

**The Ideals of a “New Woman” with an Élite
Education
Through her First-Person Narrative**
Kendi Anlatısıyla Elit Eğitimi Almış bir
“Yeni Kadın”ın İdealleri

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Abstract

The personal writings of Semiha Sureya, a young woman who keeps her memoirs in Ottoman, modern Turkish and English, show her ideals in life as a patriotic and enlightened “New Woman”. She is of a well-rooted traditional Ottoman family; and at the same time, she is well suited to the modernist project of the new regime as a student of the American Collegiate Institute of Izmir. Although she has the means and the capacity to have a career, she chooses to become a homemaker in her life. She will raise her children and work for charity as well as translating books from French and English, which will be published in local İzmir newspapers, however, her notebooks full of her personal writings have never been published. This private collection, which gives voice to Semiha Moralı, has been made available by her daughter for this article. Semiha Moralı’s dedication to her marriage and children, which from one perspective seems to be an impediment, empowers her from a different point of view.

Key words: *The New Woman, Ottoman élite education, women’s rights, missionary schools, first person narratives, family history*

Öz

Anılarını Osmanlıca, Türkçe ve İngilizce tutan Semiha Sureya’nın kişisel yazıları, aydın bir “Yeni Kadın” olarak hayattaki ideallerini ortaya koyar. Hem köklü ve geleneksel bir Osmanlı ailesinden gelmekte, hem de İzmir Amerikan Koleji’nde okuyarak yeni rejimin modernist projesine uyum sağlamaktadır. Aslında

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kariyer sahibi olmak için gerekli donanıma ve imkana sahip olmasına rağmen ev hanımlığını seçecektir. Çocuklarını büyütmekle kalmayıp çeşitli yardım kuruluşlarında çalışacak ve Fransızca ve İngilizceden tercümeleri yerel İzmir gazetelerinde yayımlanacaktır, fakat kişisel yazılarıyla dolu olan defterler hiç yayımlanmamıştır. Semiha Moralı'nın anlatısını ortaya çıkaran şahsi koleksiyon bu makale için kızı tarafından temin edilmiştir. Evliliğine ve çocuklarına bağlılığı bir açıdan bakıldığında ona engel olmuş gibi görünse de, başka bir açıdan ona güç katmıştır.

Anahtar kelimeler: *Yeni Kadın, Osmanlı elit eğitimi, kadın hakları, misyoner okulları, birinci şahıs anlatıları, aile tarihi*

This article focuses on the personal writings of Semiha Moralı (1911-1989)¹, first and foremost with the purpose of revealing the ideals of a teenager and young woman with an élite education, who descended from a family of Ottoman notables. Young Semiha Sureya seems to epitomize the “New Woman” the creation of whom was targeted by the modernist intelligentsia. At the same time, she is the combined product of a traditional Ottoman education and an American missionary school (the American Collegiate Institute of İzmir). This combination is evident from her memoirs partly kept in Ottoman Turkish, partly in English and partly in modern Turkish.

The sources of this article consist of several notebooks of letters and essays (1927-1933) written in Ottoman, modern Turkish, and English. Semiha Moralı's personal writings have never been published, but have been preserved in the private family archive of her daughter.² More specifically, her personal accounts consist of six hand-written notebooks. One of these notebooks is partly dedicated to copies of poetry, plays and quotations from Ottoman Turkish literature by Şinasi, Namık Kemal, Akif Paşa and Nabizade Nazım written in the Latin script. The second half of the same notebook includes lyric poetry and prose by Edgar Allan Poe, Lord Byron, Thomas Hardy, William Blake, John Fletcher and Robert Burns. Another notebook is completely devoted to copies of works of poetry in English by the likes of Edgar Allan Poe and Lord Byron. One distinct notebook is filled with poems in Ottoman Turkish written in the Arabic script, which is full of Ottoman poets' works. Rather more intriguing are the three notebooks that include Semiha's own opinions recorded in her essays and memoirs. One

¹ Semiha Sureya during her youth, after her father's name.

