

Early Kurdish Nationalism and Women's Imagination

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Abstract

This paper aims to re-assess the role of women in the Kurdish nationalist movement by considering early Kurdish nationalism. It explores aspects of Kurdish nationalism, for example the patriarchal language that has been used in the representation of women's issues on the one hand and the possibility that Kurdish women have provided for the manifestation of their issues in the modern discourse on the other. Rather than conceptualizing nationalism and women's issues as either contradictory or complementary frames of reference for these activists, this paper argues that Kurdish nationalism, despite its patriarchal language and exclusion of women as a separate issue, has provided new opportunities for the raising of women's issues, as well as the issue of women in Kurdistan, for the first time since the prospect of nationalism.

Keywords

Kurdish nationalism, Patriarchy, Women, National movement, Identity

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Introduction

The relationship between feminist and nationalist discourse has been complex (Yuval-Davis 1998, 28). Unquestionably, the relationship between women and the Kurdish national movement has been the subject of controversy within the study of Kurdish nationalism. The nature of the relationship between nationalism and women and the way that women are represented in that nationalism as well as the role of women in nationalism, are three issues that have been the most controversial. The roots of these discussions can be attributed to the obvious and hidden dimensions of gender in the process of nationalism. In the process of nation-building, the share of women and the gender dimension have usually been neglected, as nationality and citizenship are both considered to be masculine issues. In this regard, the 'homeland' is usually imagined as feminine. For example, in the Kurdish language, Kurdistan as the homeland of the Kurds has always been a woman's name; in modern literature the invasion of Kurdistan is usually regarded as a rape of the homeland', in which case men fight to defend woman, children and honour. In Kurdistan, like many countries, the mythological motherland served as a goddess of sovereignty who, at least in the imagination, might restore a lost national identity by summoning her sons to the sacred rite of renewal through sacrifice (Karenay, cited in *ibid.*).

As men and women identify themselves in their interaction with each other, rather than confrontation, national identity is also shaped by comparison and interaction with other groups and nationalities. Despite apparent unity of nation, there are always differences in class, ethnicity and gender contradictions. As far as feminist historians are beginning to take on some of the ideological battles waged so vociferously by mainstream

historians, the preliminary reclaiming of women's past actions has supplied the foundation for a new generation of feminist revisionists, critical of the whole nationalist activity for its excessive emphasis upon masculinity. However, for some feminists, there is simply too much testosterone fueling the national struggle.

Many feminist approaches have, therefore, always been critical of nationalism as a male ideology. But as a crucial judgment, a growing literature discusses the implications of the discourse of nationalism for women's political participation, both the openings they can provide, particularly where combined with the ideologies of modernization and the limits they place on the representation of women's claims (Randall 2001, 194). Kurdish women's role is the best example that describes how individual women acquired political prominence in Kurdistan through their role in the guerrilla war of national independence, particularly in Bakûr and Rojava, which have played a more significant role in recent years.

Nation and nationality has become one of the most legitimate of universal values; individuals, or groups without a nation, have always struggled to achieve it. In recent times, many researchers have addressed this issue through various approaches and have responded to a variety of responses to this question. In Kurdistan's political-historical context, such research has been carried out with historical sociological methodology.

Historical evidence of the women's place in Kurdish history indicates that sometimes women have played leading roles in society. Parikhan Kahtoun was the leader of the Raman tribe until her sons became of age to their inherited position, Adele Khanum from Halabja and Shamsi Khatoun as chief of the Omeryan tribe were three famous female examples of powerful

women in Kurdish history. However, the insistence and emphasis placed by some male Kurdish nationalists in their discourses on women's rights in Kurdish society through history is misleading as it concealed what they really want to say (Tasdemir 2007, 22). According to women's pre-modern cultural situation and the highly patriarchal Kurdish society, these examples are merely exceptions because in Kurdish society, like other traditional societies, Kurdish women earn respect because of being mother or spouse, but not as an individual. Therefore, in the pre-modern era, there can be no evidence of women's equality or superiority over men.

With the emergence of nationalism as a modern ideology or discourse, we can see cases of change in the image of women and their representation as a new part of a whole that has become powerful in the political arena. It appears that, for first time in modern Kurdish literature, this new image of women and the question of gender equality is raised by educated nationalist males. Hacı Qadiri Koyî, the pioneer of Kurdish nationalism, was the first person in history to explicitly support the idea of education for women. As a turning point, this can be attributed to the transfer of western experience to a traditional society by Hacı Qadir, in which women were represented as the objectification of the part of national and ethnic ideals. This idea was the beginning of a masculine imagination of women that has always been criticized by feminists how were women represented in patriarchal nationalist ideology or discourse in later periods?

