

## Contextualizing the representation of modern Turkish women through a fictional autobiography: *Memoirs of Halide Edib*

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### Abstract

Edward Said's work *Orientalism*- one of the most influential works in post-colonial studies in decades- identified and critiqued how the West positioned itself in a superior position to the East through a series of mechanisms. Despite the fact that the book is attuned to issues of gender and sexuality, it is not a work of feminist scholarship or theory. Rather, it broaches the issue of sexuality as one in which the Western "male" gaze dominates the East, which is perceived as inherently "female." Halide Edib's autobiographical work, especially the part which covers her childhood stories, is full of evident which shows the representation of "oriental women" in the Ottoman Empire. In additionally, it shows how during the modernization policy in the beginning of the Turkish Republic, Turkish women took initiatives towards gender equality. By focusing on Halide Edib's fictional autobiography, *Memoirs of Halide Edib*, it will be attempted to contextualize how Halide Edib became a pioneering figure and represented "modern Turkish women." By doing this, Said's depiction of the Western conception of "oriental women" will eventually be refuted by providing Halide Edib as an example.

**Keywords:** Turkish literature, Halide Edib's *Memoirs of Halide Edib*, gender, representation of woman.

## Modern Türk kadını temsiline kurgusal bir otobiyografi üzerinden bağlamlaştırılması: *Mor Salkımlı Ev* (Halide Edib'in Anıları)

### Öz

Edward Said'in, sömürge sonrası (post-kolonyal) çalışmalarda yıllardır en etkili eserlerinden biri olan *Oryantalizm*'deki tespitleri, "Batı"nın bir dizi mekanizma ile kendisini "Doğu"ya üstün bir pozisyonda nasıl konumlandığını belirler ve eleştirir. Bununla birlikte kitap aslında cinsiyet ve cinsellik konuları hakkında bir fikir vermesine rağmen, feminist bir teori ya da alan kitabı olarak değerlendirilmez. Daha ziyade cinsellik meselesini Batılı "erkek" bakış açısının, doğası gereği "kadın" olarak algılanan Doğu'ya egemen olduğu bir konu olarak ele alır. Halide Edib'in otobiyografik çalışması, özellikle de çocukluk hikayelerini kapsayan kısmı, Osmanlı İmparatorluğu'nda "oryantal kadın" ların temsiline açıkça ortaya koymaktadır. Ayrıca, Türkiye Cumhuriyeti'nin kuruluş yıllarındaki modernleşme politikası sırasında, Türk kadınların cinsiyet eşitliğine yönelik birçok girişimde bulunduğunu açıkça göstermektedir. Bu makalede Halide Edib'in kurgusal otobiyografisi olan *Mor Salkımlı Ev*'e (Halide Edib'in Anıları) odaklanılarak Halide Edib'in nasıl öncü bir figür haline geldiği ve "modern Türk kadını" nasıl temsil ettiği bağlamsallaştırılmaya çalışılacaktır. Bunu

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yaparken de Edward Said'in Batı'daki "oryantal kadın" anlayışı ve betimlemesi, Halide Edib'in aksi bir örnek gösterilmesi nedeniyle reddedilecektir.

**Anahtar kelimeler:** Türk edebiyatı, Halide Edib'in *Mor Salkımlı Ev'i*, toplumsal cinsiyet, kadının temsili.

### **Contextualizing the representation of modern Turkish women through a fictional autobiography: memoirs of Halide Edib**

*Orientalism* which is written by Edward Said and accepted as one of the most important and effective books in post-colonial studies in decades recognized and evaluated how the West situated itself in a superior position to the East through a series of mechanisms. It is an important source of reference for those working on the issues of gender and sexuality, although it is not a work of feminist scholarship or theory. It covers the issue of sexuality as one in which the Western "male" gaze dominates the East, which is comprehended as innately "female." He states that "this is especially evident in the writings of travelers and novelists: women are usually the creatures of a male power fantasy" (Said, 1979:207). Halide Edib's autobiographical work, especially the part which covers her childhood stories, is full of evident which shows the representation of "oriental women" in the Ottoman Empire. In additionally, it shows how during the modernization policy in the beginning of the Turkish Republic, Turkish women took initiatives towards gender equality. By focusing on Halide Edib's fictional autobiography, *Memoirs of Halide Edib*, it will be attempted to contextualize how Halide Edib became a pioneering figure and represented "modern Turkish women." By doing this, Said's depiction of the Western conception of "oriental women" will eventually be refuted by providing Halide Edib as an example.

