

**International Congress of Aesthetics 2007
“Aesthetics Bridging Cultures”**

**Women as Agents of Modernization in
Turkey**

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One of the main issues in the modernization of any Islamic culture inevitably concerns the status and rights of women. In the case of the Ottoman Empire which became conscious of the need for progress in many of its institutions, one of the important discourses that emerged during the 19th century was reform in education. Developments in the arts were also related to new educational practices. In both the arts and education women played an important role; they were not only the focus of any polemics on tradition, culture and lifestyle, but also in many cases, protagonists in the changing arts and educational practices.

Another issue which concerns modernization in cultures outside the west, or cultures reliant on tradition, is the lack of critical discourse. One of the reasons behind the slow process of modernization or behind its partial success in Turkey, is shown to be this lack of critical thought. On the other hand, we should note that this lack is related to the fact that when tradition is the guide to all practices, critical discourse can only be subversive, and is not considered to be a need. However, it had to emerge under the exigencies of reform which created a confrontation of different cultures.

Quite a dynamic and polemical critical discourse was to develop in the intellectual life of the Ottoman Empire beginning with the 18th century and gaining diversity and political stance during the end of the 19th century well into the 20th. The awareness that a serious cultural change was taking place or that it had to take place in order for Ottoman society to catch up with the new pace of the world ignited a heated polemics. This involved decisions about the direction that the change in the Ottoman society should take and about how an Islamic society should deal with the pressures of the modern world.

Between mid 19th century and the Republic that was founded in 1923, many Turkish intellectuals offered projects on the modernization of their culture, constructing a symbiosis of values taken from the West and from Islam, or presenting cases against the imposition of foreign values. Turkish modernization and the change of traditional Ottoman culture and society into that of the Republic had a background of a long intellectual argumentation. Within the time span of more than a hundred and fifty years

that this took place, from the late 18th to the early 20th century, political changes took place basically on the surface and were never completely implemented. In the implementation of new social rules and lifestyle women became extremely important since a lot of the arguments concerned the safeguarding of women's dependent position. It is when women began to actively participate in the change, both politically and culturally, that a transformation in everyday life became possible. These women were writers, authors, artists or simply social agents in the position of daughters or wives of statesmen. They began to appear in public, moved outside into the public space and created a new representation of women which, in turn, changed that public space. We can sense their influence behind many of the changes that directly effected the modernization and democratization of society.

The important changes concerning women and women rights emerge during the Reformation period and the place of women in society begins to be discussed during this period till the foundation of the Second Constitutional Government. The image of women with equal rights with the other sex and freer in the realms of education and social life begins to take shape.¹ Similar to western women, Turkish women will have to develop a consciousness that will lead to the struggle for emancipation and identity. For the acceptance of women in educational institutions women's equality and rights will have to be accepted. With the Second Constitutional Government, women begin to more frequently use the slogan of 'liberty' against men.² The education, attire, responsibilities of women begin to be openly discussed. Even newspaper headings begin to appear concerning women's equality and the need for education to make this equality possible. There were special women's journals and several women's organizations were founded.³

Only after the Second Constitutional Government women begin to enter higher educational institutions and art schools for the first time. With the new educational law that came into effect in 1913, high schools for women which, till then, existed only in city centers, begin to be opened also in the provinces. In many cities women's industrial schools were founded. Only in 1914 women begin to be accepted in the universities.⁴

When girls began to be seen in greater numbers within the educational system, it became obvious that they would also need art schools. One of the first women painters Mihri Müsfik, demands the foundation of a special art school for girls, with the claim that the Fine Arts School was accessible only to men students. In 1914, Women's Fine Arts school was opened, and three rooms were reserved for women students within the university building. It was prohibited for women to be in the same class as men; to avoid their meeting, even the recess hours were set differently.⁵

This Fine Arts School consisted of painting and sculpture departments. There were two art studios. Mihri Müsfik was going to teach in one of these studios.⁶

In the Women's Fine Arts School important Turkish artists were teaching anatomy, perspective, art history and aesthetics courses. Later Mihri Müsfik was to be promoted to become the director of the school. Many of the first Turkish women painters are to be educated in this school. Some of the first graduates, like Nazlı Ecevit, Fahrünissa Zeyd, Sabiha Bengütaş, become famous and continue to be active in the art scene of modern Turkey. The dominant approach in their work was impressionism and they usually preferred portraiture, which will be important in creating a new image of women. These women artists, most of whom also become members of the Ottoman Painters' Association, participate in the first art exhibitions that are held in the Galatasaray High

School. Although women have access to art education and to the university, their participation as professionals in the social field is the result of a very slow process, as it was also the case for European women. It will be with the foundation of the Republic in 1923 that women will constitutionally have the equal rights with men in all domains.