² The analysis put forward in this article was made possible by an extensive interview with Semiha Moralı's daughter Prof. Dr. İnci Erefe. I am grateful to Prof. Erefe for sharing her knowledge about her mother as well as providing me copies of the memoirs of Semiha Moralı.

notebook of essays contain her memoirs and essays written in the Turkish Latin script. Another such notebook includes her essays written in Ottoman Turkish in the Arabic script. Finally, she has filled a notebook of essays and memoirs written in English. This last notebook also contains a literary analysis of and quotations from Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*. An original short story she has written entitled *Eminem, Eminem*, is about an engaged couple who are temporarily separated because of the duty of the man who goes away for a while. They happily reunite in the end. The piece is constructed in the genre of the village novel and has some colloquialisms. Later on in her life, she has translated books from English, which have been serially published in local newspapers of Izmir. These novels include the works of Sophie Kerr, Zane Grey, S. Walkey, and Rafael Sabatini.

As for the contents of her personal accounts, the most interesting are her essays and letters addressed by young Semiha to an imaginary friend. These letters sometimes contain advice to this imagined younger woman and sometimes relate Semiha’s experiences in life. Her original accounts also include a letter to her fiancé (later husband Rifat Morali) written in English; her own attempts of producing short pieces of fiction; and a newspaper interview with her, published in 1984 in the İzmir paper, *Yeni Asır*, in which she reveals memories of her youth recalling the personal and social effects of the grant of political rights to women.

As a teenager, Semiha was the most passionate about building an “ideal home” with her “ideal husband” and raising her children as an educated mother. Her project of becoming an ‘enlightened housewife’ guided by her positivist elite education, necessitates further analysis both in terms of what it meant to her, as well as its social meaning within the agenda of the reformist regime. Based on an analysis put forward by Ayfer Karakaya-Stump on late-Ottoman discourses on women’s rights, I argue that Semiha Sureya’s passionate espousal of domestic duties which were formulated to elevate the nation to higher levels and standards was an influence that further empowered women of her talents and education by recognizing them as “*constructive*” social agents.³ This empowerment would create women’s demands for “*equitable*” rights compatible with corresponding duties expected from them.⁴ In this context, this study re-constructs the “ideal” of Semiha Sureya, which clearly comes across in several of her writings in both Turkish and English.

³ Ayfer Karakaya-Stump. “Debating Progress in a ‘Serious Newspaper for Muslim Women’: The Periodical *Kadın* of the Post-Revolutionary Salonica, 1908-1909,” *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 30, No. 2 (November, 2003): 157.

⁴ Karakaya-Stump (2003): 174.

Her Life Story

Semiha was born in 1911 into the Menteşe family of wealthy landlords of the Milas, Muğla district in Western Anatolia. Her mother was of the Kâtipzâde family, the officially- recognized principle notables (*a'yân*) of eighteenth-century İzmir. Semiha had an elder brother (Galip Menteşe), with whom she received a traditional Ottoman élite education in Milas during their childhood. This education included private tutoring in French as well as music lessons of playing the *oud* and the piano. The loss of her father at an early age led them to move to İzmir with their mother to live in proximity to their aunt's home. Life would be more challenging thereafter without a father and the financial means they had enjoyed in his lifetime. They did, however, have a more modest yet steady income from their family farm in Milas.

Semiha graduated from the American Collegiate Institute of İzmir (hereafter ACI) in 1928. She kept memoirs beginning in her teenage years (1927-32), while she was an ACI student. These first-person accounts are those of an ordinary young woman who has a passion for literature. Her devotion to reading in Turkish, English and French continued all her life, as her translations of novels were later published in the İzmir papers. She married a local bank director and poet (Moralızade Rifat Ahmet) in 1933, raised two children, and was often involved in charity work. She lost her husband in 1976 and continued to live alone, but close to her daughter's home in İzmir- Karşıyaka, until her death in 1989.

The "New Woman" and Semiha Sureya's Ideal

There is an established literature on discourses on women and the family created by Turkish modernization.⁵ These discourses are said to have played significant roles in establishing class differences by defining lower and upper class women's identities. According to the Turkish modernization project, the modern woman with her modesty, self-sacrifice and loyalty to family, stands out in opposition to upper-class extremisms; and with her education, awareness of her rights, and public visibility, she is positioned

