



THE IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION OF SELMA EKREM AND HER APPROACH TO "THE OTHER" IN UNVEILED*

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Abstract

Selma Ekrem (1902-1986) is the grandchild of Namık Kemal and the daughter of Ali Ekrem, two important figures of the late Ottoman literary and political life. Certainly, the names of Namık Kemal and Ali Ekrem will be familiar to those interested in literature and history. However, it is difficult to say that Selma Ekrem's recognition level is so high. She, who went to America and continued her life there until her death, had also a writing adventure. Her autobiographical text, which she compiled from her childhood/first youth memoirs, and wrote in English, were successively printed four times in the United States with the name of *Unveiled* and attracted great attention. The work has a historical value since it contains certain unique information about the socio-cultural and political atmosphere of the period. In this study, the miscellaneous questions will be addressed to the mentioned text in the frame of the concepts of "identity" and "other", and the text will be analyzed in the context of these notions. The concepts of "self-orientalization/internalized orientalism" of Gönül Pultar and "Ottoman orientalism" of Ussama Makdisi will be the basic theoretical sources to be used in the analysis process of the text. At the end of the study, it is planned that Selma Ekrem's self-representation, identity construction and approach to "the other" will be placed on a more transparent ground.

Keywords: Self-Orientalization, Ottoman Orientalism, Identity Construction, Other, Selma Ekrem, *Unveiled*.

1. Introduction

Edward W. Said basically describes the concept of orientalism as "a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient" (Said, 1979, p. 3). From the late eighteenth century, Western colonialist and imperialist powers, especially England and France have created an identity of "other" and call it "Orient". Their aim was to complete their own identity construction. These powers which positioned themselves as the center of the world/civilization constructed a West-East dichotomy. Accordingly; unfavourable, negative features such as irrational, barbaric, inferior were related to the Orient. On the other hand, the West were constructed as the rational, civilized, superior. Besides, this binary opposition established between West and East was also genderized. As a result of patriarchal world order, "active and dominant" West was designed as male, whereas, "passive and obedient" East was imagined as female. These representations have been put into use in various areas from daily life and politics to social sciences and fine arts. The most effective ones among these areas are literary and academic environment. Lots of Western male and female researchers, travel-writers or academicians, whether on purpose or not, have contributed to spread these representations.

In *Said's Orientalism and His Critics*, Reina Lewis mentions that Said described orientalism as a monolithic discourse created by a colonial subject that is unified, intentional and male. Contrary to Said, she claims that orientalism is multivocal and heterogeneous and it is open to inconsistency and rupture. She interrogates the role of Western women in the orientalist and colonialist discourse in her book *Gendering Orientalism: Race, Femininity and Representation* (Lewis, 1996, p. 17). In this paper, I will try to go one more step beyond Lewis's argument and try to analyze the role of a female Turkish life-writing author who defines herself as a Westernized and modernized subject in the context of orientalism. Using Gönül Pultar's notion of "self-orientalization" and Ussama Makdisi's concept of "Ottoman orientalism", I will try to discuss self-representation of Hatice Selma Ekrem (1902-1986) and her approach to "non-Western others" in *Unveiled: The Autobiography of a Turkish Girl*¹ (1930).

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¹The book was translated into Turkish by Gül Çağalı Güven and published by Anahtar Kitaplar Press in 1998 with the name of *Peçeyeye İsyân: Namık Kemal'in Torununun Anıları*.

2. Self-Representation and Identity Construction of Selma Ekrem

Ekrem



All visual materials used in the paper are located in the book.

The name of the book, *Unveiled* symbolizes for fighting against different forms of oppression: Fighting against the male-dominated society, against the period of autocracy, or in other words, the oppression of Sultan Hamid II and against the mobbing of conservative groups about veiling. *Unveiled* in general consists of the memoirs of Selma Ekrem until she was twenty-one. Since it was written in English, it is possible to say that her imagined reader is Western audience. Ekrem positions herself as close to the Western readers and tries to get sympathy from them. Hence, the process of Ekrem's identity construction is also as important as the representation of "others" in the text. Ekrem represents herself as a Westernized subject who took education at the American College for Girls in Istanbul. In this context, Gönül Pultar's notion of "self-orientalization/internalized orientalism" can pave the way for comprehending the reasons of Ekrem's these representations. To Pultar, "[o]ne significant aspect of self-orientalization is the internalization of the Western modernity" (Pultar, 2005, p. 4). Ekrem internalizes some Eurocentric cultural representations and accepts the existence of a distinct and constant demarcation between the West and the East. The Tanzimat Decree of 1839 is the breaking point for the historical background of this internalization process. As Ethem Eldem claims that after 1839,

"Ottomans had implicitly agreed to one of the most basic tenets of orientalism: that the East was essentially different from the West, that it was essentially stagnant and locked the capacity to change without an exogenous stimulus" (Eldem, 2010, p. 27). When Eldem and Pultar's expressions considered together, this internalization process becomes more visible and can be understood more easily.

