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The image of woman in Turkish literature of the second half of the 20th century

Abstract

This paper examines the evolution of the image of woman in Turkish literature from the time of *Tanzimat* and the I World War until the second half of the 20th century. Turkish women though gaining equal rights as a result of the proclamation of the Republic (1923), still had a long and hard way to go to become fully independent. The Turkish woman of the end of the 20th century is a person aware of her rights and obligations. Like a man, she strives for success in professional and personal life. She appreciates the family, she is a good mother, wife and patriot. The paper follows the changes in the image of women in the Turkish literature on the basis of numerous examples taken from modern stories and novels.

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When contemporary and modern literature was developing woman in a literary work was presented in a conventional way as a heroine of romantic adventures and an object of passion. The appearance of *Tanzimat* literature, especially the national literature brought a radical qualitative and quantitative change with prose reflecting the diverse problems of life particularly related to women's life, marriage and family.

The Turkish woman of the end of the 20th century is a person aware of her rights and obligations. Like a man, she strives for success in professional and personal life. She appreciates the family, she is a good mother, wife and patriot. The modern Turkish woman is radically different from her predecessors who gained equal rights for women as a result of the proclamation of the Republic (1923) and a number of reforms. Their way to emancipation was long and hard.

Let us recall World War I and the Independence War (1919–1920), a spontaneous outburst of the nation protesting against plans to divide the Ottoman Empire between western European powers. Women and children fought alongside men. Women's attitude and involvement proved that they were able to organise themselves and help their husbands to achieve their targets despite lack of experience, religious regulations and legal restrictions. In occupied territories they suffered rape. Their heroism and tragic fate were described in reports, short stories and poetry written by representatives of *milli edebiyat* (the national literature) including Ziya Gökalp (1876–1924), Halide Edip Adıvar (1884–1964), Yakup Kadri Karaosmanoğlu (1889–1974), Falih Rıfkı Atay (1894–1971), Refik Halit Karay (1888–1965), Şüküfe Nihal (1896–1973) or Halide Nüsret Zorlutuna (1901–1984), Mehmet Emin Yurdakul (1869–1944) and Nakiye Elgün. During the famous January 13, 1920 meeting at the Sultanahmet square, on behalf of women from Anatolia, Nakiye Elgün made a statement to men fighting for freedom: *Biz de, biz kadınlar da daima sizinle beraberiz. Yanınızdan, önünüzden ayrılmayacağız. Biz de sizinle beraber olacağız.* (We women have always been and will be with you. We will not leave you in any case. We will stay by you).

Different literary work presented the behaviour of high society women who tried to join the independence-oriented actions guided not only by internal conviction, but also by prevailing life-style. Even though they lived in splendid isolation from real, difficult social and political problems and did not understand the meaning of the struggle the mere fact that they perceived it necessary to get involved was a positive element. Every attempt to break with inertia and the stereotype of a woman was a successive step towards their emancipation. Novels presenting women from the 1919–1920 war period allow us to make the following classification:

1. Women in occupied territories who fell victim of rape and violence appeal to men for help.
2. Women fighting alongside men, working in Red Crescent or field hospitals as nurses.
3. Women working for different organisations and association encouraging grass-root, the independence-oriented movement. High society women of Istanbul.

Apart from the above mentioned writers some very moving and interesting work was left by, among others, Ahmet Hikmet Müftüoğlu (1870–1927). In his short story *Mukaddes kin* (The Holy Vengeance) he relates a story of an old woman, the killer of two Greeks who had raped her daughter and daughter-in-law. Guided by the feeling of holy vengeance she found strength to kill a human being. Mustafa Necati Sepetçioğlu (born in 1932), in his series of short stories *İstiklâl mücadelesi hâtıraları* (Memoirs of the Struggle for Independence) shows the enormous sacrifice of Turkish women at the front-line. Most stories of Reşat Enis Aygen (1909–1984) were devoted to the national and independence struggle and to people suffering under occupation.