⁵ *Rethinking modernity and national identity in Turkey*. Eds. Sibel Bozdoğan and Reşat Kasaba. (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1997); *Vatan Millet Kadınlar (Homeland, Nation, Women)* Ed. Ayşe Gül Altınay. (İstanbul: İletişim Press, 2000); Ayşe Durakbaşa and Aynur İlyasoğlu. "Formation of Gender Identities in Republican Turkey and Women's Narratives as Transmitters of 'Herstory' of Modernization" *Journal of Social History*, Vol. 35, No. 1 (Autumn, 2001): 195-203; Deniz Kandiyoti. *Cariyeler, bacılar, yurttaşlar: kimlikler ve toplumsal dönüşümler*. (İstanbul: Metis Yay., 1997); Hakan Kaynar. *Projesiz Modernleşme. Cumhuriyet İstanbul'undan Gündelik Fragmanlar*. (İstanbul: İstanbul Araştırmaları Enstitüsü Yayınları, 2012).

against lower-class conventionalism.⁶ The most problematic aspect of this identity from a feminist perspective, as put forward by Serpil Üşür Sancar, is the inevitable “visibility of women in the public sphere”. The risk of women becoming the subject of politics, and changing it, is always inherent in their public visibility. Therefore, pacifying this visibility; rendering it dysfunctional and insubstantial have been targeted.⁷

This critical approach, developed since the 1980s emphasizes the definition of women by republican reforms as “breeders and educators of the new generations, i.e. 'enlightened mothers of the nation’”⁸ Most of these studies are based on an evaluation of official or other public discourses including those of Atatürk, which reflect the modernist elite male voice. Women's own voices and narratives that come across written documents by women and oral history studies have recently been discovered as plausible sources of women's own self definitions, perceptions, their own theories of self and moral social conduct, and their own life stories.⁹

Among many pieces of her writing, some of which will be scrutinized below, two samples are outstandingly significant descriptions of Semiha Sureya's ideal in life as a young girl prior to her marriage. They are both entitled “My Ideal”. The first one, “İdealim” (My Ideal) written in modern Turkish, dated December 5, 1928, is noticeably different from her writing in English as the quality of her prose, her vocabulary range, her style and fluency is immediately recognizable. It begins with a quotation from a newspaper article (a direct quote without reference) which Semiha Sureya finds the most intriguing and worthwhile: “A woman can be a labourer or a politician, a lawyer or a doctor, an engineer, a dentist, a chemist—in sum—she can be anything and these are all suitable. However, a full-time mother,

⁶ Serpil Üşür Sancar. “Otoriter Türk Modernleşmesinin Cinsiyet Rejimi” (“The Gender Policy of Authoritarian Turkish Modernization”) *Doğu-Batı*, November 2004, 11.

⁷ This configuration largely depended on the establishment process of early- 1930's one-party regime. This organization gained success in taking control of womens' politicization by suppressing the independence demands of Turkish Women's Union from the State and the Party; by appointing supervisors to women's organizations through administrative authorities; encouraging the Union to work on social charity activities rather than political demands. Owing to this project, it has been possible to create the still-living- image of women “organizing bazaar sales” for charity. This arrangement created by the one-party era has survived without much change until today, and has created the habit of womens' involvement in “social activities” rather than “political representation”. Sancar (2004), 12.

⁸ Tekeli (1988) and Kandiyoti (1987) cited by Ayşe Durakbaşa and Aynur İlyasoğlu “Formation of Gender Identities in Republican Turkey and Women's Narratives as Transmitters of 'Herstory' of Modernization”. *Journal of Social History*, Vol. 35, No. 1 (Autumn, 2001), 195.

⁹ Durakbaşa and İlyasoğlu (2001), 195.

raising children who match the superiority of her country; and one who makes this her lifetime project; perhaps is the most praiseworthy and precious of all women".¹⁰

Semiha Sureya finds this quote apt and a perfect way to express her own feelings on this matter. In this essay, she explores this idea a little further by decorating it and adding a bit of the sentiments of a young girl. After all, she says: "The aspirations and dreams of a young girl become a woman's objective."

