' woman was supported by her newly found indigenous character as well.

How and why 'women' became part of this cultural politics remains to be explained. According to Scott, 'gender is a constitutive element of social relationships based on perceived differences between the sexes, and gender is a primary way of signifying relations of power.' When there is a change in the power structure, there is a parallel change in the symbolic representation of gender. Scott states that these representations are expressed in religious, educational, scientific, legal and political doctrines and typically take the form of a fixed binary opposition, categorically and unequivocally asserting the meaning of male and female, masculine and feminine.

In general terms, we find a grand narrative that not only places womanhood within the modern, global world and ascribes to it new symbolic and
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social roles but also defines this new womanhood through a process of nostalgia as indigenous, as true to the identity of the particular nation, and therefore as distinct from those images of women that are prescribed by the West. The new namings for ‘women’ were a way of consolidating power structures different from those already in place. For example, in Turkey women became a site of struggle between the Republicans and those loyal to an Islamic-Ottoman order. Historically, women not only were subjects of social change who constructed new identities for themselves and sought emancipation, but they also were objectified by nationalist discourses.

‘Women’ have been articulated within different power configurations and different versions of collective identity. Religion and nationalism have often been the dominant reference points for these identities. In order to understand the predicament of Third World women and their existence within two different cultural formations, both modern and traditional, histories of particular identities have to be brought together with the history of the category ‘women’. Feminists should investigate what power relations produce the category ‘women’. For example, at what point is the power of the West invoked in questions of the naming of ‘women’, say in Algeria or in Turkey? The overdetermination of the category ‘women’ by different political hegemonies has to be made evident, and the cultural representations of women decoded, in order to understand the subordination of women in different situations.

To place Nezihe Muhittin’s life and work in historical and cultural context, the dynamic character of the Ottoman Empire, the segmentation of the society (the division of the Empire into semi-autonomous communities called millets), and its place within the larger global order must be understood. The first reforms were introduced in the eighteenth century both to consolidate the Sultan’s power against the religious establishment and to combat Europe’s military and economic superiority. The religious establishment had been supporting the Muslims, who were economically disadvantaged by the increasing power of the Christian millets allied with Western capitalist powers within the Empire. The reforms aimed at accommodating the demands of all sections of the population by making changes in education, in the law (as in qualifications of citizenship), and in economic matters (such as taxes). These reforms were meant to place all millets in identical relationships to the Ottoman state. However, this shift required changes within the cultural domain as well, since the state took over many responsibilities previously reserved for the millets.

The first constitutional system established by the efforts of the reformers in 1876 soon failed when Sultan Abdulhamit consolidated his power with the support of the conservative-Islamic elements. His absolutist regime ended in 1908 when the Young Turks came to power with a new constitutional order, a liberal political climate, and new ideas of Turkish national identity. However, their rule was marked by defeat in the Balkan Wars in 1913 and in the First World War in 1918. In 1919 the War of Independence began in
Anatolia under the leadership of Atatürk. Turkey was born as a nation-state based on Western, secular models of nationalism. In October 1923 the parliament declared the new regime a republic and in 1924 it proclaimed a new constitution. In 1926 the country became fully secular when the position of caliphate was abolished and a new civil code was established.

Changes in the position of women began to appear with the earliest reform movements in the eighteenth century. In the Muslim millet, family matters were under the jurisdiction of religious courts in which Muslim law, the Sheriat, was strictly observed. Now, new schools were opened, women's newspapers appeared, and aspects of women's traditional lives, from polygamy to religiously prescribed garments, were debated. New civic codes were formulated. By 1900 the domain of religious law had narrowed, losing ground to secular law. Women gained inheritance rights comparable to men's. After 1908, women entered the professions and started working in public. In 1917 a new family law was put into effect and polygamy was restricted, requiring the consent of the first wife. The civil code of 1926 abolished polygamy and empowered women to seek divorce. Women gained the right to vote and run in municipal elections in 1930, in elections to village councils of elders in 1933, and in national elections in 1934. In 1937 there were eighteen women in the National Assembly, comprising 4.5% of its membership. These changes were brought about despite longstanding opposition by religious reactionaries and the ebb and flow of reform movements.¹³

I will discuss Muhittin's book in two sections, focusing first on her life and then on her ideas. I describe her life simply by summarizing and quoting directly, with emphasis on her narrative structure. I try not to intervene in the text, although of course I realize that the act of summarizing and omitting is in itself an intervention. In the second section, I take the challenge of laying out the basic premises of her discourse on feminism and the contradictions that result.