The process of modernization in Turkey is interesting especially when viewed from the perspective of women. Although the issue of women may not have been the discourse in the forefront, it was basic to all issues concerning social change. All the while that the need of modernization was felt by everyone, certain conventions and traditions, and of course certain power structures were to be safeguarded. Above all the autocracy of the Sultan was one of the main barriers against any real change. It was mainly from the world of literature that radical social and political criticisms came. Many of these writers were exiled. Yet, as the climate of opposition grew against the autocratic regime and as many intellectuals were exiled, new avenues of criticism and opposition became possible. Many Turkish writers began to publish from the distant provinces of the Ottoman Empire where they had been exiled or from European capitals where they were living, giving rise to a quasi international offense against which the Sultan had to allow certain apparent liberties in education, publication, and related fields.

Several of these social critics and philosophers, whose work involved discussions on art and aesthetics, should be remembered here. What is interesting and very important is that all discourse on art and culture was articulated with the specific idea in the background of how Ottoman culture should change. The values of nationalism which were rising during the 19th century gave all discourse an ethical concern of how such changes could be appropriated to Islam and had in view the proper progress and development of a culture vis a vis religious rules. In a way all this discourse concerned women and aesthetics, because changes in culture involved issues of everyday behavior, of dress, of social conduct, of the living space, of the city, etc. Thus they inevitable concerned aesthetics, and cultural values. One of the prominent writers of the late 19th century Hüseyin Cahit Yalçın wrote many texts on aesthetics discussing art works and their relation to the expression of truth. He worked well into the 20th century. But for a period before the Republic he was exiled to Malta for his revolutionary thoughts. We have people like Mehmet Rauf who was also exiled because his novels were thought to be pornographic, Cenap Şahabettin who argued for poetry against nature or Ahmet Şuayıp who criticized Moralism were interesting original thinkers who became at odds with the state at different periods of their career. Ahmet Şuayıp discussed Ottoman culture from the point of view of anthropology claiming there was no pure human race.⁷ This is interesting in a period when nationalism was being considered from a racial point of view.

We can give numerous examples of Turkish intellectuals who were concerned with radical change and radical arguments, from the end of the 19th century onwards. Although their ideas were developed from French literature they applied them to the problems in the Ottoman world. Most of them were educated in Europe or lived a period of their life there as exiles. Thus they began to read French much easier than they could the Ottoman language in Arabic script.⁸ These new generations of educated people found it difficult to follow the Ottoman language and with the impact of westernization preferably read in French and German, and were naturally influenced by French thinkers in issues of social reform as was the rest of the world. Yet, rather than being an imposition from above, this adoption of ideas or values from another culture, was for the Ottoman aristocrat something that was his right, as an equal citizen of the world and an inheritor of a great

world empire. On the other hand, women who were generally confined to the interior, till the Republic, lived the change towards modernization in very intimate ways in their private life. As pursuits of the higher classes, they followed European dress codes, they read French novels, learned foreign languages, painted and wrote poetry. For men who were on the stage of social life, to assume such changes in their everyday life was not so easy; they also had the responsibility of safeguarding their national identity. Therefore it could be said that from an interiorized position, women were the real catalyzers of modernization because they could personally assume its lifestyle in their everyday private world.

As with the arguments behind the French revolution, the main argument in the defense of an autocratic regime was religion.⁹ As such, the arguments made in favor of Islamic rules were not only the defense of autocracy but acted as the main barrier against social and individual rights. There was a strong argumentation around the modernization of the language, which also involved the problem of printing, which concerned the translation and printing of the Koran.¹⁰

It is interesting to note that many authors who were adamant Moslems could be more open and tolerant vis a vis the translation and interpretation of the Koran than the religious Moslems of today. One of the common sayings was, 'Let us close the Koran and open the women' and another followed: 'Let us both open the Koran and the women'; opening the Koran meant to read it in Turkish and to be able to understand and discuss it.¹¹ One can say that, in a way they were students of the enlightenment and believed in rational arguments. As Niyazi Berkes, the Turkish social historian argues, all reactions to contemporary change emerge in the guise of religious codes. The issue of the Koran and Islamic rules were at the very heart of all social progress and involved the condition of women and of family life. On the whole the approach to the issue of women's rights was extremely reactionary and often constituted the core of the arguments of social reform. It is because this became such a hot issue and such a widespread subject of discourse that it created a great pressure. Women were, in this way becoming more and more a subject of focus and attention, which helped certain changes to be implemented. The basic tenets of social reform were to emerge from the discourse on the issue of women. And in this, women were directly influential by becoming examples of a style of life they protected. In the last decade of the 19th century, we see both women and men arguing for certain social rights. Usually, progressive men approached the problem in a positivist, materialist and economic way. Claiming that if women were not free and equal, half of the society would be ineffectual and that this would be a hindrance to economic growth. On the other hand, women, although they also participated in the arguments, became live examples of their discourse. I think that not only in the Ottoman lands, but globally, this has been a basic factor of social change.