Interestingly, she reveals that two people are always alive in her imagination—a man and a woman. But for the purpose of this essay in which she interprets the ideals of a young girl, she proposes to focus on the imagined woman rather than the man. Then she goes on to describe this imagined young girl in detail: "A fairly genuine, very open-hearted, thoughtful, lyric young girl... Overflowing with joy, always smiling, always narrating, whose speech is always enjoyed by the listeners... Despite her cheerful appearance, she is vulnerable with a fragile heart. Her heart, which appears to be easily healed, has the deep remnants of previous wounds." Along with her other personal accounts in Ottoman Turkish and in English, this description suggest that it is mostly based on her own self-image. In fact, this piece seems to embody a summary of the main themes that appear in all other personal accounts, through which she reveals that the honesty of this "imagined" young girl, is never matched by others. She is ever-thoughtful and self-reflecting. Her dignity is above all else.

She follows with a vivid depiction of this young girl's dream in which she is a newly-wed housewife who manages her home up to the highest contemporary standards of cooking, cleaning, creating and increasing savings, and raising two good children—a boy and a girl—to serve the modern nation. The dream comes to an end with the death of the old couple "with God's name on their lips," passing onto their son and daughter two principles of wisdom: 'It is the female bird that builds the nest, my girl. If you wish to be happy, you must be attached to your home with all your heart and your presence'; and 'The key to happiness is with the man, my boy. You will gain access to this key with the endless affection you will give to your lifelong companion, and with your determined hard work.'

¹⁰ "Kadın orta halli bir işçi de olabilir, yüksek bir meb'us da, bir avukat da olabilir, bir doktor da, bir mühendis, bir dişçi, bir kimyager hülāsā her şey, her şey olabilir ve hepsi de muhteremdir. Fakat vatanına, vatanının yüksekliğiyle mütenasip evlat yetiştiren ve bunu kendine gaye edinen tam bir anne her halde en çok hörmet ve taktire şayan olan kadındır." A newspaper article (source unknown) quoted by Semiha Sureya in "İdealim". Her memoire entry dated Saturday, 12.15.1928.

The second essay entitled “My Ideal,” this time written in English in the week of May 29, 1929 reads as follows in her own words:

Everyone asks me: ‘What do you want to be in the future?’ or ‘What’s your ideal?’

I always think that my ideal is the greatest thing in my life. When I imagine my ideal with its ideal home, ideal husband, ideal children and ideal woman my heart beats so strong that I think, I’ve got all my ideal wishes.

Can you imagine a greater person than an ideal mother? What can a mother, a modern mother have that she must be called “the best modern mother”? A good education, strong character, keen eyes to see everything keenly, strong brain, a perfect health. If chance helps, this woman can never fail in her life... And don’t we sometimes prepare our chances?

What can this woman give to her society? She can give the greatest thing to our society which it needs most. Think of that woman’s home...A home which is full of love, a home that gives joy and happiness, a home that is decorated by hands which show her high spirit...That’s the house which can be a model and a wonderful torchbearer. The children who grow here are the ideal children. They are trained by her, they’ve got their character from her and they are the best children. Isn’t that a great help to society? Our society needs children and it is greatest help to her society if a girl wants to be a mother... a modern mother.

My ideal is that, the reason also is that which sends me to my ideal. My imagination gathers around my ideal. I become a modern woman, to open a modern and an ideal home, to give ideal children to my society and to work with my ideal man in my life.

Semiha Sureya’s memoirs constitute a mine of information about her perspective that seems to fit squarely with the image of the early-republican new woman. She appears to be the epitome of the “enlightened mother” who is confined to her home by the “modernization project of republican reforms”, however, from her own narrative, from what her daughter has related, this “confinement” to domestic duties was an integral part of her identity which empowered her as an indispensable agent of the family and the society. She was positive about her function in life, and never aspired to having a profession she would perform outside of home, though she was definitely qualified to do so.

Her High School Education

Semiha Sureya came from a conservative family and had been indoctrinated with the early recordings of her traditional Ottoman education

in the countryside. She was always patriotic, and a devout Muslim, and was practicing the daily five prayers regularly by mid-age. Having lived through the War of Independence, Semiha Sureya's Western-style education received at the American Collegiate Institute probably accentuated her ideal as a patriotic and enlightened mother who would serve her country by raising educated children.