Early Kurdish nationalism and women's imagination

Despite discussions about the early steps of Kurdish nationalism, it seems that, during the last years of the nineteenth century, Kurdish nationalism emerged as a reaction to Turkish

nationalism in the late Ottoman period. In the ottoman Empire, as Yavuz states; Attempts at centralization during the nineteenth century politicized peripheral ethnic and religious identities (Yavuz 2001, 5). The collapse of the Ottoman Empire was concurrent with the advancement of Turkish nationalism and a turning point in the rise of Kurdish nationalism. But this rise can be traced back to at least half a century earlier which was when the Ottoman reform movements led to the formation of a class of Muslim professionals and intellectuals (Bajalan 2013, 11). Enlightened intellectuals, such as the Bedirxanî sons, adapted European ideologies such as nationalism and their new ideas were represented in associations such as *Kurdistan Azm-I Kavi Cemiyeti* led by Fikrî Efendî Diyarbakirî (1900) and newspapers such as *Kurdistan* (1898).

For the first time in Kurdish history, in correlation with the Kurdish situation in the Ottoman Empire, the Kurds began to produce literature which reflected both their status as well as demands for change. Rafiq Sabir believed the birth of the newspaper can be considered as the birth of Kurdish nationalism, but this should be analysed within the framework of the Millet system of the Empire and the linking of the Kurds to the Ottoman middle class and in particular, to the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) (Haji Aghaie 2015, 140). In this context, contributors to *Kurdistan* saw Kurdish nationality and identity as a need for modernization and education similar to other nations of the Empire. Although they believed that their land was being ruined by the despotism of Abdul Hamid II, they did remain loyal to the Empire.

A study of *Kurdistan* shows that the newspaper is virtually using a 'male language' by excluding women from politics and society. Kurdish nationalism, by the use of nodal points such as

the identification of homeland and the 'other', the misfortune and unsettling days of the Kurds, focusing on reason, as well as history as a mechanism of nation-building and self-representation, has tried to present a dual strategy: simultaneously showing protest, demonstrating that the Kurds, as Muslims of the Empire, were interlinking their fate with its continuation. A glance at the publications of that time shows that women, as an important part of society, did not pay attention to aristocracy and the middle class. After the establishment of *Jön Türkler* (1906) and the Constitutional Revolution (1908), the Kurds, also by the establishment of the *Teavun ve Tarakki Jamieyti* (Society for Cooperation and Progress), used the opportunity constructs available to them. However, during this period, they identified with the Ottoman brotherhood, but this period is marked by the increasing process of demarcations between Kurdish and Turkish identities.

Although society aimed at improving the lives of the Kurds and drawing the government's attention to their problems, it did not demand particular political rights for the Kurdish population (Özoglu 2004, 80). '*Kürt Teavün ve Terakki Gazetesi*' printed articles in Turkish about Kurdish history and literature which were published in 1908. The society was also involved in opening schools for Kurdish children in Istanbul. In this period other societies such '*Heviya Kurd Jamiyati*' (Kurdish Society of Hope), which was largely a student movement, the *Kurd Tashkilati Ijtimaiyati* (the Kurdish Social Organization Society) and the *Kurd Millet Firqasi* (the Kurdish National Party) came onto the scene (Bokani 2017, 265). In addition, the *Kurdistan Muhibban Jamiyati* was also established this time.

Between the Balkan Wars of 1912–13, the impact of nationalistic discourse led to the growth of Kurdish and Turkish nationalism. In his memoirs Nûrî Dêrsimî states:

The Turkish nationalist position that the CUP adopted after the Balkan Wars affected the Kurdish youth [in Istanbul]. Even those Kurds who had no interest in the Kurdish cause were agitated and saw the Turks as their enemies (*Düsman*). When we went to school, we would see Turkish slogans on the blackboard with large letters saying 'Happy are those who call themselves Turks' and 'Long Live Turks'. As a response, we would have to write on the board 'Long Live Kurds and Kurdistan' and 'Happy is the one who says, I am a Kurd' (cited in Özoglu 2004, 80).