In *Orientalism*, Edward Said describes Orientalism as a fundamentally male-oriented standpoint. As Jukka Jouhki states in his dissertation "Imagining the Other Orientalism and Occidentalism in Tamil-European Relations in South India," the Orientalist gaze essentially has a sexist viewpoint rendering Oriental women objects of a male power-fantasy (2006: 74). Eastern women have, in general and as a whole, been seen as perpetually sensual, deprived of rationality and, above all, willing. He argues that the male conception of the world has made the Orientalist discourse "static, frozen and fixed eternally (Said 1995: 207–219)." Therefore, the Easterner does not have the opportunity of advancement and transformation. To some extent, the Orient is represented as the powerless and inferior companion of the Westerner like a woman to a man (Said 1995: 207–219).

Ramazan Gulendam asserts in "Turkish Women In the Novels of Some Turkish Female Writers (1839 1930)" that

With the conversion of Turks to Islam, their settlement in Anatolia and more importantly their being susceptible to the influence of the Arab and Iranian culture and tradition, the woman mostly imprisoned in her home, coerced to wear the 'peche' covering her face and was expected to be obedient and subservient. (Gulendam, 2007: 180)

This analysis shows that with the conversion of Turks to Islam, male hegemony began to prevail as a result of interpreting Islam in patriarchal way, and the Turkish woman lost her first-class standing and most importantly equal status with her male partner. This situation continued throughout the time of the Ottoman Empire. Nilgun Anadolu-Okur states in her article "The Demise of the Great Mother: Islam, Reform, and Women's Emancipation in Turkey," "after the conquest of Constantinople... traditional Ottoman social life was influenced by Byzantinian and Iranian state structure which favored slavery and subjugation in its political system of hierarchical organization. Turkish women's once-superior status

suffered a sharp decline (2005:17). Eventually with the establishment of “Harem”, which was the part of a house set apart for the women of the family in Muslim society, the Turkish woman lost almost all of her rights. Man’s world was communal, woman’s world was private, and her existence was only in the family. Woman imprisoned in the home who was forced to cover herself, lost her role in the society. The exclusion of the woman from positions of power, sanctified by religion, in an overwhelmingly masculine society did not prevent women close to sultans, namely their mothers, daughters, spouses, and sisters, from exerting considerable political influence behind the walls. “High ranking dynastic women”, Leslie P. Peirce states in her article, *Beyond Harem Walls Ottoman Royal Family and the Exercise of Power*, “especially the mother of the reigning sultan and his leading concubines, were considerably more active than their predecessors in the direct exercise of power – in creating and manipulating domestic political factions, in negotiating with ambassadors of foreign powers and in acting as regents to their sons.” In additionally, some women were involved in literature as being the voice of all especially in their poetries. These female poets such as Mihri and Zeynep Hatuns who lived during the reign of Fatih Sultan Mehmet, Hubbi Hatun who lived during Kanuni Sultan Suleyman’s (Suleyman the Magnificent) reign in the 17th century, Sitki Hatun, Ani Hatun and Fitnat Hanim who lived in 19th century, uttered their feelings with their poetries, and for them poetry became the source of their grief and at the same time outcome (Gulendam, 2007). However, they were not able to play an influential role to change the status of women in the society as Halide Edip Adivar did. Halide Edip was a nationalist, modernist, educator, prolific writer (especially popular with her novels) and the leader of the women’s emancipation movement in Turkey. She was the “only” woman novelist among the writers of the period. Among her written works, her memoirs attracted and still continue to attract significant attention, because they are not only fictional works to read and enjoy, but also work of Turkey’s social history from a woman perspective.

*Memoirs of Halide Edib* is the story of a little girl who later becomes a public figure. It discusses the personal challenges and benefits of the transition from the Ottoman Empire to a new republic, while discoursing about the modernization period, with special attention to the gender aspects of modernity and the transformation of women’s lives in Turkey. Her memoir is especially important for that time period as it portrays the various perspectives of women, describes how Turkish women gained power to deal with the issue of polygamy, their marital problems, and contrasts these issues to the views and lives of women during the Ottoman Empire.

In *Women and Gender in Islam*, Leila Ahmed mentions the issue of veiling, polygamy, and education – especially the women’s education- as the important aspect of the otherness and inferiority of the Easterners from the eyes of Westerners (Ahmed, 1992:149). As an illustration, Ahmed indicates “... the thesis of the new colonial discourse of Islam centered on women... Islam was oppressive to women, that the veil (polygamy and women’s education) ...was the comprehensive backwardness of Islamic society” (152). Westerners see these issues as emblematic of the abuse and pressure of the oppressed ‘oriental’ women in a male-dominated community or due to the influence of neo-imperialist and colonizing western powers (Grace, 2004: 1). As it is clear, veiling, polygamy, and education were the most remarkable signal of divergence and inferiority of Muslim countries from the view of the West.