Against the background of intellectual discourse often conducted by men, women became the actors of the stage of transformation. To illustrate we can quote an example about the first group of Turkish painters who were sent to Paris to study painting. They were studiously following courses and living in their accustomed Ottoman shell till a women painter from Turkey joined them. Hale Asaf who was a very westernized woman was in fact the real agent of their transformation. They all fell in love with her and became aware of a new reality of men and women relations in the western world. There was an Ottoman School for the men of aristocratic Ottoman families, and many Ottoman youth was educated in Paris. It was also true of Ottoman young girls to be sent to Rome or to Paris

to study basically the arts. The first Turkish or Ottoman painters, like Mihri Müşfik or Müfide Kadri went abroad after having studied in the Girls Fine Arts School which had opened in Istanbul 31 years after the one founded by the painter and archeologist Osman Hamdi in 1883. In fact the year 1914 is an important turning point for Turkish history as the year of the last reform effort of the Ottoman State. With the obvious acceptance of modern institutions women begin to have more visibility on the public scene. We meet the first Turkish women painters who revolutionized Ottoman culture not only by stepping forward as artists, taking teaching positions in Girls Fine Arts School but also by acting freely. The year 1914 is marked as one of the important periods in the development of fine arts in what was then Ottoman culture.

One of the early women painters was Müfide Kadri who although she died very young, was talented enough to be the painting teacher of the Sultan's daughter, and who illustrated the life of the palace in her work. At her death her family organized her painting exhibition in the gardens of the Sultan Ahmet district. This was to be the first painting exhibition of a woman artist. Mihri Müşfik, one of the first women painters, was educated in Paris and Rome. Her work illustrates the modern life of the day with women in their fashionable clothing. She made it even possible for girls to work from nude models in the studio of their school which was situated in one of the old private villas. She had close relations with the radical political thinkers of the day and therefore was under close surveillance of the forces of occupation which had taken over the control of Istanbul. She later moved to Italy.

We see that many women artists become active in these years, including women from the palace and many a general or Pasha's daughter. What is striking is how many of these women are concerned with the issue of femininity and how they portray the subjectivity of women. Not only are they themselves publicly visible but force this public appearance into cultural consciousness and into recognition in representations of femininity. This occurs not merely in the visual arts, we see that in many novels the main character becomes the woman rather than the masculine hero. One of the first impressionists of Turkish art, İbrahim Çallı, or Nazmi Ziya were both illustrators of this new emerging woman, in her European and quite open dress. She is no longer confined to the harem but is now present in social gatherings, alongside men. Nazmi Ziya's painting from the early period of the Republic is symbolic of the change women undergo. It shows women in modern dress in the city, while women in black garb are running away.

With the Republic in 1923, while everybody argued for the emancipation and equal rights of women, the appearance of women on the social and public scene obliged them to be forced into masculine appearances. Being virtuous, pure and manlike in dress codes was one of the unspoken rules of women's public appearance. One of the most influential women of the early 20th Century, Halide Edip Adıvar, was often seen in what looked like men's suits.

The model was Jeanne D'Arc or George Sand. What had begun as a certain intellectualized and cultured femininity (Balzac in the Harem) – (Beethoven in the Seraglio) (The Mihrab of Osman Hamdi) was soon cleansed of all its gender. The romantic view of the 19th century intellectuals about women was transformed into the materialistic, positivistic view of women as economic and development agents. In this change of attitude towards women's appearance, the essential concept concerned the great gap between the private and the public which was the most important characteristic

of Islamic or even at large, Oriental societies. The private, called the Harem, means the core of life, the womb, women, centrality, and becomes a sacred concept. This is dominated and filled by the feminine, it is sacred in that it is the domination of this that gives men power. As women become public, the power of men is reduced or loses its justification. Women's becoming public meant their appearance and experience in everyday public life. Cultural events became the core stage of such an appearance. In this relation, women who were musicians, authors, painters or actors were the main instigators of social change.

