

TURKISH WOMEN IN ISLAMISM: GENDER AND THE MIRAGE OF “ISLAMIC FEMINISM”

ESRA ÖZCAN

Abstract: In this paper, I reflect on the use of the term “Islamic feminism” in Turkey from the 1990s to the present. I discuss how Turkey’s Islamic feminists who were once the victims and strong critics of secular authoritarianism have now become advocates of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s populist Islamist authoritarianism which has severely restricted rights and freedoms in the country. I claim that using the term “Islamic feminist” in reference to the Islamist women supporters of Erdoğan is misleading as it puts a progressive spin on their ideas and activism. I argue that the terms “conservative” or “right-wing” more accurately describe the political positioning of these women.

Keywords: Islamic feminist, psalmist women, Islamist movement, Boğaziçi university, secular mainstream media, conservative women

1988

My grandmother, the strong matriarch of our family, passed away in 1988. My mother, a dentist and a single-parent, had to work a lot. I spent a lot of time with my grandmother. Born in 1923, the year when the modern Turkish republic was founded, my grandmother was raised as a secular girl. Educated as a lawyer, which was a privilege for her generation, she had turned to religion in her 40s and covered her hair. This was so unusual during the 1960s in Turkey that her whole family thought she had lost her mind. She then re-educated herself to become a very sophisticated instructor/interpreter of the Qur’an. In my childhood, I remember her acting as an “imam” to women in mosques and preaching. Her vast library included volumes and volumes of books about Islam: on Muhammad’s life, Qur’anic exegesis, Islamic law, history of the sects in Islam, Sufism, and many other topics. When I was young I used to browse through those books.

My mother's life also crisscrossed Turkey's secular and religious territories in odd ways. When my grandmother passed away my mother entered a period when she looked to religion for protection, comfort, and support. She kept my grandmother's library and decided that the only way to protect me from the pain and evil in this world was to raise me as a God-fearing young woman. As a result, I started covering my hair at the age of twelve. By the time I started university as a young student of sociology I felt I had learned enough about religion and was ready to learn something new.

1992 – 2002

During my undergraduate and graduate study at Boğaziçi University in Istanbul in 1999 to 2000 I encountered the scholarly literature on the Islamist movements. It was particularly exciting to study this subject at that time in the liberalised atmosphere of the 1990s. Public expression of religion had become more visible in the 1990s under the staunchly secularist state that had resolutely discouraged public displays of religiosity. The headscarf ban in the university, which was enforced on and off was a particularly hot issue. At the same time, the Welfare Party (*Refah Partisi/ RP*), an Islamist party on the far right, was gaining political ground by mobilising all kinds of frustration toward the system, some based on religion some not. The RP had won the municipalities of the big cities in the 1994 local elections and introduced Recep Tayyip Erdoğan as the new Mayor of Istanbul into Turkish politics. The RP emerged from the general elections of 1995 as the leading party and became the senior partner in a coalition government in 1996. The coalition government was forced to resign by the military the next year. The military which sees itself as the guardian of secularism could not tolerate a coalition government with an Islamist party for more than a year.

At Boğaziçi I had the good fortune of working with Nilüfer Göle, a top scholar of Islamism, while these developments were unfolding in Turkey's secularised social and political life. Göle, the author of *Modern Mahrem*, (1991; published in English as *The Forbidden Modern*, 1997), was among the few pioneering scholars whose work focused on women with headscarves who were part of the Islamist movements in Turkey.¹ Her work opened up new possibilities for understanding interactions between Islam and modernisation in Turkey. She looked at moments when Islam and modernity interacted and transformed each other in new hybridising ways. She worked with a small group of students interested in different faces of Islam in Turkey. Göle called our working group an atelier. In our atelier, we were mostly interested in "cultural Islam" rather than "political Islam." Our atelier produced a book titled *İslamın Yeni Kamusal Yüzleri: İslam ve Kamusal Alan*