Nezihe Muhittin (1889–1958) was born to an upper-class family in Istanbul during the absolutist period of Sultan Abdulhamit's rule. She grew up among educated women, with a liberal father and radical cousins who went to military schools and opposed the regime. The household's intellectual spirit left a mark on Muhittin that defined her feminism and politics for the rest of her life. Describing the female cousin who influenced her the most, she stated: 'Nakiye Hanım ... had an unshakable belief. The three fundamental principles of this belief were a deep love of freedom and of humanity, a hatred of cruelty and oppression, and a commitment to all kinds of sacrifice for the sake of humanity.'¹⁴

In addition to these family influences, other figures appear in the text who apparently played prominent roles in feminist politics during Muhittin's childhood. For example, a footnote mentions that one of Nakiye Hanım's friends, Kibrislizade Azize Hanım, was the first Turkish woman to go to Europe for the International Women's Congress. Muhittin visited a women's
organization with her mother when she was eight. However, it was difficult to sustain that philanthropic group, despite her cousin’s effort to do so by writing in the newspapers. Muhittin wrote that before 1900 there had been no bridge between the minority of educated women concerned with the needs of womanhood and the rest of society. Between them stood old customs and superstitions that had to be overcome.

The constitution of 1908 initially gave women no new rights, Muhittin stated, but they could engage in political life. Muhittin herself wrote for the newspapers. Her first article expressed her concern with laws about women. Although several women were active in literary circles, Muhittin was distinguished by her concern with social issues. Having been educated at home by private teachers, she became a teacher of natural sciences at a newly opened girls’ high school and also principal of a girls’ vocational school. She worked closely with several other women who became leading feminists in the early republican era, ‘all of them working together with the hope and aspiration of teaching Turkish girls just as well as the foreigners’. As principal, Muhittin introduced classes in science, music and sports and imported European ideas about teaching and the curriculum. Even when the regime was threatened by religious reactionaries, she managed to keep her school open.

Muhittin acknowledged that Halide Edip’s formation of the Society for the Elevation of Women in 1909 was a new step for Turkish women. But she also pointed out that, rather than ‘doing lots of work’, this society aimed to foster the entry of women into social life. Muhittin cited her heavy work-load as a reason for not often participating in the gatherings of this Society. But she soon founded another women’s society herself, the women’s chapter of the Association of Navy, directed to social work and philanthropy.

During the Balkan War, Muhittin wrote, more and more women came to the help of the needy. Professional nurses appeared for the first time, several women’s organizations were established, and schools were turned into hospitals or factories to supply the demands of the war. After Turkey’s defeat in 1913, the women’s chapter of the Association for Patriotic Defense made its presence known through mass rallies and meetings. Muhittin, invited to give a speech at one of these meetings, focused on economic problems and advocated the consumption of domestic goods in place of foreign-made goods. This resulted in a government request to mobilize the country through a series of neighborhood conferences on the topic. In 1913 Muhittin founded the Association for Protection of Ottoman Turkish Women. In this organization she aimed to unite philanthropic activities, such as the care and education of orphans, widows, and young girls, with the economic goal of bringing women into the labor force to produce domestic manufactures to replace foreign ones. But as she was assigned new jobs around the country by the Ministry of Education, the organization moved away from its economic purpose. Other women’s organizations, such as the women’s chapters of the Turkish Hearth, were also active, and many women attended...
and spoke at their meetings. But, as Muhittin saw it, they could not yet formulate a strong, collective notion of womanhood. Although they broke the old roles assigned to them, they were not able to conceptualize new goals. Muhittin lamented that women were prone to jealousy and competitiveness, making it impossible for them to be mutually supportive and cooperative.¹⁸