Her experience of ACI is noteworthy in the sense that it provided the positive education and the rational and scientific approach that gave her the self-confidence of an expert in home-economics; an enlightened homemaker who had both the aptitude as well as the training of a literary critic who would pass her knowledge onto her children. She had been a student of Edith F. Parsons, a graduate of Stanford University. The same period was shaped by the distinguished principal of ACI, Olive Greene (1923–25 and 1945–48), a Wellesley graduate who strived for "...educating women whose culture expected them to marry and have children, and whose government exhorted them to go beyond their role in creating and caring for families, yet framed women's education as a duty toward the next generation."¹¹ Thus the curricula of American schools shared with the Turkish state the target of training young women to manage their homes and to take care of their families. They included domestic sciences, including housekeeping, cooking, food and nutrition, budget keeping, needlework, and childcare. While the state curriculum required a course on hygiene, ACI began training in home economics, which included instruction on 'making of a beautiful and healthful home with small means and few rooms'.¹²

Another skill Semiha Sureya received from her ACI education was her knowledge of English. The choice of language in her writing varies from modern Turkish written in the Latin alphabet, to essays written in Turkish using the Ottoman script, and to those in English. Her own justification of her choice of English is clear. In September 25, 1931 (following her graduation from high school) she writes in English:

I'm afraid that I shall lose my English with no conversation. Yes it is true that I read; but that does not help me in practicing the language, so I decided to write letters to an unknown person trying to put my feelings into my own words, that is to express myself in a foreign language.

¹¹ Faith J Childress. "Creating the 'New Woman' in Early Republican Turkey: The Contributions of the American Collegiate Institute and the American College for Girls". *Middle Eastern Studies*. Vol. 44, No. 4 (Jul., 2008), 555-56.

¹² Childress (2008), 560.

I want to do another thing also: I want to study or practice translation. But as my English is very little, and my knowledge so limited, I need a big and good dictionary...Ah! If I had one...I want to manage that, for really I need one.

She evidently wishes to keep her English alive after her education comes to an end, but reading through her writing, one wonders whether she either consciously or unconsciously made a choice between Turkish and English when writing on personal matters, especially the pieces in which she described her disappointment in life. This could have been a motivation for her to write certain memoirs in English, as no one within the immediate family circle, including her elder brother, would have been able to decipher those pieces.

As for the contents of her memoirs, either in English, Turkish or Ottoman, what she writes about specific family events rarely include names of the people involved in those events. Aynur İlyasoğlu shows that social (class) differences shape the way women’s experiences were narrated: The pioneering, elite women of the Republic displayed an “epic style”, as opposed to ordinary women, whose narratives were full of rich details that revealed their endeavor of holding on to life through difficulties.¹³ Semiha Sureya fits in with the image of the Republican elite woman with a positivist modern Western-style education. Her writing appears with a certain degree of abstraction. Not only exclusion of names, but also exclusion of details in general show that she created her narrative by focusing on what she found to be significant.

Semiha Sureya also wrote short essays of literary criticism. Her criticism of classic works of English Literature display a fairly simplistic approach and an amateur’s insight. Yet they are noteworthy in the sense that they show how her education and knowledge of a foreign language inspired her to write essays that contained commentaries on these literary works and their characters. A case in point is her undated essay entitled: “What lessons I’ve got from *The Rose and The Ring*,” which is about the satirical story by William Makepeace Thackeray dated 1855: Semiha Sureya’s account of *The Rose and the Ring* shows her naïve approach to literature:

¹³Aynur İlyasoğlu. “Cumhuriyet’le yaşıt Kadınların Yaşam Tarihi Anlatılarında Kadınlık Durumları, Deneyimler, Öznellik” *75 Yılda Kadınlar ve Erkekler (Men and Women in 75 Years)*, Ed. A. Berktay Hacımiraçoğlu, İstanbul: *Tarih Vakfı Yayınları*, p. 199 cited by Pınar-Melis Yelsalı Parmaksız “Kadınların Belleği: Hatırlama, Anlatı, Deneyim ve Toplumsal Cinsiyet,”171.

The people in this story show different and real characters and by these I understood that:

With some exceptions, all the people in aristocratic families are bad. They are very selfish, very jealous, very unkind and stony hearted. The children who grow up in them, who are trained by them aren't good at all. They know nothing, they pretend they know everything. With such people at the head of country, think of its progress! I learned another thing, it isn't the beauty of color which makes people charming, but it is the beauty of character, the sweetness of heart and politeness. These make people wonderfully charming and it is the beauty which loses none of its charm. This is just like Rosalba.