Üzerine bir Atölye Çalışması (The New Public Faces of Islam: An Atelier on Islam and Public Sphere, Metis, Istanbul, 2000). We focused on how Islamic practices became visible in concrete spaces in Turkey's modernised and secularised public sphere. Each of us looked into specific themes such as Islamic women's organisations, women with the headscarf in Islamic radio stations, the headscarf in the mainstream media, beaches, and coffeehouses, and the new consumption patterns among the rising Islamic middle classes.² Some of us looked at changes in the secular public sphere through interactions with Islam. Being especially interested in this subject I studied Yaşar Nuri Öztürk (1945–2016), a scholar of theology who had become a celebrity in the secular mainstream media in the 1990s preaching the modernised “real” Islam as opposed to the “distorted” politicised Islam or Islamism. Öztürk had made Islam appealing to Turkey's secular publics and provided them with Islamic arguments with which to criticise the Welfare Party.³

Göle was interested in moments when lived experience defied or challenged modernisation theory. Modernisation theory had assumed that with increasing modernisation people would leave religion behind. Turkish modernisers had diligently applied the premises of modernisation theory to Turkish society. From their perspective women demanding to wear a headscarf and go to university at the same time were an anomaly. According to Göle, Turkish modernisers were mistaken to read it this way. What was happening was rather a new form of modernity in the making which she called an “indigenous modernity” whereby women were defining for themselves a new way of becoming modern. They objected to abandoning their belief in order to become modern in the way that the Turkish state wanted.

According to Göle's complex approach women in the Islamist movements occupied a unique position. In her view they had the potential to transform these movements from within. Turkey's secular modernist establishment saw such women as pawns of men or as duped by them. But when looked at closely the women were not at all pawns. They were highly active and they did not see themselves as submitting to the men in the movement. The women that Göle talked to in the 1980s and 1990s were university students, journalists and writers who were critical of Islamist men in many instances. They engaged with feminism and criticised patriarchal interpretations of Islam. They were fighting on two fronts: against the strict implementation of secularism (and for the right to wear the headscarf at university) and against patriarchy within their own circles. Göle assumed that this was a transformative position that might lead to the dissolution of the gender regime within the Islamist movements and eventually produce a new hybridised public sphere in Turkey.

Göle's thesis became widely popular among Turkey's liberal democrats. It generated great interest in both the mainstream and Islamist media. During the 1990s and early 2000s, evidence supporting Göle's theory abounded. Following the shut-down of the Welfare Party in 1998, Islamist intellectuals and politicians started to engage in discussions about participatory democracy questioning their radical discourse that aimed to overturn the democratic secular state to establish an Islamic state. The Islamist discourse of the 1990s looked quite different from the Islamist discourse during the 1980s. The 1990s Islamic discourse was more compromising, softer, and more integrated into capitalism and consumption. The Islamists who kept demanding more religious rights did not live their lives according to *The Book* as they spoke of it. They did not practice gender segregation and claimed to be Islamic. Books by the Islamist authors condemned dating and flirting but young people in the movement did not seem to pay much attention. Women wearing headscarves and flirting and kissing in public became a topic of everyday conversation. In the 1980s Islamist men and women rejected capitalism and the middle class life style. In the 1990s they embraced capitalism, started to get richer, and began to create a new Islamised middle class lifestyle. Göle and her students, like myself, interpreted these developments as evidence of the transformation of the Islamist movements in Turkey. Meanwhile I, along with my closest friend from the atelier, born into conservative families, were moving away from religion and conservatism. Our research and engagement in sociology provided us with a new language to examine our upbringing in light of Turkey's political history had transformed us. In a way, we had become evidence supporting Göle's thesis. In 2001, a year after I finished the M.A. program in sociology at Boğaziçi University I stopped wearing the headscarf.