After the proclamation of the Republic and the introduction of social and political reforms Turkish women, for ages accustomed to obedience toward men and to the religious regulations of Islam, welcomed all innovations aimed at undermining the existing model of men-women relations with mistrust, fear and disbelief. A huge role in the promotion

of the new life-style was played by writers who in their articles or literary work indefatigably encouraged readers. Apart from traditional representatives of society they presented men and women jointly spending their pastime dancing in public places, travelling together and studying. As an example here we may quote works by Halide Edip, Reşat Nuri Güntekin (1889–1956), Peride Celâl (born in 1915), Mükerrerem Kâmil (born in 1900) and many others. The westernising trend influenced all areas of life and was tantamount to the resignation from the Arab-Persian cultural tradition. One of the most renowned poets Nazım Hikmet (1902–1963) was the first to raise in his work the issue of friendship and solidarity with women. Women presented by him were in love and were loved. His letters from prison to his wife and literary work such as *Bir aşk masalı* (Legend of Love) or *Yusuf ve Menofis* (Yusuf and Menofis) are imbued with deep humanism.

With time women have become rightful members of society, assuming posts traditionally ascribed to men such as lawyers, doctors, artists, political and social activists. Consequently they began to be perceived not only as objects of passion but also as partners of men, matching them in a number of fields. Representatives of realism in the Turkish literature as Sadri Ertem (1898–1943), Sait Faik Abasıyanık (1906–1954) and especially those following the line of *toplumcu gerçekçilik* (social realism – 1935–1954) devoted their literary work to struggle for better living standards. They presented the remains of the feudal system in Anatolia, exploitation of people, and legal loopholes. They exposed backwardness, reactionary policy of the authorities, widespread unemployment and poverty. They dealt with problems of pauperised craftsmen, intelligentsia, the life of working people, the proletariat and social outcasts living in slums selecting for heroes both men and women. Among many writers of that period we can point to Sabahattin Ali (1907–1948) who gave several excellent portraits of women from Istanbul intelligentsia circles including *Kürk mantolu Madonna* (Madonna in the Furcoat), *İçimizdeki şeytan* (Satan Within Us), *Sırça köşk* (The Glass Pavilion) and Sait Faik, who understood the vagrants, prostitutes, fishermen, Gypsies and later presented their lives in novels such as *Bir takım insanlar* (Certain People), *Kayıp aranıyor* (The Missing Is Being Searched For), poems *Şimdi sevişme vakti* (Love Time Has Come) in short stories such as *Semaver* (Samovar), *Sarnıç* (Cistern), *Lüzumsuz adam* (Useless Man) and the like. He was the first to write about the 'dark' sides of life, about women and men, and the dregs of society thus stimulating the interest of young artists in these problems. Apart from those already quoted one cannot omit Aziz Nesin (1915–1955) whose work encouraged widespread criticism of negative socio-economic, political and ethical phenomena; Haldun Taner (1916–1986) whose attention was focused on representatives of the middle class bourgeoisie including office workers and officials. He was very critical of women seeing them as ordinary, calculated, egoistic beings and actresses.

The political climate after 1954 brought about new literary trends and committed literary work gave way to modernist writing including introspective literature called *bunalım* ('the period of lack of air, of standing air, of fear'). This trend was especially visible in the work of Ferit Edgü (born in 1936, Demir Özlü (born in 1935) and others. These authors distanced themselves from their own society, Turkish reality, and followed western

models with particular stress put on the French "roman nouveau". Their novels and short stories were imbued with deep pessimism, expressed the senselessness of existence, man's alienation from society and the inability to reach mutual understanding between people. The work centred on life in cities and rural areas with the latter skilfully depicted by Bekir Yıldız (1933–1998), born in Anatolia and therefore familiar with the life of this region. Heroines of his short stories, full of ancestral vengeance and blood, were mainly farmers' wives, always dedicated to their husbands, legally incapacitated, forced to observe traditional moral principles. This type of situation was presented in, among other stories, *Kara çarşafli kadın* (A Woman in a Black Charshaf), *Sekizinci bebek* (The Eight Child), *Kuma* (Second wife).