A person can deceive people a long time, but a time comes when she can't hide her character and all her charm goes away. The real beauty is always beauty. The other can collect love for a while. This is just like Princess Angelica.

Another thing which makes people charming and beautiful is education. Beside sweet and perfect character there must be good knowledge. The character can't show itself without education and knowledge. Rosalba and her charm through that and Prince Giglio had his charm through that/ And I understand that education is the most important thing in our life.

The story showed me another thing. If you try hard and if you are always joyful and happy in the storms of life, you can get your wish and you can beat the giant-life-!...

Another important thing I've got from the story: a sudden feeling can lead you to a bad action and if you feel sorry for that and try to overcome it, you can have love around you again. This happened to Princess Angelica and Prince Bulbo.

I've got this also: God always helps people to get their share if they are strong enough in character to face the storms of life.

On the other hand, Semiha's favorite Turkish authors were Aka Gündüz, Hüseyin Rahmi, Reşat Nuri Halide Edip, and Abdülhak Hâmit. Among nearly two-hundred novels she has read, much loved ones by her are Reşat Nuri's. She says that she has learned the meaning of dignity from Reşat Nuri. Though she writes essays in an abstract genre on various topics, both in Turkish and in English, her true talent is discernible only through her attempts at writing fiction in Turkish. The following comments are on authors she follows, addressed to her imaginary friend in the form of advice:

Aka Gündüz (d. 1958): For he is an idealist, and a realist. His subjects are taken from real life, but he idealizes them. I don't like his style. Conversations are unnatural. Every word has a meaning. Nobody can talk in that way. ... His style is very decorative. I think I'd like him better if he used a simpler style.

Hüseyin Rahmi (d. 1944): A real realist. Subjects well-chosen and serious. Conclusions are philosophical, but his style is too low to be called literary.

Reşat Nuri (d. 1956): is the one whom I like best. I like his style and his subjects. The heroes are natural. Characters taken from life. The style strong, powerful, musical, high and simple. Oh! I adore him.

Halide Edib (d. 1964): It is her books that take a person in storm. Her hero women take men after themselves. Her books also take the soul after themselves. Only in her books mind and heart can go together side by side. Her style is shockingly attractive and high. Her subjects put the soul, heart, and mind on fire. Read her and Reşat Nuri's books many times as you can, I mean, read them repeatedly, the effect is the same. It never alters or decreases. You are never tired of them.

Abdülhak Hâmid (d. 1937): is so high that I almost look at him with fear.¹⁴ Only his “Makber” (The Grave) is a world in itself. I cannot dare to criticize him but I almost worship him. Read his books also. They are hard to understand, but you can understand for yourself like me.

On a related note, Semiha Sureya's ACI education offered her many opportunities, apart from that of opening up to a different culture represented by Anglo-Saxon literature. Among the most impressive moments of her youth was her appearance in the high-school performance of the tragedy *Eşber* by the above-mentioned Abdülhak Hâmit Tarhan. In this celebrated play by the great poet and playwright of the Romantic period of Turkish Literature, Semiha assumed the role of Eşber the ruler of Punjab. The story takes place during India's conquest by Alexander the Great. Eşber is the opponent of Alexander. As in any all-girls school, men's roles were also taken by the students. Semiha Sureya was so successful in getting into the Eşber character that the people of İzmir yelled after her: “Eşber!” for weeks after her performance, a detail she would tell her daughter time and again in the future. She was so proud of this experience that she wrote an entry about it in her memoir. This entry written in English, is addressed to her imaginary friend. It relates the extent of her success, and how many

¹⁴ She must have meant “awe” by “fear” in this context.

important people congratulated her. More significantly, this memory reveals her aspiration of “being someone” who will be of service to her country in the most patriotic way:

I am glad my dear, glad in the full meaning of gladness.

It was a great success for me. All the great men shook hands with me and congratulated me. I was full of excitement. I was trembling so much that I ascended the steps slowly and oh (...) dear, it was so hard to face the audience. Think a moment dear... Hundreds of people and some one hundred of great men and officers.

A moment’s hesitation and I began. I was in a dream. I was acting and reciting in a dream. By and by I came to myself and my heart was so full of feeling that my language worked under its command. I did well. I saw on the people’s faces that I was doing well. When I came to my own piece, I forgot everyone, I forgot the place and my heart spoke, not my language and this is what they liked in my recitation.

