

Cumhuriyet'in Dindar Kadınları [The religious women of the Republic]

Fatma K. Barbarosoğlu. İstanbul: Profil, 2009. 231 pp. ISBN 978-975-996-229-6

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Social and political resistance against the unfriendly measures of the Turkish state toward religious freedoms has been widely studied. Yet beside some of the recent literature about the ban on headscarves in the 'public sphere' (*kamusal alan*), which includes state institutions as well as public and private universities, women's positions and perspectives on the resistance have been largely ignored. Although it would be unfair to characterize the literature on the Islamic resistance in Turkey as a women-free body of works, the ways in which the literature reports the course of events or the literature's choice of emphasis on the actors are clearly male-dominated.

The Turkish sociologist Fatma K. Barbarosoğlu's book therefore fills a gap in the literature by inquiring into the earlier stages of the Islamic revival efforts in Turkey by highlighting female perspectives. This endeavor is also interesting in the sense that the Kemalist revolution presented an 'ideal woman' image as an embodiment of its laicist reforms. This is unlike most revolutions, which, in Nilüfer Göle's words, 'introduce the image of an ideal man.' Barbarosoğlu's analysis puts in the center the life stories of women who belong to a generation whose prominent members have directly or indirectly become the role models of today's urban young women who wear the headscarf (pp. 15-16, 18). Barbarosoğlu declares that the central aims of the book are (1) to reveal the language of the solidarity created by religious women in their non-governmental endeavors, and (2) make known the conditions of their struggle (p. 15).

These 'role models' whose life stories Barbarosoğlu has chosen to explore were born between 1914 and 1945. Barbarosoğlu indicates that they share a collective pain (p. 11), but the ways in which they go about relieving this pain are not necessarily the same. They have encountered the state or its policies on different

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fronts: some educated hundreds of Muslim girls (p. 48), some founded associations, some published influential magazines (p. 164), and some had to individually suffer from and/or resist the discriminatory state policies which deprived the veiled women of their right to educate or be educated (pp. 216–221). When answering the question of who these women are, what needs to be said first and foremost is that almost all of them belong to a sufi order, and mostly to the Nakşibendi, according to Barbarosoğlu (p. 14). In fact, the reflections of their sufi backgrounds are highly visible especially in the details given in the introductory chapter about the making of the book. Barbarosoğlu states that the first obstacle for her in the process was to convince the ‘heroines’ that their life stories were in fact ‘worth telling others’ (p. 9). Most of them were of the opinion that ‘they did not live a noteworthy life,’ and referred her to others whose lives they deemed more important (p. 9). Even those who eventually accepted to be interviewed did not seem to have changed their opinions after the process. One of the interviewees, for example, continued to downplay the impact of her past activities, and told Barbarosoğlu that the whole chat was actually ‘unnecessary’ (p. 9).

The sufi backgrounds of the ‘women of the past’ reflect also on their mystical lives. For example, one of the women whom Barbarosoğlu tried to convince for an interview was years ago engaged to be married to a pilot, but unfortunately the pilot died in a plane crash. Since that day, she has refused to have physical contact with people, and did not even shake hands with anyone (p. 12). Barbarosoğlu reports in amazement that at the time when she met her, she was in her sixties but did not look even half that age. Even more astonishing was what happened during her interview. At some point into the discussion, she went to the kitchen to bring some tea and cookies. But when she returned, she said, ‘They do not let me tell.’ Barbarosoğlu was disappointed, and decided that maybe she could at least build the story by using the information she had provided until that point. But she said, ‘No, no! They do not permit the story either.’ Therefore, she does not have a chapter in the book. Barbarosoğlu does not even acknowledge her name.

What is equally amazing is that, unlike the more-than-60-year-old interviewee’s unbelievably young looks, her not-of-this-earth line of reasoning involving ‘them’ does not surprise Barbarosoğlu at all. She simply says, ‘I was not ignorant enough to ask who, of course’ (p. 12). This makes the reader see the author as an insider who is familiar with the mystical tradition of Islam rather than an outside observer. Obviously, the way the book treats the frequent references the interviewees make to mystical elements and supernatural events, such as dreams or instant answers to prayers, as ordinary occurrences is a little unusual for a work by a sociologist. Barbarosoğlu acts like a reflexivist ethnographer, if not an actual fellow sufi. But then again, Barbarosoğlu’s ability to understand and communicate with the interviewees is a major part of her success in bringing to light the women’s perspectives on and responses to the laicist measures of the Republic.

In all, *The Religious women of the republic* is a work by a sociologist that falls somewhere between the fields of sociology, politics, and anthropology. In fact, due to the proximity of the interviewees to the period and the phenomenon in question, it is a primary source for several disciplines in this understudied era. As of now, the language barrier makes it accessible only to the Turkish audiences, and its translation into English would be a notable contribution.