Hevi and the opening of new perspectives

The first steps of the women's movement in Bakûr had been influenced by the women's movement in the Ottoman Empire. In this period, women expressed their demands by means of journalistic and associated activities. In fact, in the beginning women were designated as 'Ottoman women'; a definition that does not imply a homogenous category. They were divided in terms of their religion, social status and urban/rural position. The activity of Kurdish women in the period of the Ottoman women's movement is treated from this perspective; the first association of Kurdish women was established in İstanbul in 1919. It was called as *Kürt Kadınları Teali Cemiyeti* (Association for the Advancement of Kurdish Women) (Tasdemir 2007, 38). Until this period, there was no reference to women or issues relating to Kurdish women. The group was under the influence of Kurdish intellectuals from prominent families who were influenced by modern European ideas and the ideology of nationalism. The organization was founded for the purpose of

“enlightening Kurdish women with modern thoughts and for reforming Kurdish family life (ibid.).

There were few articles written about women's demands and their living conditions before the establishment of this association. While this article represented the condition of Kurdish women, the patriarchal language of nationalism and general social problems were two crucial points that represented the Kurdish issue. Therefore, it seems that a turning point can be seen in the nationalistic discourse articulated by new elements. *Roji Kurd* was one of the important periodicals released by this community.

As a result of student activities a secret underground organization, ‘Hevi’, was founded as the first Kurdish secular society in 1912; its branches expanded in Arzrum, Diyarbakir and Lausanne. Founding members of Hevi, included people such as Khalil Khayali, Ghadri Bey, Akram Jamil Pasha and Mamdouh Salim; all belonged to the urban middle class and were rooted in Kurdish aristocracy. The bilingual monthly publication of the society, *Roji Kurd*, of which only four issues were published (Haji Aghaie 2015, 184) considered important issues such as the essential need to establish of schools and orphanages in Kurdistan and to extend and improve Kurdish language and literature as well as the elimination of discord and division amongst the Kurdish elites.

Kurdish society was highly male-dominated, and it has been such for all of its known history (Bruinessen, 2001). In Kurdish political history, it seems that Hevi and its monthly issues were the first to raise women’s issues in Kurdish political literature; it can be seen as a turning point in the pre-modern mentality of

Kurds. With the title of '*Kurtlere Kadin Meselesi*'² *Roji Kurd* believed:

'In this age, all publications of the West and partially the Eastern world, pay attention to women's issues; In our area, women are half-attendees at schools and academics ... and for their survival and their rights, their political and social rights, women all over the world are screaming and fighting' (*Roji Kurd* 2002, 4: 11).

This article, after giving general references to women's global struggles, argued that women's issues are both important and a challenge, so detailed analysis and discussion was needed. Nevertheless, the roots of the disease should be sought in the culture of society that dominates Kurdistan (Haji Aghaie 2015, 193).

The text's image of women was based on the conditions of Kurdistan in which the Kurds had an unsophisticated and simple life. In this context, the current situation of women is due to underdeveloped conditions as well as tribal tensions. Runaway girls (elopements), for example, were one of the problems that emerged from unfavorable conditions and, in turn, increased tribal tensions. Aiming to provide a solution to this problem, it seems that this fundamental text with a deep understanding of the structure and awareness of the psychological dimensions of Kurdish families, seeks to deliver some analysis of the issue. Addressing both men and women, the text argued: 'In fact, Kurdish women are ignorant, illiterate and a source of shame'; from this angle, the text seeks to reform family structures and issues relating to marriage. The importance of this article is on

² Issues of Kurdish women

the linking of the issue of Kurdish women and families to the Kurdish people's life and survival. The status of women in each nation is considered a measure of the progress of that nation (Roji Kurd 2001, No. 4).

Despite the fact that, from a feminist perspective, the masculine writing can be criticized, it seems that the promotion of the Kurdish women's status and comparing the progress of the nation with the status of women is one of the crucial and exceptional images of women that could not be found at the time amongst neighboring nations. It could maybe be attributed to the significance of secularism promoted by the Hevi Society as after World War I, the Society explicitly defined itself as a secular organization and declared that 'Hevi was not related to religious matters. Political issues are distinct from those of religion. Let our notables engage in politics as a nation of Kurds; our aim is the promotion of the Kurdish homeland, science and knowledge' (Jin 1985, 5; 21, 905).