Women's literary work can also be perceived as an example of their broader participation in social life. Matters brought up by contemporary Turkish female writers of the 1970-ties and 1980-ties have been closely related to women's continuing problems in the context of current developments in the country and in the world. Like their male compatriots they touched upon different aspects of life. Apart from literary work, the plot of which was set in the social and political context or in rural areas they wrote novels and short stories devoted to emigration (the so called German emigration), autobiographies, stories analysing moral standards and the mentality of individuals. Here we can quote names of Nilüfer Mizanoğlu Reddy (born in 1922), Nezihe Meriç (born in 1925), Adalet Ağaoğlu (born in 1929), Leyla Erbil (1931), Sevim Burak (1933–1983), Selçuk Baran (born in 1933), Füzûzan (born in 1935), Gülten Dayıoğlu (1935), Sevgi Soysal (1936–1976), Afet İlğaz Muhteremoğlu (born in 1937), Ayla Kutlu (born in 1938), Nursel Duruel (born in 1941), Tömris Uyar (born in 1941), Aysel Özakin (born in 1942), Pınar Kür (born in 1943), Tezel Özlü (1943–1986), İnci Aral (born in 1944), Nazlı Eray (born in 1945), Erendiz Atası (born in 1947) or representatives of the youngest generation: Murathan Mungan (1955), Solmaz Kâmuran (1954), Ayşe Kilimci (born in 1954) and Lâfite Tekin (born in 1957).

The literary work of Füzûzan, for example, depicts the life of contemporary Turkey, emphasising the life of the rich and the poor. Her short stories present a variety of characters, principally women struggling with everyday life. The most characteristic of her works were collected in two series of short stories titled: *Kuşatma* (Siege) and *Parasız Yatılı* (Free Students' Hostel). The stories present the life of the poor. The principle characters are mostly lonely mothers struggling to make ends meet having been abandoned by husbands that have either left them without money or have died penniless. In a moving short story *Parasız Yatılı* from the series published under the same title the author presents, as in many other stories, a single mother with a 10-year-old daughter. The husband died when the girl was eight. At present the child is in the third form. Both are very happy because the mother has just got a job as an orderly in a hospital. It is a great day for both of them, at home they ponder what they would buy with the first salary. The purchase plan envisages coal, cheap plastic shoes for the child. Movie tickets for days off... It was hard for the widow to make ends meet. She could not afford a number of things the girl needed for school. The child could not participate in gym classes for the lack of shorts,

white socks and flannel blouses. Despite hardships the girl was a no-problem child. Afraid of burdening her mother with additional costs she did not even want to eat and home she claimed that school lunches are very satisfactory. She was very good at school which make her quite popular. Doing very well in her last year of primary school she is given the opportunity to take exams for entry to a secondary school with a free hostel. It was her mother's dream and a great opportunity for the daughter and other children because the mother knew how expensive education was. She certainly could not afford additional money for the hostel and therefore her daughter could not continue with her studies. After graduating from secondary school the girl could become a teacher. This was also the mother's dream. She would not have to work anymore in the hospital but could organise small parties for friends at her home...

Unfortunately the reader is not given the chance to learn whether the dream of the mother and the daughter came true and whether their life improved. The story ends when the daughter, accompanied by the mother, goes to school to take the exams. They met lots of children who also hope to pass exams to a school with free hostels. The girl enters the examination building leaving the mother, smiling, in the rain. And this smile comprises all hopes for the better future...