Ekrem is very conscious about her social standing and represents herself accordingly. She is from one of the upper-class Ottoman families; she is the child of a significant Ottoman official, Ali Ekrem (1867-1937) and the granddaughter of the prominent Ottoman intellectual, Namık Kemal (1840-1888). Ekrem uses her family's class superiority during the process of self-representation. She virtually draws a picture of "Ekrem's family" and "the others". While she represents herself and her family as modern, civilized, and liberal; on the other hand, she otherizes some people who come from different classes and educational backgrounds, and projects them as uncivilized, illiterate and inferior. By mentioning her mother (Zeynep Celile) as an able, educated, clean and tolerant woman, Ekrem tries to draw her just like Western instructors who she admired (Ezer, 2013, p. 106). Ekrem's "other" is generally Arabs. She makes essentialist generalizations about them. However, she makes it indirectly through other people such as her mother or Ferhunde Dadi. For instance, Ferhunde Dadi says that: "Aman, hanımdjım, don't look at the kitchen. A dirty Arab cook and the baby's diapers drying side by side with the utensils" (Ekrem, 2005, p. 51). There is also another passage related to the discourse of "dirty Arabs": "My mother's horror of dirt bristled in her eyebrows. How could she eat with that kitchen and its dirt rising like a ghost before her eyes?" (p. 52). As it can be inferred from the two passages above, Ekrem's family was characterized as "clean" and Arabs were defined as "dirty and nasty". All these adjectives were used to consolidate the process of Ekrem's Western-identity construction. In these passages, Ekrem uses "positional superiority" (Said, 1979, p. 7) of the West against the Arabs. Of course, the discourse of "clean and dirty" contributes to the binary oppositions of orientalism and deepens the perception of "self" and "the other".

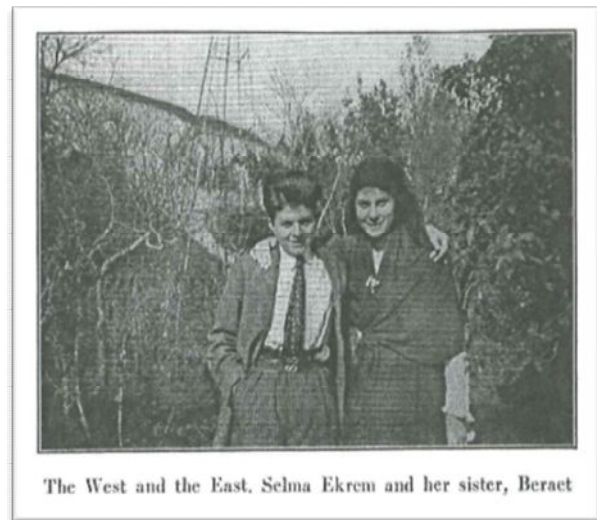


The visual materials of the book are also very functional in order to reveal the contrast between "Ekrem's family" and "the others". For instance, the frontispiece portrait of

Selma Ekrem depicts a very modern, self-confident and short-haired woman. This portrait was used to convince the Western audience that she has a Western physiognomy. Moreover, the photograph that shows Selma Ekrem's father, Ali Ekrem and an unnamed Arab chief in the same frame evokes the East-West dichotomy of the orientalist discourse. In this frame, while Ali Ekrem looks modern and "unveiled", the unnamed Arab man covers all his body but his face with a veil. Besides, it might be useful to mention what Carolyn Goffman said about the photographs in the book. She claims that in the frontispiece portrait, "Ekrem appears not only Western and modern, but very fair-skinned, thus immediately undermining any racist expectations of a darker-skinned 'Oriental'" (Goffman, 2005, p. VII). Hence, it is possible to say that this visual material both contributes to the process of Ekrem's Western-identity construction and on the other hand, it also challenges certain orientalist stereotypes/representations.

3. Is Selma Ekrem an Ottoman Orientalist?

In this context, Ussama Makdisi's notion of "Ottoman orientalism" is another significant concept. Ottoman orientalism and self-orientalization are not far apart concepts; they have actually lots of common features. To Makdisi, "In an age of Western-dominated modernity, every nation creates its own 'Orient'. The nineteenth-century Ottoman Empire was no exception" (Makdisi, 2002, p. 768). As previously mentioned, with the Tanzimat Decree of 1839, Ottoman Empire admitted that the West is the center of progress and the East should follow the new developments in the West to struggle with its backwardness. After that date, just as Western colonial powers constructed their "other", Ottoman Empire also created its own "Orient". He further maintains that the Ottoman Empire's modernization reforms of the nineteenth century also betrayed the desire to create a modern Ottoman Turkish nation, which created its own Orientalist representational logic to lead "the empire's other putatively stagnant ethnic and national groups into an Ottoman modernity" (p. 769). According to Ottoman orientalism, Istanbul was the capital of modernity and Ottoman Turkish elites were superior to Arabs, Armenians, Kurds, Bulgarians and Bedouins.