Meanwhile during the 1990s disagreements between Islamist men and women seemed to be growing. When Islamist women who wanted to participate more and more in social life encountered resistance from the men in their communities they fought back. Their discontent became visible in the television programs they took part in and the books they authored. Inspired by Göle's work, the new descriptor "Islamic feminists" referring to Islamist women writers and intellectuals who challenged patriarchal interpretations of Islam started to circulate in the media around that time. This new descriptor framed Islamist women positively and gradually gave them more access to the secular mainstream media. The women gained the chance to share their stories with larger audiences. Their personal accounts were effective in conveying their struggle and revealing the difficulties they faced as practicing Muslim women in Turkey. Women inside the Islamist movements were not only challenging their own men but were also building bridges with secular circles.⁴ We in

Göle's atelier saw this as a promising development auguring the expansion of democratic rights and freedoms in the country.

In 2002 the Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi/*AKP) led by former Welfare Party Mayor of Istanbul, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, came to power tapping into the economic and cultural resentments of the poor. Using populist rhetoric the AKP pointed to the failures of previous governments and cast Erdoğan's AKP as the "true" representatives of "the people." Erdoğan and his team which had abandoned the radical Islamist rhetoric that advocated the overthrow of the system argued that they were fundamentally different from their predecessor. Erdoğan's AKP committed itself to implementing the European Union's democratisation reforms and seemed ready to embrace everyone in Turkish society. Islamist movements in Turkey were heading into new territory integrating with secular democratic mechanisms. Everything seemed to be going in line with Göle's analysis.

2017

As of January 2017, fifteen years into AKP rule, things look quite different. AKP leader Erdoğan has become more and more authoritarian. He is at the moment working towards changing the Constitution to have monopoly control over the executive, legislative, and judiciary branches of the government. Instead of expanding democratic rights, the AKP has severely constricted the rights that existed. Erdoğan's crackdown on the Kurdish, leftist and secular opposition took a more aggressive turn after the failed coup attempt in July 2016. The crackdown has taken Turkey to the top of the charts in terms of the number of jailed journalists and academics. His party has pushed conservative religious politics into all areas of life: it has changed the school system and curricula to educate new "pious" generations.

In 2011 the AKP started a gradual lifting of the headscarf ban in Turkey. Now not only can young women wear a headscarf in universities but also girls as young as seven years can wear a headscarf in schools. Once victims of Turkey's secularist state, women in the Islamist movements have moved from the margins to the very center of power. They now hold positions of influence in the government and media. Some of these women actively support a new conservative women's organisation, KADEM (Kadın ve Demokrasi Derneği / the Association of Women and Democracy, established in 2014). Erdoğan's daughter Sümeyye Erdoğan is the Vice President of the association that aims to spread Erdoğan's notion of "gender justice" as opposed to "gender equality." The term "gender justice," as

they define it, holds that men and women are created different and treating them equally is harmful to women. Women and men's strengths, they insist, lie in separate spheres. The emphasis on "gender justice" and differences between men and women reflect Erdoğan's dislike of Turkey's feminists and their support of gender equality. Erdoğan does not shy away from expressing his anti-feminist sentiments at every opportunity. He supports the view that women's proper place is in the home and that they are created to be mothers first and foremost. KADEM might be seen as constituting a kind of "institutionalisation of antifeminism" in Turkey to use Ronnee Schreiber's term (2008: 22).⁵

I examined how women journalists and writers in the pro-AKP media responded to instances when the AKP silenced critical voices during the last five years. Many secular journalists and academics who had supported Islamist women and advocated for the abolition of the headscarf ban at the universities were jailed. Göle, who stood against the ban and worked hard for the incorporation of disaffected Muslims into democratic channels came under fire as soon as she criticised the AKP's authoritarianism. I was almost certain that the women intellectuals close to the AKP who themselves had suffered under secularist authoritarianism would loudly protest the violations of basic rights and the silencing operations taking place under a government to which they had given support. Sadly, that never happened.⁶ Turkey's "Islamic feminists" are now happily and fully integrated into Erdoğan's new authoritarian regime in Turkey. They provide justifications for Erdoğan's authoritarian moves and suppression of critical voices. The women that Göle and we in the atelier thought or hoped would transform the Islamist movement have themselves been transformed by an Islamist government in power. Turkish politics disproved our theory.