Next story, titled *İskele parklarında* (At the Marina) shows a 30-year-old woman whose husband was killed in an accident in his workplace ten months before. She was left alone with a seven-year-old daughter. Everyday the two used to go to the marina to take a look at people. They lived in poverty in a rented room without modern conveniences. The woman suffered. She was worried about her little girl not being properly washed and fed and who looked sickly and pale. She felt young although unattractive. Clad in old and out-of-fashion clothes she was aware of her looks: *Artık otuz yaşımdayım. Yaşlandım sayılır. Hem yedi yaşında çocuklu kadınla kim evlenmek ister yeniden? Zayıfım da. Belki biraz yiyip içsem... Zaten evlenmek istemiyorum aslında. Bazı şeytan diyor, at kendini denize, bitsin su iş.* (I am thirty. I am getting old. Who would like to marry a woman with a seven-year-old girl? I am skinny. Maybe if I had more to eat and to drink... Essentially I don't want to get married. Sometimes the Satan whispers into my ear: throw yourself into the sea, leave all this behind.) She couldn't take up work because she had to take care of her child. She lacked money to pay for the basics and a little had to be sent to school which also entailed spending. The girl needed a pinafore. The woman is toying with the idea of going to her elder sister whose daughters were older than her girl. Maybe there she could find the pinafore? She hesitated because she went there just after her husband died but her arrival was rather unwelcome. She was not even asked to stay for dinner. When she was leaving her sister pressed 10 liras into her hand apparently thinking that money would settle everything...

The young woman was resigned and depressed. The marriage to a man she loved and for whom she ran away from home brought her neither happiness nor well-being and, after her husband death she found herself in poverty. One day at the marina she met an elderly woman with a grandson. The women started talking. The elderly lady talked about her children – her daughter and son-in-law, who worked long hours everyday. However,

they had Saturdays off and the granny took care of the child thus enabling the young couple to be by themselves. Our heroine compares her life with the life of the young couple. She believed that they were very happy whereas she... She did not even want the evening to come because it would mean that she would have to go back to the room which she did not even want to call a home.

Fürüzan was interested not only in the fate of women but also in children as the children have been the essence of women's life. Unfortunately women not always were able to provide for their children. This type of situation was depicted in short stories *Kuşatma* (Siege), *Haraç* (Tribute) or, for example, *Yaz geldi* (Summer Has Come). This was the way female writers presented some aspects of a broad range of women's problems.

Analysing short stories written by Tomris Uyar one should attach special attention to her style and language: beautiful, pure, lively and artistic at the same time that makes her writing 'different' from the writing of other contemporary colleagues... Tomris Uyar seems oblivious of any harmony between the plot, place and time which, in her writing give place to impressions and images. Descriptions are constructed on the basis of dialogues. Her novels are not centred on extraordinary and disputable events but imbued with remembrance and feelings. Problems with which women are struggling can be found in the series of short stories titled: *Yürekte bukağı* (Chains in the heart) and *Ödeğmeler* (Indemnities). These stories are dominated by family troubles including the generation gap, relations with children and between spouses with the latter question explored in *Ayşe haklı* (Ayşe Is Right). It is a story of a couple travelling on a *dolmuş* (a local bus). The writer showed the transformation of their marriage, the decline of love. Earlier they were very happy. At present, so the husband thinks, the situation has radically changed. He is longing for the former Ayşe and not the one sitting beside him who seems to be a perfect stranger. After years of being together he thought of her as of *eski karısı*, the old wife, who ages ago was very beautiful. And now?... Her habits have not changed over the years. Every night she sits in front of the dressing table brushing her hair with exactly twenty five strokes, not more, not less. She touches the bed-frame three times before popping in. She is always cold so she sleeps in thick long-sleeved night gowns. While in bed she presses her feet against those of her husband but only for making them warm. The child to whom she is dedicated has become the core of her life. The husband has ceased to be important and no longer counts. He feels unable to talk to her because she has created a different language to communicate with her child. Her breasts are only for feeding the new-born, her arms for carrying it. Slowly but surely she has turned into a monument to maternity. Besides, she has become jealous. Life with this woman is a nightmare. They blamed one another for the failure of their marriage. They watched successful relationships built by their friends but were unable to change what was going wrong to find in themselves 'this thing' 'o şey', which could restore their happiness. This story ends with words said by the husband to the wife:

...Ayşe...sen haklısın galiba.

(...Ayşe... I think you are right).

These words suggest that after thorough consideration he understood that not only Ayşe is to blame...