During World War I and the War of National Independence, women of all sections joined in the war effort. Peasant women fought beside men on the battlefield, while middle-class women worked with men behind the lines. Muhittin made women’s actions central to the transition from the old to the new social and political order. She argued that women’s contribution was crucial to the defeat of the enemy. Women did not differ from men in putting the welfare of the nation first. The nation realized its power and won its independence, and the debris of the old sultanate was brought down by the nationalist movement. Muhittin clearly included women among those who made the nation-state’s existence possible. She described both women and men as looking to the future and wanting to be free of the past. The excitement of a new life had spread to every soul. Women were not behind men in desiring to be free of dogmas and superstitions. Both in action and in mind, they showed their talent at working together; they were determined not to fall behind men in realizing the nation’s aims.

This repudiation of the past and turn to the future enabled Muhittin to conceive a new social and political order that would guarantee women’s place as legitimate constituents. In 1923, during the formation of the Republican People’s Party, Muhittin decided to realize her aim of many years: the establishment of a women’s organization that would unite enlightened women. She formed the Women’s People’s Party with friends who shared her intellectual and political opinions. Their goal was to realize the principles of democracy by modifying ‘the consciousness, the negligence, the grave situation’ that had made womanhood the lowest class of society in all previous periods. The group met in Muhittin’s apartment to prepare the party program. They started by defining the needs of society and the kind of ‘revolutionary women’ who would make an impact on this new society.

The speech Muhittin gave to the Congress on Education on 26 June 1923 appeared in newspapers and was reprinted in her book. She located her progressive ideas within the social conditions of the time:

At this time in which we are busy with the reform and development of the country from top to bottom, the value of the effort we will be spending on the improvement of womanhood is enormous. As it has happened several times in the past, the neglect of womanhood in the valley of reforms would leave her without a future, without a result and bare. Attention! I am not saying halfway or partially without a future. Yes, as long as woman and womanhood are forgotten, the reforms started will remain without a future.¹⁹
Muhittin suggested that a full investigation of the needs of the country and of its economic, political, social and administrative potential be undertaken and then an education program be developed to realize that potential.

The two opposing forces of nature, one conservative, the other the tendency for renovation and progress, are always in collision with each other, and no doubt the winner is eventually the renovation. But isn’t the difficulty directing and managing the balance between these two forces? The principles of sociology that govern this balance have not acquired a positive certainty, and are not definite and fixed. So experience and observation remain important. For this reason, it is necessary to move away from the area of theory and go to practice. Please, let us be practical and give a positive direction to what we are thinking. I therefore find the cries in the newspaper that this or that should be done (but with no action) fruitless. An invitation to work would probably be logical and productive. In these matters, we are seeing every day that individualistic ideas and efforts are unproductive.20

The first project of the Women’s People’s Party was a congress on education. But the planned congress was cancelled because the Ministry of Education opened an Institute of Training and Instruction and called every member who had been invited to the congress to the capital to work toward the same goals set by Muhittin’s party. (This, I believe, is evidence of the influence of women’s political organizations on the government.) Collection of statistics about orphans and the poor in Istanbul became the next project, which was completed in a year. The party organized lectures to invite more women to contribute to the national effort. Unfortunately, after months of waiting, the party was denied permission to incorporate by the authorities on the grounds that women were not yet enfranchised. To stay in existence, the party reorganized as The Women’s League of Turkey and certain demands, such as women’s participation in the armed forces, were dropped. Muhittin notes that these events were covered world-wide by the media. One year later she started the journal of the League, *The Way of Turkish Woman*, with her own money. Women writers, professionals and activists became members of the League and pursued suffrage for the next decade. They contributed to neighborhood welfare, aided the needy and the sick, invited women to become involved in public life, and pressured the government for suffrage. The book ends with the events of 1923; the Women’s League was dissolved by the ruling People’s Party in 1935.21

*The Turkish Woman* is not only rich in historical content; it is also a discourse on society and social change, gender difference, and feminism. Muhittin’s ideas on these matters are representative of the modernist ideology of her period. However, she also presented a critical debate on what modernism implied for women and on the goals of feminism, speaking as a woman and for women.