I have been reflecting on my frustration and disappointment, and what went wrong in my own thinking. I can only speak for myself. Göle and my other colleagues may read the unfolding events in Turkey differently and come to other conclusions. Göle read Turkish history in terms of a shift from Islamic to Western civilisation and focused on the tensions between Turkey's secular elite and the Islamists. Yet, reading modern Turkey's history in terms of a struggle between Islamism vs. secularism ignores other important axes of struggle in Turkey particularly the struggle between the left and the right. Writing in the aftermath of the 1980 military coup which seemed to erase this very significant axis of struggle from Turkish politics, Göle focused on what seemed to be a new axis of struggle in Turkish society. In her narrative, the Islamist movements and women's headscarves enter the scene of Turkish politics in the 1980s. Yet, these movements have a prior history going back to the 1960s with women activists such as Şule Yüksel Şenler (b.1938) advocating conservative gender roles and conventional religious values. These active

women were not as yet called “Islamists” by sociologists and political scientists. They were seen as women on the right. My own grandmother was probably among the very early examples of Turkey’s active and educated conservative women. In that sense the women Göle talked with were second or even third generation conservative women. In the post 1980 military coup era they were not called right-wing or conservative but were now labelled “Islamist” women. The 1980 military coup had created a new political context and a new label producing an illusion of discontinuity.

When I look at the activism and writing of these women along a continuum from the 1960s to the present the picture looks different. Yes, religion constitutes an important element of how these women define themselves but this is only one dimension of their activism. A strong anti-feminist and anti-leftist strand has characterised both their earlier and later writing. The generation of religiously oriented women which became visible in the 1980s engaged with feminism and used feminist ideas in a very selective manner to reinforce their “Muslim” identity with reference to intersectionality theory and deflect criticism of their activism coming from those Islamist men who would be pleased only with a Taliban- or Saudi-style gender order. An analysis of the website of the pro-AKP conservative women’s organisation KADEM indicates that feminism is mainly seen as a foreign Western imposition and as “turning women into men.”⁷ In the last twenty years some women in the Islamist movement have objected to being called “feminist” while others have accepted the term with reluctance, in a rather “ok, well ... if you really want to call me so...” fashion. Although Islamist women distanced themselves from the term “feminism” being called a “feminist” brought them to the attention of the secular mainstream media and enabled them to communicate with secular circles. The term “feminist” made Turkey’s conservative women activists on the right look more progressive than they are or want to be.

Scholars who came after Göle have used the terms: Islamic women, Islamic feminists, pious women, and conservative women in speaking about the same women⁸ I believe the term “conservative” or “right-wing” would be a more appropriate descriptor for capturing the politics of the women intellectuals supporting the AKP in Turkey today.⁹ The AKP reveals itself more and more as a typical right-wing populist party. Its rhetoric on domestic and foreign policy issues is characterised by an aggressive nationalism and racism that pits “pious” people against the corrupt cultural elite and their “foreign enablers.” Both the pro-AKP women inside the party and in the media work diligently to propagate the party’s spin on events and help it to increase its grip on power. Their nationalist right-wing rhetoric is deeply divisive and essentialist. Only those who embrace Islam and Turkish nationalism are defined as the “real” and “essential” elements of Turkey. Criticism of Erdoğan is

equated to being anti-Turkey. The half of Turkey who did not vote for him--secularists, Alevites, the majority of Kurds, the left, and others--are not considered an “essential” or fundamental part of the country. They are now outside the “nation” cherished by the AKP leadership.