Despite the closure of Roj and Hataw-I Kurd as a periodical of the Society, the radical thought of 'Hevi' was embodied in 'Jin', which had been published in Istanbul during 1918. By adopting this radical concept, Jin presented the Kurds as a different nation, separate from the Turks and Iranians and opening new approaches to Kurdish issues. The Kurdish language, history, the relationship between the Kurds and Islam and Kurdish nationalism along with women's issues were reviewed with a new narrative. By adopting rhetoric resembling the Roji Kurd, 'Jin' again articulated Kurdish nationalism in relation to the progress of women. At the establishment ceremony of women progress society, Jin believed: 'As of all nations, attainment of Kurdish civilization has depended on the progress and flourishing of

women ... and the progress of women represents the progress of society' (ibid., 1040).

The opening speech of the Society, which was presented by a woman, is one of the most crucial images that shows how Kurdish nationalism, by using elements such as *Kurditi* (being Kurd) and the utilization of religion and sacrifice and struggle, Kurdish women enter the political process and simultaneously, with the use of religious elements that create the juxtaposition of human beings, emphasizes the difference between the Kurds and the Turks. It argued that the fate of all nations is well on the way, and all nations have attained their own rights. Because the Kurdish nation has a population of several millions, with its own territory known as Kurdistan, we are claiming our rights. We are grateful to those who have fought for the revered purposes and have shown their loyalty to their nation through sacrifice. Our aim is to find job opportunities for women and children who need cooperation and support through the creation of schools; our descendants will be bidden to engage in tasks such as reading and learning (ibid., 932).

Despite the apparent femininity of the text's rhetoric, the tendency, like other articles and predilections which have a male rhetoric, the women's observance is also the consideration of women as part of the nation's image. From the perspective of the text, women must fight for the goals of the nation and do not differ from men. Perhaps the only thing that is demonstrated in the femininity of the text is that the duty of mothers is to nurture and educate children. In other related texts we can see that, from the perspective of Kurdish nationalism, women were free and they could have held high positions in society or could have improved their difficult situation; improving their conditions should be done to advance the progression of the nation.

The experience of women in the Republic of Kurdistan

After nearly two decades, following the dynamics of Kurdish nationalism in Bakûr, modern Kurdish nationalism in Eastern Kurdistan was fashioned by 'The Society for the Revival of Kurdistan' known in Kurdish as *Komeley J.K.* This clandestine organization advocated the formation of a Kurdish state comprising all parts of Greater Kurdistan. J.K. is considered as the first Kurdish party with a modernist nationalist outlook.

In this part of Kurdistan, the issue of women was first introduced through this organization and then pursued its development. The founding members of J.K. (the first modern Kurdish organization) unlike Northern Kurdistan, was rooted in urban middle class. In their nationalism, the main internal enemies were tribalism, illiteracy and economic and industrial underdevelopment. Within this framework, women occasionally were called upon to join men and participate in the liberation of the motherland (Mojab 2001, 75). Women were often invited to participate in the struggle against these two classes in conjunction with men in the form of poetry, (see Nishtiman, 82-3, cited in Haji Aghaie 2015, 375). As Mojab describes, the organization paid lip service to other requirements of democratic life such as gender equality, and did not even consider abolishing feudal relations; women were the property and the chaste mother of the nation (ibid., 76).

With the establishment of the Republic of Kurdistan in Mahabad in 1946, which was also affected by the internal changes in J.K. as well as the Soviet Union's goals in the region, Kurdish women also had a significant level of participation in the Republic and in *Kurdistan* daily. During the celebrations of the 'independence (serbexoyî u istiqlal) of Kurdistan' on 22 January 1946, two women, by adopting male rhetoric, congratulated the

occasion, insisting on the Kurdish national issue. In the speech, the orator said the following:

Now, dear sisters, let's look at our dear brothers and extend our hands to one another, because I see that the motherland is expecting her daughters to begin action and education so that we also catch up with our dear brothers; today's world needs girls and boys to join each other like sisters and brothers for the liberation of the motherland ... [and] motherland is waiting for her daughters with her activity and education, to free him. (Kurdistan, 13: 4, cited in Mojab 2001, 79).

This political line, already articulated in Komele's publications, was repeatedly expressed in both female and male speeches, the press and in poetry. In another speech, Ismat Qazi, the daughter of Qazî Mohammad said: 'Women should have made several celebrations of our freedom so that the entire world knows that Kurdish women love freedom much more than men do'. These points are reminiscent of arguments made by Anthias and Yuval-Davis about the role of women in Kurdish nationalism:

'Women, however, are not just the biological reproducers of the nation, but also its cultural reproducers, often being given the task of guardians of 'culture' who are responsible for transmitting it to the children and constructing the 'home' in a specific cultural style. Culture is used as a resource in various ethnic and national projects and in such projects, women are constructed as symbols of national 'essence', unity and emancipation as well as border guards of ethnic, national and racial difference. These constructions of womanhood are often used as resources for national relations of both domination and resistance.' (Anthias and Yuval-Davis 1992, 116).