According to Muhittin, during the Ottoman Empire’s absolutist period power rested in the hands of the uneducated. In her words, science had become the loser and ignorance the winner. Educated men were slaves of
the uneducated, and women were the slaves of the slaves. First the slaves had to be liberated. Men were divided into two groups, the elite and the common people. From the ‘diseased mouth with decaying teeth’ of this cruel administration came the ‘despicable’ statement that women were a third group, a class even beneath the other two, powerless and completely subordinate. For the slaves of the slaves, there was no law, no rights, no conscience. Since customs and religion forbade women from speaking or acting, their very voices and actions were a crime from the moment they were born.

Muhittin contrasted the powerful women of long-past eras, who were lively and determined, with the women of the near past who existed in pain and disaster. This celebration of the pre-Ottoman Turkish past was common among Turkists, who were searching for a pre-Islamic cultural identity. The image of the ‘new woman’ was the recovery of the real self of the Turkish woman. Muhittin’s historical account reflects her involvement in the nationalist debates of the period. She further contrasted the lives of city and town women with those of peasants. Once again, she found a basis for constructing an independent, strong working role for Turkish women. Although women in cities were in desperate straits, she said, peasant women had always maintained their own personalities, as they lived and worked together with men. She explained the oppressive conventions, enforced by religion, under which city women lived. Women had no power to change their circumstances since they could not provide themselves with jobs. She believed a person so deprived economically could not be anything other than a slave. According to Muhittin, those who woke up to these conditions of the Empire were able to generate a revolution. Consciousness and action were brought back to life from their sleep, and progress and reform would continue in the new nation.

Muhittin’s language was rooted in French positivist philosophy, especially that of Comte and Durkheim, and thus the dominant discourse of progress and reform which grounded nationhood, civilization, and social organization. The methods of inquiry of the positive sciences, observation and experimentation, together with the universal laws of social evolution, underlined her belief that historical change could only be in the direction of progress. For her, development towards a good and harmonious society was based on scientific principles that were immanent and necessary. Not only was there only one true possibility for social change, but fighting against it would be futile. Anything else would be, in Muhittin’s language, disease-stricken, harmful to the collective being, dangerous for society and future generations, and out of social harmony. She also analyzed the forces and structures of the moral order, in abstract terms, through scientific and causal laws. She viewed these laws as universally applicable to the social domain, physiology, and psychology. From the general principle that the greater the force of the stimulus, the greater will be the effect or response, she argued that the greater the force of the social awakening to change, the greater will
be the effect on the social organism and the deeper and more evident will be changes in the organization and structure of society.23

Muhittin’s writing showed how not only women’s issues but also the women’s movement were closely articulated to this ideological milieu. Her views of womanhood and society were grounded in an absolute belief in the principles of science and the laws of nature. First, the two sexes were organically related to each other, their differences explained in scientific terms. Second, the relation of women to society was explained scientifically; there was a good fit between women and society only when both were constituted according to the dictates of science.

Muhittin repudiated the claim that there was no difference between men and women and thus that they could wear the same clothes, had the same physical capacities, etc. She wrote that the difference between the sexes could be explained through the metaphor of the opposite ends of a battery. Men and women were different biologically, naturally and morally. They were two contradictory poles, with a strong attraction between them. ‘Up until now men wanted to rule our social life with the power of one pole and neglected the other pole. Life went on but to ill effect.’24 Real feminists, she declared, desired changes in the civic and political laws so that the battery of life would work well and the condition of ordinary people would improve. Similarity between the two sexes would not yield these results. On the contrary, it was their difference that would produce social balance and power. Given the urgent needs of society, she worried about the trend of women dressing like men and pursuing masculine life styles. She complained that, although the civilized woman was now seeking equality in horsemanship or in swimming, she did not need the muscles of a wrestler to bear the healthy children needed by society. The ‘new woman’, regardless of society’s needs, desired to compete with men and, like them, to live a free and independent life. Women of the past, enslaved within their homes, had become gossiping, chattering, conceited monsters. The new woman wanted to leave her cocoon altogether, like a butterfly. This could result in her neglecting women’s important role in ‘population politics’. However, Muhittin added that women should be educated to be able to work in case men were unable to take care of their families.