One of the recent books which appeared about the wife of Atatürk, Latife Hanım, shows to what extent Latife was influential in bringing about the social revolutions that concerned women like the right to vote and to have equal professional positions. As many women who were keen on their social freedom, Latife was also educated in foreign schools.¹² It is important here to mention that girls of well to do families were sent to foreign missionary schools with the hope that they would become cultured ladies. But often what happened is that they became critics of the status quo. Their opposing the conventions appeared as outright anarchy and avant-gardism. Having been forced into invisibility for centuries, their stepping forward meant more than just that, it became conspicuous social anarchy. While men were striving to hold a balance between modernization and tradition, women's forward action was itself a radical change.

We can follow this argument into the 1950's when Turkish art began to make itself visible on the international scene, attesting to a true cultural integration with the contemporary world. In this stage also, we see that women are important agents. We can talk about two important artists, Aliye Berger and Fahr ul Nissa Zeid. Aliye Berger was one of the pioneers of abstraction in Turkey. Fahr ul Nissa Zeid who later settled in Jordan was an important artist exhibiting in important Parisian or London galleries.

To close, we should mention the achievements of women artists in the 1980's when, with the development of global economies, artists of the second and third worlds began to emerge on the international scene. In this period Turkish arts saw a visible leap forward with the original approaches of many Turkish women artists, both living in Turkey and abroad. Their great contribution was, as before, in their individualistic and totally personal approaches which enriched Turkish art with new sensibilities and forms and new uses of material. The names of the sculptress Seyhun Topuz, ceramicist and painter Melike Abasıyanık Kurtiç, painter Bilge Alkor, video artist Gülsüm Karamustafa, or installation and multi media artist Ayşe Erkmen are amongst many others that have made Turkish contemporary art visible on the international scene.

¹ Selda Alp, "II Meşrutiyet Döneminde Kadın Sanatçılar ve Kadın Resimleri", Anadolu Sanat, Eskişehir, 1999, pp-14-29 (Women Artist and Paintings of Women during the II. Constitutional Government).

² Canan Beykal, "Yeni Kadın ve İnas Sanayi-I Nefise Mektebi", Yeni Boyut, 1983, pp.6-13 (New Women and the Women's Fine arts School).

³ The names of the journals were: Cemiyet-I Hayriye-I Nisvan, Müdafayı Hukuki Nisvan, Nisvan-I Osmaniye, in Kıymet Giray, "Görsel Sanatlarda Kadın Sanatçılar ve Sorunları", Türkiye'de Sanat, 1993, Vol. 10, pp.40-47 (Women in Visual Arts, and their Problems).

⁴ Canan Beykal, 1983, pp.7.

⁵ Berrin Küçük, "İnas (Kız) Sanayi-I Nefise Mektebi'nin Öyküsü", Milliyet Sanat, Vol 69, 1983, pp.28 (The Story of the Inas Women's Fine Arts School).

⁶ Ahmet Kamil Gören, "Güzel Sanatlar Eğitimi'nde Kadınlara Açılan ilk Resmi Mektep: İnas Sanayi Nefise", Art Décor, Vol. 43, 1996, pp.124-130.

⁷ Hilmi Ziya Ülken, 'Türkiye'de Çağdaş Düşünce Tarihi', Ülken Yayınları, İstanbul 1979 (The History of Contemporary Thought in Turkey).

⁸ Niyazi Berkes, Türkiye'de Çağdaşlaşma (Secularism in Turkey – The author argues that the word secularism corresponds better to efforts of coming in terms with contemporary culture), Doğu Batı Yayınları, 1978, pp.371.

⁹ Ibid, pp 29-30. It was believed that the seat of the Sultan was sacred, being designated by God.

¹⁰ The Ottoman language had been changing from century to century, making it impossible for new generations to read former literature. One of the reasons of this uncontrollable change was the lack of printing which would make the written language more continuous. However, especially in regards the Koran, there was a strong opposition against the printing of the Koran, which would involve machine technology considered both the innovation of non-Muslim and therefore suspect. On the other hand, it was and still is claimed that there can be no translation of the Koran, being the word of God; any translation would itself be an interpretation.

¹¹ Ibid. pp.436. During the reforms after the announcement of the foundation of the parliament in 1908, one of the main arguments concerned family life, now that Islamic codes would no longer be applicable. The majority of opinion was against any rights to be given to women, including education or employment.

¹² İpek Çalışlar, *Latife Hanım*, Doğan Kitap, İstanbul 2006.