During the 1990s our research group clearly overestimated the potential of active conservative religious women to transform the far- right movement of which they were a part. By focusing on “Islam” and “culture” we neglected the problematic past of this reactionary movement and its divisive political language, authoritarian tendencies, and ways it mobilised the electorate through grassroots organisations to reap, long- term, Turkey’s leftist secular feminists' support.

In retrospect, the analyses of women in conservative right-wing movements by Turkey’s leftist secular feminists turned out to be prescient.¹⁰ The secular feminists on the left did not approve of the exclusionary politics of the Turkish secular state or the headscarf ban. But they also called attention to the limits of women’s empowerment within a religious and nationalist framework. They were in a sense both inclusive and critical. I wish hardline Turkish secularists could have learned something from them long ago. The hardline secularist repression of the headscarf turned the garment into a symbol of victimisation and a rallying point for conservative right-wing religious politics. I sometimes wonder if things could have been different had Turkish hardcore secularists been less restrictive about the headscarf. My mind keeps looking for a point in the past where things could have been set on a different course. From what point could Turkey have moved forward to become a fully democratised country with strong checks and balances, with a free and independent media reflecting the diversity of opinion in the country, with citizens who respect ethnic, religious, sexual minorities and women’s rights. A place where there is no room for the rise of fascism, sexism, racism and homophobia. A place where all citizens are seen as equals and “essentials.”

When I start searching for that imaginary point in the past, my mind usually lingers around my years at the Boğaziçi University and Göle’s atelier. I am thankful to the welcoming atmosphere that Boğaziçi University’s Sociology Department had accorded me despite my difference. Our theory proved wrong but I still have a very good reason to believe in the power of inclusion.

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NOTES

¹ Nilüfer Göle (1991) *Modern Mahrem*. Istanbul: Metis Books (appeared in English in 1997, *The Forbidden Modern: Civilisation and Veiling*, Ann Harbor: University of Michigan Press. Göle re-wrote the book herself in English.)

² The book is not published in English. Yet, more information about the book and the authors can be found at the publisher's website in Turkish: <http://www.metiskitap.com/Catalog/Book/4340><accessed in Jan.13.2017>

³ I wrote my MA thesis on the same topic. Özcan, Ayşe Esra (2000). *The new configurations Islam in Contemporary Turkey: The case of Yaşar Nuri Öztürk*. Unpublished thesis: Boğaziçi University. <http://seyhan.library.boun.edu.tr/record=b1198805~S5>

⁴ Women interacted initially with the secular left. *Birikim*, a socialist monthly, published interviews with women and their writing in September 2000. Ruşen Çakır, a liberal secular journalist published interviews with women wearing headscarf, mostly opinion leaders and intellectuals in 2000 (*Direnış ve İtaat*, Istanbul: Metis Books). Interviews with these women in the mainstream media started to appear more often after the mid-2000s. *Hürriyet*, a famous secular daily, published interviews with the popular female columnists of the Islamist newspapers, Ayşe Böhürler and Nihal Bengisu Karaca in 2006 and 2007 respectively. Karaca's piece titled "Bir mütesettirin tatil günçesi" (The diary of a woman with headscarf on vacation), published in the secular newspaper Radikal in August 11, 2007, generated a lot of discussion and interest in the secular mainstream media. In that piece, Karaca reflected on the hurdles of her beach holidays, where very few women-only beaches existed for women like her to enjoy the sea. Her archived piece can be accessed at <http://www.radikal.com.tr/hayat/bir-mutesettirin-tatil-guncesi-867464/><accessed in Jan.13.2017> Since Karaca's piece, numerous women-only beaches were opened by the municipalities run by Erdoğan's Justice and Development Party. Radikal was shut down in 2016 under both financial hardships and the growing hostility of the President Erdoğan towards the oppositional media.