Muhittin was aware of the contradictions in her feminist position. She suggested that her emphasis on sexual difference would promote general harmony and the balance of social life. Otherwise, she said, women should take their place in all occupations. They should become doctors, lawyers, merchants, civil servants, teachers, artists, members of parliament and even ministers so that they would make women’s existence felt among the enlightened and educated people who would in turn be organizing women’s social life. But if the only goal of every woman was to enter one of these professions, then there would be no social harmony. The advancement of women was necessary for the country’s happiness and for reforms to go forward. Yet women’s differences from men needed to be brought to the
foreground. If essential feminine qualities, such as nurturance, were extricated from the old superstitions about women, women would be able to use responsibly the rights they had or would gain.

This emphasis on social harmony explains how Muhittin integrated society and the individual. Both these categories were subject to the same physiological and psychological rules and laws. There was no conflict between the two because what was necessary for the good of society was also good for the individual. In this framework, unless what was good for women—mainly education, freedom from oppressive superstitions and customs, and freedom to move in the public domain—was accomplished, there could be no improvement in society. This argument, however, implied that to pursue individual gain and freedom regardless of the social good would be a selfish act, destructive both to the individual and to society.

Nezihe Muhittin's feminist thought and principles and the ideology of the Turkish Republicans were not based on the idea of the autonomous subject. Women's rights were not viewed by feminists as 'individual' rights. Social change in Turkey, unlike that in Western European countries, was not rooted in the ideal of individual reason and the rights of man. Rather, August Comte's sociological principle of 'order and progress' and Durkheim's sociology of 'collective conscience', 'culture and solidarity', and 'division of labor' became the constituting referents of the new nation. Instead of the principles of individual free will or reason, the new nation was reformed on the basis of a fundamentally communal existence that was re-thought and problematized. For example, starting with the 1924 constitution, the main interest of lawmakers was to institutionalize social changes within the domain of the secular state, and not within the religious, autocratic order of the sultanate. They paid little attention to the rights of citizens other than listing the classic rights taken from French liberalism and providing limited constitutional means of guaranteeing them. It was perhaps for this reason that the women's suffrage movement was more successful in Turkey than in many other places, including Europe. Since the new social order was not based on the individual, defined as male, women seemed part of the collectivity rather than needing to enter it through the principle of individual rights. What women saw as their enemy was the old religious-social order, not the power of 'modern' men.

Nezihe Muhittin opposed both individualism and individualistic interpretations of feminism. She saw women's desire to be identical to men as one manifestation of individualism. Without benefiting the social cause it could not benefit women, who had suffered the most from the evils of the old system. Muhittin located the backwardness of the country in the minds of the masses guided by superstition, unscientific knowledge and misinformation. For her, feminism's real commitment was to progress. But total progress would not be realized until every woman left her cage, was allowed to speak not only in front of her in-laws but also in public, and knew how to tend the sick and raise children properly. In Muhittin's positive feminism,
the ideal society is not one in which men and women are equal, but one in which their differences and complementary social roles are fully realized.

However, the contradiction between her emphases on women's entry into the public world through independence, education, and the professions, on the one hand, and their importance as mothers to the collective good, on the other, remained unresolved in Muhittin's thought. For the intellectuals of her time, such as Ziya Gökalp, the Durkheimian theory of the division of labor and organic solidarity was key to building the new nation. In this view, the contractual relation between various occupational positions, defined through functional necessity, maintained social cohesion through a moral order of interdependence, which eliminated disruptive divisions based on class. But this theory was based on a non-problematic equation of 'men' with 'work': only men's public work was 'divided' in this model. Apparently Muhittin wanted a division of labor between men and women within the professional/public world as well. This was problematic since the professions were not divided according to sex. There was no clear way to translate the complementarity of the sexes into distinct professional roles in public life. It was not logically consistent to argue, as Muhittin did, for different social roles for women and men and, at the same time, to demand the liberation of women by enabling them, like men, to enter the social world through education and the free choice of an occupation.

