Gendering Modernization and Nation-Building: Turkey

When the process of transition from the Ottoman Empire to the Republic is read as a project of modernization and nation building, the universal characteristics of the modernizing/nationalist discourse can be discerned. This reading enables us to delineate the importance of the comparative method and criticize the (Orientalist) cultural relativist approach which tends to reject transcultural categories, and even comparative methods, as based on superficial similarities. There is no doubt that modernistic meta-theories ground and legitimate the illusion of a “universal history of mankind” which erases the different “histories” of each particular group, glossing over and ignoring crucial differences emanating from gender, class and culture. But this does not mean that we should plunge into particularism. Particularist paradigms cannot fully communicate with each other, and cannot, therefore, even identify differences systematically.

Ottoman (Muslim) and early republican feminism developed hand in hand with nationalism, and women in Turkey, much like their sisters in the West, demanded education and citizenship rights on the grounds that they were the “mothers of the nation”. Ottoman women had started to express their demands in daily papers and periodicals and organized themselves in various associations as early as 1860’s, thereby contributing to the creation of a civil public space. Analyses pertaining to social change in Ottoman society rightly delineate the distinctive and dynamic role of the state which ends in giving priority to the community over the individual. Similarly, Ottoman Muslim women’s movement is also said to emphasize the common good over women’s individual rights. This is true but not specific to Ottoman society (or more generally to Middle Eastern societies). Using women as the symbol of the community spirit and identifying them either with the liberation/progress of the community or its deterioration is a common trait of patriarchal ideology.

However, the ways in which each modernizing project articulates patriarchal gender rules with the “new” ideology of the nation-state has its own specificities. One of these specificities in Turkey is obviously the prevalence of the Islamic Law in the previous Ottoman society which excluded women from the public space, and women’s subsequent inclusion (or their being “thrown”) into the republican public space. Women’s newly gained visibility was indeed an explicit symbol of the break with the past (and Islam as its ideological/religious basis), but the psychological and social trauma this caused
in the (male) society had to be overcome, the “patriarchal anxiety” be eliminated through continuing male control of women and their bodies albeit now in a different (seemingly Westernized) guise.

The late 19th and early 20th centuries were periods of rapid change for the Ottoman empire, and confronted with economic pressures, impact of the West, the education reform and especially the demands of conscription during the Balkan War and the World War I, women began moving out of their domestic realm into the public domain of men. 19th century also marked the declining period of the empire and the Ottoman elite tried to reverse this process in terms of saving the state with resort to modernization. Aside from the attempts of Young Ottomans to synthesize Islam and modernization, two contending strands of thought emerged: Islamism and Westernism. By the turn of the century a third strand of political thought was included into this scheme: Turkism. The ruling cadre opted for Turkish nationalism. It is no surprise that the woman issue occupied a significant place in these debates—the conflict between Islamists and westernists still continues on the axis of the woman issue in contemporary Turkey.

Ottoman and later republican Muslim feminists were much aware that Turkish nationalism paved the way for women’s citizenship rights, and Turkish feminism was dominated by the nationalist ideology. This is obvious in the discourse and practice of period’s women’s organizations and in the discourse of prominent female writers such as Sabiha Zekeriya (Sertel). The rationalization she uses for granting political rights to women in 1919 is significant: “We, who have sacrificed most for the life and independence of this country, are the children of this nation too [...] Refusing to include us in general suffrage while granting the right to vote to the minorities who have shown their indifference towards this country is both a sin and a crime.” (Toprak, 1998). Here it should be noted that the nascent Kurdish nationalism and Kurdish women’s activism of the period also went hand in hand, much replicating the pattern of the Turkish case. (Karakışla, 2003) Thus, we can say that the Ottoman women’s movement evolved in accord with the conditions of the period and was articulated into Turkish nationalist movement and discourse.