In this theoretical framework, it is possible to assert that Selma Ekrem is an Ottoman orientalist. Her father Ali Ekrem was an Ottoman Turkish governor and was charged with to civilize and modernize "the pre-modern Ottoman Orient". Because of her father's duty, Selma Ekrem had a chance to travel to "Ottoman Orient" that includes Jerusalem, Beirut, Ghaze, Jaffaa and Berussebi. She represented these lands as the soils ruled by barbarity, indolence and stagnation. As previously mentioned, Ekrem discriminated against Arabs living in these lands and indirectly makes essentialist generalizations about them. For instance, Ekrem



mentions Arab women as mobs or groups. They are not the individuals who have names and personalities; they are represented as silent, sensual, passive and dirty objects. To Özlem Ezer, Ekrem puts a distance between herself and Arab women by focusing 'strangeness' and 'dissimilarities' of them (Ezer, 2012, p. 116). She mostly uses the words notifying oddness to describe Arab women and "Ottoman Orient". For instance, "Their Arabic sounded harsh and strange in my ears. [...] I wondered if people ate lemons in this strange country" (Ekrem, 2005, p. 52) Or "The women were dressed oddly in rough hand-woven material..." (p. 67). These statements contribute to the othering and stereotyping process of orientalism. Nonetheless, in a few lines, Ekrem also describes the "hospitable" (p. 51) and "generous" (p. 52) aspects of Arabs. However, if it is remembered that in the past, these "positive" adjectives were generally used by lots of orientalist travelers for the portrayal of Turks, it can be noticed that these expressions are not so innocent, too.

Another point to take into consideration is that, contrary to Makdisi, the others in *Unveiled* are not just only Arabs or people living in "Ottoman Orient". Ekrem uses the manners of positional superiority against not just Arabs but some Turkish people who come from different class and educational backgrounds (Ezer, 2012, p. 111). In this case, the others in *Unveiled* can be divided into two groups: "the others in Istanbul" and "the others out of Istanbul". The others out of Istanbul are the people dwelling in "Ottoman Orient". On the other side, the others in Istanbul are the people who force Turkish women to conceal their body with a tcharshaf and a veil. For instance, the hodja who compels women to cover their faces represents the paternalistic social order and he is one of the others in Istanbul. Similarly, when Ekrem realized that her hat was interpreted as a sign of her "strangeness" or "otherness", she also started to see the women in tcharshaf as "others". In the text, there is a contrast between the tcharshaf and the hat; or in other words, tcharshaf versus hat. Hat is the symbol of modernity and tcharshaf is the symbol of backwardness. Moreover, there is another passage that describes a house in Jerusalem gives one more example of the others in Istanbul. Ekrem says that "We had never lived in such a house before, never had known a divided home (...) In Constantinople we had not needed a harem for my father, unlike most of the Turkish men, allowed mother to appear before any friend of his whom she wanted to see" (Ekrem, 2005, p. 57) (emphasis is mine). In these lines, once again, Ekrem puts a difference between her father and Turkish men and in some way otherizes them. At the same time, by pointing out that her family doesn't divide itself on gender lines, she tries to strengthen the process of her Western-identity construction. By doing this, she deports "harem" from Istanbul and locks it in Jerusalem. This is also another example of self-orientalization in the text.

4. Conclusion

In this paper, the self-representation of Selma Ekrem and the appearances of "non-Western others" were tried to be explained with the concepts of self-orientalization and Ottoman orientalism. Ekrem mostly tries to present herself and her family as the Westernized and modernized subjects in order to win Western audience's favor. She strives to construct herself as close to the Western readers. Besides, she creates "others" in Istanbul and out of Istanbul. Her "others" are generally Arabs who she encountered in Jerusalem, Beirut, Ghaze, Jaffaa and Berussebi. However, although *Unveiled* advertently or inadvertently contributed to the orientalist discourse, it is not a text that utterly advocates this discourse; there are also some challenging passages in it. Hence, it is possible to say that the text includes double binds. On the one hand, Ekrem uses some Western stereotypes and representations to satisfy her readers; on the other hand, she also makes some deconstructing moves about these representations. With all these features, it can be alleged that *Unveiled* is one of the significant documents for the time of late Ottoman period and especially orientalist studies.

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