So as we can see Tomris Uyar is very concerned with the problems of women although these problems are presented differently, not so dramatically as by Fûruzan. Uyar's artistry consists in the fact that often the stories are not concluded leaving the reader a margin for his/her own interpretation. And the way the reader sees the problem will be very individual.

Interesting observations about women are made by Solmaz Kâmuran, the representative of 1990' postmodernism, who has become very popular inside and outside of Turkey. She graduated from the Dentistry Department at the University of Istanbul and worked as a dentist for 14 years. Later she devoted herself totally to writing. Her first articles about literature and translations appeared in "Yansıma" ("Reflections") magazine when she was 17. She did not cease to be interested in literature while working as a dentist. Her reports from journeys throughout the country and abroad, book reviews, articles and translations were published in numerous papers and journals. She works for TV as woman of letters. She is the author of popular books: autobiography *İpek böceği cinayeti* (Crime of a Silkworm), novels: *Bir levrek iskeleti* (The Skeleton of a Bass), a historical novel: *Kiraze*. Solmaz Kâmuran translated Ann Chamberlin's *Sultan's Daughter* (Turkish title *Safiye sultan*), as well as some books by Wiliam Davis Stearns, Colin Falconer and Lili Prior. Besides, she is the editor of books by writer Çetin Altan. Her book *Kiraze* was highly praised by literary critics, listed among the bestsellers of recent years and has been translated into Greek, Hebrew and French. Talks on translations into other languages are underway.

She summarised her work in these words: *Sade bir dil kullanmaya özen gösteriyorum, anlaşılabilir olmak, akılcılık benim için çok önemli. Özellikle kadınları konu almasam da kendim de bir kadın olduğumdan doğal olarak konular daha çok kadınlara ilgili. Kadınların dünya refahından az pay almaları ve tüm yaratıcılıklarına rağmen hala ikinci sınıf kabul edilmeleri beni çok etkiliyor. Ayrıca göç sorunu ve tarih boyunca bu nedenle acı çeken insanlar daima ilgimi çekti. Azınlık sorunları ve insanın insanı ezmeye de... Kadınların kurtuluşunun kesinlikle bir meslek sahibi olmaktan geçtiğini düşünüyorum. Yazı yazmayı bir yaşam biçimi olarak kabul ediyorum, tüm stresine rağmen bunu yapmaktan mutluyum.* (I attach utmost importance to the simplicity of the language in order to be understood. The language must be lively and smooth. In my books I bring up different topics but since I am a woman most of my work is concentrated on women, which is rather obvious. I am deeply moved by the facts that despite great creativity and the role women play in society they do not take full advantage of the world's cultural heritage and are still perceived as second class citizens. I am also interested, in the historic context, of the fate and suffering of people forced to emigrate, problems of ethnic minorities, the exploitation of man by man... Returning to the question of women I believe that only by having a profession are they able to attain total independence. Artistic creation is my life and I am happy in spite of the fact that it involves lots of stress.)

Bir levrek iskeleti, is a novel written as a documentary description and analysis of the human soul as if it was registered by a camera. We can see frame by frame pictures presenting the life of the modern Turkish society with its problems and joys. A businesswoman, the owner of one of Istanbul restaurants monitors the circle of the rich represented by the guests and the poor, represented by the employees. Their conversations and short remarks give us a wide spectrum of people's nature, life-style, worldviews and opinions. We learn about social relations and the role of the Turkish woman.

The heroine is unlike other heroines. She has also a family, problems with her marriage and life is not easy for her but she does not yield to pressure. She does not wait for further developments. She is independent and educated and this adds to her courage. She is often tired and depressed but the feeling that she is needed gives her additional stamina. The modern 'businesswoman' manages a group of people in her own seaside restaurant. She is demanding when the need arises but also tolerant and even lenient, as her waiters and cooks underline. She is liked by her staff and respected by neighbours. Even though the novel is not long it gives a perfect image of social relations and the place of the Turkish woman. Reading it we are impressed by the change in the position of women over a relative few years. From total incapacity, lack of freedom and dependence to securing full rights and opportunities to develop their skills and abilities.

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