Women demanded to be full citizens in return for their “sacrifices” in the War of Independence (1919-22). They even applied to establish the “Women’s People’s Party” as early as 1923, immediately after the proclamation of the Republic, but were refused authorization on the grounds that women were not given political rights yet. Instead, they were advised to set up a Women’s Association. This delineated the fact that the stage for the granting of social and political rights for women was set by men as founders of republican Turkey (Arat, 1989). One of the most important breaking points between the Ottoman society and the new
republic resided in the fact that now women were “visible” in the public space which constituted an unwanted challenge for men. Although—or perhaps because—this break with the past was so deep as to cause almost a psychological trauma in social life, it was also surrounded by ideological and structural continuities based on patriarchy. This is what some writers coin as the “replacement of Islamic patriarchy by Western patriarchy” (Arat, 1998) and constitutes a telling example of articulation of traditional sexist stereotypes and rules with nationalist, secularist discriminations and new gender roles. Kemalist reforms neither aimed nor led to the dissolution of the patriarchal structure that had been infused into the private and public spheres. Instead they were instrumental in the transformation of the mode of patriarchy from sultanic to republican texture. (Fgb. “Feminism From the Ottoman to the Republican Era”, 2003.)

An example in point is that the new Civil Code (1926) which brought the secularisation of the family and improved women’s social status also had its own patriarchal biases legally designating the husband the “head” of the family and relegating the wife to being his “helpmate”. Explicitly patriarchal clauses of the Civil Code could only be amended in 2002 after a long struggle by women. The legal biases reflected a male dominated society which sought to confine women to traditional gender roles while at the same time demanding them to be professionals and good patriots. An explanation to the “smoothness” with which these biases could find a place in the so-called radically new jurisprudence may be an attempt to cope with the deep fear and challenge men sensed when faced by women’s newly gained visibility in the public space and thereby to eliminate the “patriarchal anxiety” prevalent in society.

With the granting of political rights (1934) women were formally accepted as citizens and the public space was now open for their contributions. But the nature of these “contributions” were to be strictly defined by the male leaders and ideologues of the single party regime. In 1935 the Turkish Women’s Association, obeying the advice of the regime, abolished itself on grounds that it had achieved its end (suffrage) after hosting 1935 congress of the International Alliance of Women for Suffrage and Equal Citizenship. The corporatist approach of the state denied the existence of class and other sectoral interests in the body politic and controlled not only the women’s movement but also the worker’s associations, cultural clubs, etc. However, control of women and their bodies assumed a specific character. Here it is interesting to note that the western-oriented/modernizing “new man” and his eastern oriented/Islamist brother joined hands. The authoritarian and patriarchal nature of the state reflected itself in the attempt to harness the “New Woman” to traditional gender roles, to the creation and reproduction of a uniform citizenry. And the so-called “new man” of the new era who jealously tried to preserve the right to define the
“new woman” resembled too much the so called “backward, religiously obscurantist” man of the past. Now there were “two masters”, as it were, over women: The state and the husband. A utilitarian approach, much inspired by the Lockeian theories of the west, seeking to mobilize the “creative powers” of women for the benefit of the whole nation was prevalent and this approach well served the corporatist/solidarist ideology of the Kemalist regime. Now that the overwhelming “father”, the ottoman state, who had long kept the “creativity” of the “Turk” under pressure and hindered his coming of age was no longer there, the New Man of the Republic was obliged to obey the nation-state, whereas the New Woman, in her turn, to obey the New Man. This “obeisance” on women’s part would, more or less, last until the new feminist movement of the late 1980’s when women started to critically evaluate the Turkish experience of modernizing nationalism. This also seems to be the most important reason why it took us so long to become aware of a feminist past which had not been part of women’s consciousness in Turkey before.

In Kemalist discourse the ideal republican woman –the “new woman”- was subjected to double subordination of the husband and the state. First, her femininity was drawn within the limits of wifehood and motherhood. Second, she was required to enter the public sphere devoid of any hint of femininity that would connote a self-chosen sexual identity (S.Coşar, 2006) The transition from the Ottoman empire to the new republic was surrounded with both social and individual traumas and a dire sense of anxiety. As observed in most societies in Turkey too these anxieties were projected symbolically unto the area of gender identity, especially to the construction of “woman”. In this respect a comparison with the anxieties surrounding the construction of a “new woman” in 19th century popular British culture reflecting itself in the various images of the femme fatale is striking. For example a republican writer Peyami Safa who is a critic of kemalist modernization argues that kemalist modernization masculinized women by stripping them off their natural features. However, except for the childbearing and childrearing functions his model of ideal woman was based on the negation of of the features which he thought was embedded in woman’s nature. This model required that women should be cultivated in such a way that they could avoid the traps of modernization. He criticized the changes in bodily appearances of modernized women brought about by Kemalist reforms. For him these were examples of moral decadence:

“Since the beginning of the century the wishes and desires of woman have increased...she wants everything from us. Everything: luxurious automobile on the one hand, enfranchise on the other; half-naked ball dress on the one hand, virtue on the other, pearled necklace and equal wage with men, make up and sincerity, unreservedness and family care; war against us, war for themselves...” (Safa, 1935:17; in Coşar, 2006:15)
Obviously the ideal woman for Safa, had to be obedient and ready to accommodate the patriarchal needs of men and male-dominated society. Any woman who did not fit in this picture was deemed as dangerous femme fatale whose legitimate fate could only be death! The interesting thing is of course, both the critics and the endorsers of Kemalist modernization agreed on this definition of woman! “With segregation and the veil removed, women incurred the constant risk of overstepping dangerous boundaries, which now required diffuse but persistent monitoring.” (Kandiyoti, 1998:282.)

While nationalist kemalist policies provided an opening for women in terms of legal and political equality, they nevertheless restricted women’s liberation within the contours of the republican regime. In this respect, the woman issue was perceived to be a matter of traditionality-modernity dichotomy. Those political actors and thinkers who took issue with Kemalist modernization project also approached the woman question in the same frame. The shortcomings of these approaches did not result from the fact that all the concerned thinkers were misogynists but that the political thought was embedded in a patriarchal framework. This framework was reflected in the idealization of womanhood in terms of wifehood and national motherhood as opposed to femininity. (Coşar, 2006:19.) The dualistic construction of woman’s self also hints at the common grounds on which the model of ideal woman was defined within the frame of contesting ideologies: The women were conceived primarily in relation to their procreative functions in the family, and for the nation. Thus writers representing polar opposites in terms of their political preferences neither refrained from emphasizing the childbearing and homemaking capacities of women.

The dominance of masculinist intellectual milieu in the Turkish context continued throughout the republican history and has led to the reproduction of patriarchy in Turkish political thought: most of the studies on the prominent political thinkers have been conducted without due regard to gender relations and patriarchy. In those rare cases where women and/or family have been integrated into the scope of analysis, this was done without questioning “the gendered expression of dualism” (Berktay 1999:270) that has put its stamp not only on Turkish political thought, but on political thought in general. This affected and reflected the way woman issue has been handled, either by men or by women. Since the knowledge about women are organized and produced without questioning the patriarchal mode of thinking it was the male who continued to be taken as “the norm and female as the submissive (or aggressive) exception (Hartman 1991:18; Coşar, 2006:20) Thus, the differences attributed to women were tried to be reserved to the private sphere, or considered to be facts attesting to the need for relegating women to the private sphere. This has led to a delay in the rise of an autonomous feminist movement until 1980s.
To summarize I would argue that the most important continuity between the Ottoman Empire and the new Republic lied in the continuity of patriarchy albeit in a different guise. But this guise is thin enough to show through! Modernist male founders of the republic had to seek an alliance with their sisters as they struggled against the authority of the Sultan and the father. Women opted for being the mothers of the nation and supported their nationalist brothers in the hope of being equal citizens. However, this alliance has been problematic insofar as the “modernist brothers” stopped short of granting full rights to women, trying to restrict them within traditional gender roles. In the nation-building process almost everywhere women often than not enthusiastically volunteered and still volunteer for the role of “mothers and daughters of the nation”. However as Benedict Anderson succinctly puts it, “no nationalism in the world has ever granted women and men the same privileged access to the resources of the nation-state” and “women, whose claims to nationhood frequently dependent upon marriage to a male citizen have been subsumed only symbolically into the national body politic.” (Imagined Communities, p.13). Turkish nation-building was no exception!