In the article, “The Novelist Halide Edip Adivar and Turkish Feminism,” Emel Sonmez states a parallel situation for the time period in which Halide Edib lived. However, even in this time of conflict, Halide Edib’s difference was easily recognized. Sonmez indicates that

Halide Edib was born and raised during the dark years of Abdulhamit’s, who was the last sultan of Ottoman Empire, tyranny when the only thing a woman could do in public was to wear her veil, but, ever since her childhood, she was very active (Sonmez, 1973:86).

As opposed to Western writers' depiction of women, Halide was a highly educated woman, she did not complied with polygamy, and she did not suffer from the issue of veiling. Therefore, her life became an ideal representation of modern Turkish women in contrast to Western conception of "oriental women."

Halide Edib gives a vivid account of her life in her fictional autobiography, *Memoirs of Halide Edib*. This work gives important clues about her ability to overcome difficulties because of her sex to achieve a respected public role in the new republic and international recognition as an author and lecturer. More importantly, in every detailed account, she clearly shows the habit and culture of her time, as well as the change in the society, and creation of a new period. Therefore, it serves as an important document for this significant term and helps reader to understand the reality of human lives.

She mentions in *Memoirs of Halide Edib* that she was born in Istanbul in 1882, into a wealthy traditional family. Her father, Edib Bey, was a secretary of Sultan Abdülhamid II and worked in the palace. Halide Edib's mother died when she was a small child. She was cared for by her maternal grandparents until she was four years old. At home in the care of her grandmother, Halide Edib was raised according to the rules of Ottoman traditional way of life and Islamic harem. When her father remarried, she returned father's home. There her feminist consciousness emerged because her father had two wives and this event had a profound effect on Halide Edib and her writings as well. As a "little girl," by which she describes herself in her *Memoirs*, she recognized the male province, and described her thoughts and the starting point on her determination to change the situation as follows:

She knows two classes of people and two ages: 'Children' are all little girls and continue to live in child-dom till they take the veil.... That happens when they are ten years old, and they then join the grown-ups forever after. All the grown-ups are the same and of the same age whether they are twelve or fifty. Boys are emphatically not children. They dress like men, or rather as they did at that time, and they are disagreeable and noisy. If there is anything in the world to dislike, for her, it is boys. They are almost like the ugly, noisy musical box which her mother played, still echoing in her brain as a continual false note. If there is anything in her heart that can be called a decided liking, it is for men... (Edib, 1926:17).

In contrast to the most of the Western writers' idea of uneducated oriental women, Halide Edib's involvement in the education system was also twofold that was implemented in her *Memoirs*. First was during her childhood as having an education in both modern and traditional style, and second was her active participation in the process of creation of an education system for girls.

To begin with her own education, at father's home she received a privileged education by English governess, called "lala," and Turkish religious sheikhs. As Ozgun Basmaz describes in the article "The Rebellious Daughter of the Republic" or "The Mother of the Turks": Reconsidering the Late Ottoman Empire and the Early Turkish Republic Through the Politics of Halide Edib Adivar, her father was a man of modern outlook, and determined that she should receive a Western education, so after attending nursery school run by a Greek woman, Kyria Eleni, she was sent to The American College for Girls in Uskudar, and became the first Muslim and Turkish girl to graduate from this school in 1901 (2008). She was educated in eastern and Western literature, religion, philosophy, and sociology. The American College formed a footstep in her later life to establish a self-confident female identity and enable the chances of meeting independent women models.

In addition to her highly educated personality, she dedicated herself to the improvement of education for Turkish women and to furthering relations between them and European women. In order to achieve

this goal, she focused on the quality of the schools and its high standards of teaching capacity rather than increasing the number of schools. Concerning the education of women, she indicates that:

The education of women seriously speaking was begun by the new regime, and in 1913 we had a good college- and a normal school. I felt that our efforts must be directed toward slowly increasing the numbers without endangering their quality, that the normal schools should be fused with the colleges and that several of these should be united in order to economize teachers and equipment, and thus keep up the standard, which was falling low in the many normal schools and colleges which we opened all over the country, and which were only nominally what they should have been" (Edib, 1926:348).

As it is clear, she does not only underline the quality of schools, but also reveals the transformations in education from the old method to a new system.

She was highly involved in the education of girls. As she recounts in *Memoirs*, she supports her sister Nighiar in establishing an elementary school in Beirut. Also, she was actively participated in teaching activities in Damascus, Lebanon, Beirut. In addition to that, she made important changes on the syllabus and administration in Dar al-mu'allimat (Women Teachers Training College) for the betterment of education. Furthermore, she established Teali-i Nisvan Cemiyeti (The Society for the Elevation of Women) in 1908 (Between Modernity and Nationalism, Hasan). She introduced this women club as follows:

We, with some teachers and some educated Turkish women, had formed that first women's club. Its ultimate object was the cultivation of its members. It had a small center where the members took lessons in French and English. It also opened classes for limited number of Turkish women to study Turkish, domestic science, and the bringing up of children... (Edib, 1926:334).