⁵ Ronnee Schreiber (2008) *Righting Feminism: Conservative Women and American Politics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

⁶ I could count only two exceptions in the internet media since July 2016. Özbudun (2016) criticized Turkey's "Islamist 'feminists'" for running to the defense of Islam and remaining silent on the face of ISIS's violence against women in Iraq (Sibel Özbudun (2016). *Kadınlar: İslam, AKP ve Ötesi* [Women: Islam, AKP and Beyond]. Ankara: Ütopya, pp. 137-144). Arat analyzed Islamist women's columns between 2011 and 2013 and reported that the women "usually avoided criticising the government" (Yeşim Arat, 2016. "Islamist Women and Feminist Concerns in Contemporary Turkey: Prospects for Women's Rights and Solidarity". *Frontiers*, 2016, 37(3): 143). Arat argues that "Despite differences, there are grounds for solidarity between Islamist and secular women concerning women's rights," (2016, p. 145). Yet, I believe there is less and less space for such solidarity under AKP's increasing authoritarianism. For secular women and feminists "resistance" has become the main priority and they find the Islamist women on the side of the government that encroaches on their rights and freedoms.

⁷ See, Esra Özcan (forthcoming) *Conservative Women in Power: A New Predicament for Transnational Feminist Media Research*. In *Through a Feminist Kaleidoscope: Reflections on Media Research and Theory*. Editors: Dustin Harp, Jaime Loke, Ingrid Bachmann.

⁸ For articles that use the term "pious woman" see, Berna Turam (2008), Didem Unal (2015). Canan Aslan Akman (2013) uses "Islamic women" and "feminist Islamic women" interchangeably. Berna Turam (2008). Turkish women divided by politics: Secularist activism versus pious non-resistance. *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 10(4), 475-494. Didem Unal (2015). Vulnerable Identities: Pious Women Columnists' Narratives on Islamic Feminism and Feminist Self-identification in Contemporary Turkey. *Women's Studies International Forum*, 53:12-21. Canan Aslan Akman (2013). Islamic Women's Ordeal with the New Face(s) of Patriarchy in Power: Divergence or Convergence over Expanding Women's Citizenship, in *Gendered Identities: Criticising Patriarchy in Turkey*, ed. Rasim Özgür Dönmez and Fazilet Ahu Özmen. Lanham: Lexington Books, pp: 113–45.

⁹ Ayşe Saktanber interpreted Islamist women's activism as "the symbolic feminisation of right-wing politics in Turkey" in *Right-wing Women: From Conservatives to Extremists around the World* ed. by Bacchetta, Paola, and Margaret Power. Routledge, 2013. p. 82. I argue that, situating the Islamist women within right-wing politics in Turkey,

as Saktanber did, makes the limits of their political activism for women's empowerment more visible.

¹⁰ I have Özbudun and Koç's work in mind while writing. Please see Sibel Özbudun (2016). *Kadınlar: İslam, AKP ve Ötesi* [Women: Islam, AKP and Beyond]. Ankara: Ütopya. Handan Koç (2015). *Muhafazakarlığa Karşı Feminizm* [Feminism against Conservatism]. Istanbul: Güldünya Yayınları.

Contributor:

ESRA ÖZCAN. Is a Communication Studies scholar at Tulane University, Department of Communication in New Orleans. She received her Ph.D. in Communication Science from Jacobs University Bremen in Germany. She was an Assistant Professor at Kadir Has University in Istanbul. She is a contributor to the alternative news network Bianet in Turkey. Her recent publications include "Women's Headscarves in News Photographs: A Comparison between the Secular and Islamic Press during the AKP Government in Turkey," *European Journal of Communication*, vol. 30, no. 6 (2015) 698-713; and "Lingerie, Bikinis and the Headscarf: Visual Depictions of Muslim Female Migrants in German News Media" *Feminist Media Studies*, vol. 13, no. 3, (2013) 427-44. She is author of the forthcoming book *Mainstreaming the Headscarf: Islamic Politics and Women in the Turkish Media* (I.B. Tauris, 2018).