One of the most important events during the short life of the Republic was the formation by Kurdish women of the Democratic Party on March 15, 1946. One can say that the name indicates a reference to the KDP's women's wing. As Mojab argues, the primary aim of the women's party was to mobilize adult women in support of the Republic and the nation. Since the majority of these women were illiterate, the party organized literacy training classes as well as informal gatherings. Other activities included fundraising for the national army as well as participation in marches, demonstrations and writing articles for newspapers. Assistance to support the national army necessitated the female work of weaving clothes and socks for the pêşmerge 'soldiers'. The women's organization conferred on the Republic the image of a modern state interested in the advancement of women (Mojab 2001, 82). In the short term, laws were adopted to improve the social status of women and issues related to their marriage.

The women's demand in the form of a nationalist discourse, which resembles a lot of women's speech mechanisms in Bakûr falls within these parameters. By studying women's published texts in the *Kurdistan* daily, which are not too numerous, one can find that in women's rhetoric education and learning were two important fundamentals necessary for the advancement of Kurdish women status with the employment of elements such as politics, history, national and political freedom, actually adopting a masculine language. In the *Kurdistan* Daily, two texts can be found that partly deal with women's issues using feminist language (Kurdistan 2011, 31: 137; 36: 146).

In general, one can see that a lack of a female language has led to the creation of a male language in their speeches or writings. In other words, woman's rhetorical representation in the

Kurdistan indicates the representation of woman based on male characteristics which is defined by a male identity. In spite of these indications that could indicate the involvement of women in the political process, it seems that the insistence positioned by some male Kurdish nationalists in their discourses on women's rights, or by women, is misleading, since it conceals what they really want to say: that is to say there is no necessity for the liberation of women. However, the nature and degree of this liberation depends on a large scale and to a large extent on their families' social status. The women mentioned in *Jin* were probably members of an aristocrat family and in the case of Kurdistan, during the Republic of Kurdistan, they were close to the officials of that period; women counted only if they could assist men in the nationalist cause.

But as an important point, one should not forget that women's issues, under the influence of secular nationalism, made a space for their introduction and evolution. In other words, women were able to express their existence through nationalist discourse as the first step, sometimes reflecting their demands as a stratum. However, nationalist discourse also produced women as an important part of society, ignoring their particular issues, in the form of a patriarchal language. This mutual relationship, in the next phase of the evolution of Kurdish nationalism, took diverse directions in different parts of Kurdistan. But what matters is that the Kurdish secular nationalistic discourse, despite its patriarchal language, has provided an opportunity to open the door for women to enter the political arena.

Conclusion

Any political analysis should be carried out within a structural and historical context. In spite of the view of the feminist

theorists, that see nationalism and its patriarchal language with a pessimistic outlook, it seems that any socio-political phenomenon should be considered in a particular context. As a general phenomenon, the patriarchal nature of nationalism cannot be doubted; however, in the context of the early Kurdish history of nationalism, at least in two parts of the study, which were very briefly represented. It can be seen that only in the light of this ideology or discourse, women have had the opportunity for self-expression.

At different times and within different regimes, opportunity spaces for women, and in the context of nationalism, can be used to alter the existing pattern of gender relations. In certain contexts, for example in some political formations or during moments of regime change that is transition or fluidity, there may be a greater potential for actions and strategies which will act to alter gender relations. Fluid spaces during the transition of the Caliphate to the Republican period in Turkey made it possible for the nationalist discourse to use women as part of the community to mobilize the Kurds; women also used this new space both to raise their own issues and to mobilize Kurdish nationalism. A similar experience in the Republic of Kurdistan may be seen. However, the importance for the subsequent periods of nationalism is, despite the male imaging use of the biological dimension, and other masculine imagination of it, and viewing women as a homogenous category, the next advances should be seen in the development of this stage. The review of this stage, which could serve as the basis for the transforming tradition in the discourse of liberating Kurdish nationalism, seems necessary to re-examine the role of women, the language of women in later stages, and, finally, the development of Kurdish nationalism.

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