Besides educational activities, another important point that she was very determine about the changing the image of women was their public visibility. She was in the front while engaging this issue. Her visibility outside of home, even her access to mixed gender spaces was an evident of the changing women situation after the time of Ottoman Empire. In addition to giving lectures, establishing an association (Teali Nisvan Cemiyeti) for women rights and fighting to have the equal status with men, giving an enthusiastic and spirited public speech in Sultanahmet meeting shows her taking part actively in the public as breaking the understanding of private for women and public for men. In fact, the famous Sultanahmet meeting, one of the meetings to protest the occupations in 1919 in Istanbul, became a turning point of her life. She was the first woman speaker at this mass public meeting where her speech left the strongest mark on people's mind (Turkish Cultural Foundation, 2014). In her speech she addressed the women and emphasized that Turkish men and women should stand in solidarity and defend the country against the invaders and she stated that all self-conscious Turkish women abandoned their individual identities and became the part of a unique ideal for the sake and independence of their country (Hasan, 2010:19).

She did not work only for education of girls, but also set a model with her own experiences for the other important women issues. Immediately after graduating from the American College in 1901, Halide Edib married her teacher, the famous professor of mathematics Salih Zeki Bey who was twenty years older than her. She stayed as married with him for nine years. During her marriage, she did many intellectual activities with and without her husband. Beside intellectual studies, her housekeeping duties and the needs of her husband were important for her. This is most probably due to her grandmother's traditional way of education. After nine years of marriage, her husband decided to take a second wife. However, as Ilber Ortaylı indicates in "Halide Edib Adivar," there was an original side in their marriage agreement comparing to the Turkey's social norm. Halide Edib and Salih Zeki mutually signed a contract which

included a crucial provision for Halide Edib's life. According to this provision, if the groom chooses to have polygamy ("taaddüd-ü zevcat"), woman has a right to divorce (2013). Thus, she used her right to divorce in 1910. She had to face with the issue of polygamy not only with her husband, but also with her father who had two wives. The resonance of these distressing experiences appears in her novels, which often deal with the emotional and social conflict arising from traditional, patriarchal attitudes toward women. Also, as a result of these painful experiences, she determined herself to change the domination of men power over women. Halide Edib conveys her ideas about polygamy in her *Memoirs* both as a participant and a feminist critic of the social system. She describes her bitter experience as the following in her *Memoirs*:

At my return Salih Zeki Bey told me that he had married the lady, but to my great surprise he added that polygamy was necessary in some cases, and he asked me to continue as his first wife. There was a long and painful struggle between us but at last he consented to a divorce, and I left what for nine years had been my home. It was a cold April night when I drove with two boys (her sons Ayetullah and Hikmetullah) to Fatih to the big old-fashioned house of Nakie Hanum, where I stayed till I found a suitable house. What now seems an almost ordinary incident in a woman's life was then of supreme importance and the cause of great suffering to me. My foolish heart nearly broke. I think the women of Turkey must be more used to divorce nowadays, for one hears little of broken hearts in the many divorce cases that now take place there (Edib, 1926:308).

It is worth emphasizing that Halide Edib's memoir covers very vivid account not only about her life, but also the atmosphere of the period which covers her life. After her unpleasant polygamy experience she showed with her activities, lectures, and more importantly writings that Turkish women are not same with the "oriental women" of the Ottoman Empire. Her activities got very successful result in a short term. Her book shows that, she played a significant role in the process of women emancipation in Turkey that shows her perseverance to erase the image of oriental women in the eyes of Westerners.

In conclusion, *Memoirs of Halide Edib* acknowledges the Western interpretation of "oriental women." However, it also emphasizes that with the establishment of Turkish Republic this image was erased gradually. Therefore, this book is one of the touchstones of the Turkish political and social history for giving spirited and real information about the period. It is clear that despite of being raised during Ottoman period when most women were not allowed in public, were rarely provided more than the basic education, Halide Edib's accomplishments are noteworthy. Her life and career represents a remarkable example for emancipation of Turkish women in the twentieth century. As opposed to Western writers' depiction of women, in Edib's *Memoirs*, Halide was portrayed as a highly educated woman who did not complied with polygamy, and who did not suffer from the issue of veiling. That is to say, her life became an ideal representation of modern Turkish women as opposed to the Western conception of "oriental women."

Halide Edib fights with her pen for the rights of women through her literary works, including twenty-one novels, four collections of short stories, two theater plays, and countless articles, as a woman, Ottoman, Turkish and modern intellectual. She is still remembered and enthusiastically praised for her all-round contributions and her innovative feminist thought.

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