Muhittin was greatly disappointed when only five hundred women responded to her call for membership in the new party; she had expected thousands. Given the urban population and the number of people who were educated and involved in political life in those days, however, the number of women who actually responded was significant. After the 'republican ideology' lost its power over the country, there were even fewer women involved in politics, and those who were active had almost no interest in feminism. The everyday involvement of the public and the press with feminism, and the accusations that certain (male) members of parliament in the early 1920s were feminists, lost currency. Elsewhere I have argued that, given the conflict of power between the center and the periphery of the country, promotion of the emancipation of women was part of the ideology of modernism at the center. When the power structures of the periphery, defined by the patron-client relations established over the centuries, came to power, this ideology faded. The traditionalist-conservative elements defined gender through honor and shame, while pursuing technological and developmentalist modernization but not modernism. During the last fifty years, modernist-scientific legitimation of the emancipation of women lost its influence. However, the institutional rights women obtained before the 1940s were retained, making it possible for modernists and their children to defend their rights when they were challenged.

Turkish women's participation in defining women in social terms has been in general effaced and forgotten. Women have been both objects and
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subjects of social change. The forces that led Atatürk to grant suffrage to women in the early 1930s and to include eighteen women in the Assembly in 1937 can in part explain how women became objects for political ends. Women can be seen as ‘symbolic pawns’ in Atatürk’s anti-religious political program and, as Tekeli argues, women’s suffrage made it possible to show the world the democratization of Turkey under the single-party rule of Atatürk, as against the fascist parties of Italy and Germany.29 Issues of gender stood at the center of the fight between reformers and traditionalists and were appropriate for public display abroad. But women’s issues could have been accommodated rather than made the focus of confrontation. Women’s suffrage was not merely an ‘instrument’ to prove democratization but was regarded as ‘evidence’. After all, ‘the generation of the republic’, as it is called in Turkey, grew up with new ideas about women.

It is important to see the feminist movement of the period in terms other than instrumentalist ones. First, it was embedded within a search for a new national-communal identity, a new ideology of secularism and progress, and the global construction of the categories of the ‘new woman’ and the ‘social’. Second, the contributions of Nezihe Muhittin and others show how women played active and important roles as subjects. One book, a party, and a few organizations do not demonstrate that there was a widespread feminist movement in the period. But there was definitely an effective public discourse about feminism generated by women, so women have been participants in their own emancipation. The view that sees them only as objects in the politics of Westernization must be reconsidered.

Notes

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1. Nezihe Muhittin, Türk Kadini (The Turkish Woman) (Numune Matbaasi, Istanbul, 1931). I have translated all quotations myself.

2. Information on the activities of women and their organizations during this early period of the Turkish feminist movement has been retrieved by Serpil Çakir. I share her view that Turkish women were not only objects of national politics but also active subjects in their struggle for emancipation. See S. Çakir, ‘Siyasal Yasama Katilim Mücadelesinde Türk Kadını’, in Kadınlar ve Siyasal Yaşam: eşit hak — eşit katılım, ed. Necla Arat (Cem Yayınevi, İstanbul, 1991).


15. In fact, this period marks the entry of women into the social-political domain in large numbers through various organizations and publications. Serpil Çakir lists eighteen organizations established between 1908 and 1918; see S. Çakir, ‘Bir Osmanlı Kadın Örgütü: Osmanlı Mudafaa-i Hukuk-u Nisvan Cemiyeti’, Tarih ve Toplum, 66 (1989), pp. 16–21.


17. For the program of this organization, see S. Çakir, ‘Osmanlı Türk Kadınları Esirgeme Derneği’, Toplum ve Bilim, 45 (Spring 1991), pp. 91–97.

18. One of these feminist organizations, which Muhittin names but disregards, is the Society for the Defense of Women’s Rights. Serpil Çakir places this organization and its journal, World of Women, published between 1913 and 1921, among the most influential feminist organizations. It was supported by middle-class women and lacked support from feminists of the upper classes. Such evidence points to the limits of Muhittin’s objectivity and to her elitism. For detailed information on this and other Ottoman women’s organizations, see S. Çakir, ‘Bir Osmanlı Kadın Örgütü’, and ‘Osmanlı Kadın Dernekleri’, Toplum ve Bilim, 53 (Spring 1991), pp. 139–57.


22. Muhittin, The Turkish Woman, p. 28.

23. See especially Muhittin, The Turkish Woman, the dedication of the book to Atatürk, pp. 69–73, and pp. 96–100.