O yes I am glad my dear, very very glad and proud. Because I learned that I can be something to my country. Pray for me dearest that I may have the opportunity of doing something for my darling country. Your forever, S.S.

On Progress, and Women’s Rights

Semiha Sureya’s positivist views on progress, that are clearly shaped by her education come through in one of her essays entitled “Enemy”. Written on the 19th of May, 1929, this entry reads as follows: “Every kind of enemy is bad, but the enemy of civilization is worst. The great enemy of it is ignorance. To make progress, every member of society has a work to do, and progress brings us to the civilization very quickly... Ignorance makes us savage... Besides that, human wastes are other enemies.” This progressive ideology resonates throughout her life and writing.

One of the most significant of “moments of progress” is remembered toward the end of her life, in a newspaper interview, as Semiha Moralı recalls the excitement of the days during which Turkish women were granted the right to be elected.¹⁵ She was then newly wed to Rıfat Moralı, and had settled in the Western Anatolian small town of Ödemiş. She cannot forget the way men looked at them with smiles on their faces, as women paraded

¹⁵ Interview with her by Türkan Kasapoğlu Publ. *Yeni Asır* (Local İzmir Paper) Saturday, December 1984, p: 13. 4th interview of a series entitles “Atatürk, Devrimler ve Kadınlar” “Atatürk, Reforms and Women”.

the streets of Ödemiş with flags in their hands on December 8, 1934, to show “gratitude to Great Atatürk”.

When the right to be elected was granted, I had been married for a year. My husband was a bank director in Ödemiş. We, the ladies, gathered in the city-hall (*halkevi*). A ceremony to celebrate this event was organized. On that evening, I gave a speech, and received abundant applause. The wife of the mayor, Bengisu also gave a speech. Meanwhile, we paraded the streets with flags in our hands. Torchlight processions (*fenerlayı*) were held. Men gave us a good laugh. They were laughing, but we had an air of self-confidence: and our heads were higher and our chests were straight, next to our husbands. In those days, celebration festivities were organized all over Turkey. During the elections, we all participated with our husbands. It was such a great feeling that neither culture, nor wealth from family or any other force could have given women such power. The most important of reforms was the Civil Law and the right of election granted to women.

Conclusion

Many details come through Semiha Sureya’s own narratives, and through what her daughter has related about her. I have chosen to focus on her ideals as a young girl, her positivist education, which has provided her with a firm determination to attain her goal in life. Her ideal of becoming an enlightened wife and mother, is striking as the embodiment of the “New Woman” created with the help of an Ottoman élite education and that of an American missionary school, which both successfully suited the agenda of the republican regime. The second time she saw her fiancé was right after their engagement, about which she wrote:

I liked him more today. He is fearfully clever. His actions are very natural. He has very good ideas and he is ambitious. I think I understand him. He will be a friend to me. God grant that I will be that also for him. I will try to be, with all my heart. I will give my best to make him happy. Oh! What can’t I give him if the source of his love and respect is his heart?! I pray God to give me strength to make my home a sweet, cheerful nest. S.S.

Building “a cheerful nest” was the purpose of her life. From her life story, it seems like this objective was fulfilled as she was the maker of her home, and the mother of two children—a professor and a diplomat—both of whom served their country as government employees. Whether or not the cliché of the New Woman was a natural barrier on someone as gifted and educated as Semiha Sureya, is a different matter. She obviously had the potential, endowment and the self-confidence for active participation in public and

professional life. Was she strained by the indoctrinated ideal she held on to so zealously? It is likely that she was. In this respect, the feminist critique of the modernization project emphasizes these strains brought on women whose voices were prevented from being heard by masculine narratives.

On the other hand, a recent alternative stance on the issue of the place of women within the modernization project, and how it affected them, as formulated by Karakaya-Stump underlines a hitherto neglected aspect of “empowerment” of enlightened modern mothers as indispensable and crucial agents of the modern society, who are entitled to equitable rights of their own in return to corresponding duties.

This article aimed at making an ordinary woman heard through her own narrative. While it is not difficult to view Semiha Sureya as someone confined to her home; her own voice, along with her image in the minds of her children, present the picture of a talented, able and powerful woman with a rare clarity of mind.

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