Veiled Women, Belly-dancers and Feminists: Public Representations of Turkish Women and the Modern Nationalist Experiment

By Jennifer W. Nourse

First time visitors to Turkey, especially those who land in Istanbul, are often shocked by its sophisticated cosmopolitanism, perhaps best embodied in the emancipated "Europeanized" women walking Istanbul's boutique lined avenues. As we met with serious academic scholars, both male and female, it was obvious that the anglicized academic dress code practiced in the US did not apply here. Fashionable business dress appropriate for Milan or Paris was worn by professors and even our tour guide. The well-educated (ABD in philosophy) woman leading our seminar group around Istanbul was nattily dressed with matching shoes, scarf and jewelry pontificating about Turkish social values. "Turkish women are free, independent and well-educated just as Western women are." "Women as well as men no longer regard Islam as all important and women haven't worn veils since the 1920s when the state banned them."

Initially our guides' words were confirmed by the visual encounters we had; no Islamic piety surfaced when she escorted us, on our second evening in Istanbul, to a Las Vegas style dinner and show. The campy touristic revue, serving mediocre food amidst long tables designating the guests' national flags, entertained the global community brought (voluntarily or not) to witness a "Turkish Delight"--sexually provocative (and silicone enhanced) belly-dancers boldly enticing male audience members onto the stage to straddle various solo dancers whose hips writhed to the beat of western pop songs. In sum, the public statements made by women through their clothing and their narratives about themselves were shocking as well as strangely familiar; they were shocking because they defied any stereotypical presumptions we might have had about women in Islamic cultures but paradoxically they were strangely familiar because they resembled the kinds of women one would encounter in any affluent European or North American city such as New York, Paris or Milan.

Our guide's words, supplemented by our readings prior to arrival, reminded us that the creation of a modern Turkish woman began in 1923 when the Turkish nation was founded under the leadership of Mustafa Kemal Ataturk,. Ataturk and the Kemalists not only declared that women have the right to vote, participate in public education, and run for parliament, they were encouraged to do so. Women who came out from under the veils and donned western dress were regarded by the Kemalists as "true Republicans" patriotic citizens of the newly declared state. Such feminist reforms were radical not only for Turkey, but also for any early twentieth century European or American countries. This cutting edge social experiment, largely designed to modernize and westernize the mostly rural and conservative population of Turkey began in the cities during the 1920s and slowly filtered down to the masses. "Emancipated, secular and well-educated women became the feminist role models for traditional rural women" said our guide. Throughout the twentieth century rural Turkish women gained more and more access to educational and employment opportunities, eventually immigrating to urban centers such as Istanbul and Ankara to fulfill their duties as good Turkish young women at

Universities and large corporations. “This is all due to Ataturk’s ‘feminist-minded’ reforms”, our guide told us. “Once rural women became educated, they were enlightened about westernization and moved to the cities to escape their more restrictive rural homes.”

The guides’ patriotic claims about the wonders of the Kemalist revolution and the eagerness with which women embraced it were sincerely expressed, but the frequency of such claims uttered by person after person we encountered led me (and others) to question whether or not the assertions were parroted phrases spoken through the lense of a naïve patriot. This is not to deny that we were given empirical evidence to support those claims. From the 1920s through the 1950s only 18% of the Turkish population lived in the cities, but today, the statistics are almost completely reversed. Only 35% of the Turkish population lives in rural areas. “The population of Istanbul alone has grown nearly 10 times in that period to a whopping 14 million people. Despite the massive influx of rural migrants, Istanbul has remained a very European city” (Matthews 2004: 34). Apparently hordes of young, modern youth are leaving their rural homes to embrace a westernized, “modern”, urban life. In Istanbul rap music blares from hip boutiques and the streets, cafes and nightclubs teem with young men and women indistinguishable from youth in Paris or New York.

It is in this environment, in Taksim Square in Istanbul, amidst the punked out, the haute coutured and the dreadlocked, that our first sighting occurs; two completely shrouded young women quietly pass us by in full Islamic Burqa, black flowing robes covering all but a small slit for the eyes.[1] I recalled that Turkish elites during Ataturk’s time mocked women covered in black, calling them “beetles.” Women were encouraged by Ataturk to be symbols of the new state and those who resisted these ideas of social progress were mocked. Though our guide tries to dismiss the presence of such women as “new arrivals to the city from the country. Unlike the majority of Turkish women” I know from our seminar readings that there is an increasing number of young urban Turkish women who have chosen to don the burga or the more loose fitting hijab. I also know that the relationship between secularism and Islam is not as easily dichotomized into an urban/rural, modern/traditional divide. I question whether Kemalist reforms were as deeply ingrained as our guide proclaims. In the rest of this essay, I address these questions by analyzing gendered notions of public dress in contemporary Turkey as these concepts intersect in complex ways with Turkish history, nationalism and religious identity.

ATATURK AND THE “FEMINIST” STATE

To understand how contemporary Turkish women have come to identify themselves through their dress, a brief historical background is needed. The demise of the

[1] Women's dress in Islamic culture is based on a principle of female modesty. Customs of the time, place, and social class of the woman influence what she might wear. Some options include hijab -- or modest, loose clothing and a scarf over the head and under the chin -- and burqa or burka, a more complete covering of the head, face and body. It is more common to see women in **hijab**, loose clothing topped by a type of scarf worn around the head and under the chin. Women don't share a common style nor have the same reasons for wearing hijab. For many it reflects the belief that they are following God's commandments, are dressing according to "the correct standard of modesty," or simply are wearing the type of traditional clothes they feel comfortable in. Women were encouraged to be symbols of the new state. Those who resisted these ideas of social progress were mocked.. (Women in the Muslim World, p. 2).

600 year dominance of the Ottoman Empire after World War I created a vacuum of power in which Ataturk was able to create what some scholars call a "feminist" state,"a male-dominated state that made women's equality in the public sphere a national policy."[2] Mustafa Kemal Ataturk denounced the veil as demeaning and a hindrance to a civilized nation. But he did not outlaw it. Women were encouraged to be symbols of the new state through their manner of modern dress. By encouraging women to unveil, follow fashion, and to enter universities and professions, (running for parliament or piloting airplanes), Ataturk,as a charismatic leader and founder of the republic, set the standard for how a small group of urban, middle-class citizens should value women. Concommitantly, Ataturk declared the Turkish state secular and asked this small group of urban elite to renounce their public expression of religious identity. By forbidding men from wearing the Ottoman fez and women from wearing traditional veils, Ataturk used public dress as the means to declare oneself a citizen of a modern and secular nation-state.

Official state rhetoric espoused by tour guides such as our own portray women in urban centers' transition from Ottoman servitude to powerful emancipation as a radical but welcomed shift. Recent studies, however, indicate the so-called emancipated Turkish women sacrificed certain freedoms to become the state's role models. "Since the new Republican woman represented the modern, secular, Westernized state, she was expected to behave and dress in what the state defined as a modern, Western manner." (White 2003: 146). "Women who felt that their religious beliefs required them to dress modestly and cover their heads, and women who kept to older customs—like sitting on cushions and eating at low trays instead of sitting on chairs at a table—were not accepted into this Republican sisterhood and were alternately reviled as the uncivilized primitive or romanticized as the "noble peasant. Since poverty and rural origin hindered women from "obeying" the injunction to leave their homes, become educated, and contribute to the Republic's professional life, social class and urban/rural differences were, from the beginning implicit in the differentiation of the Republican woman from the "reactionary" woman. The ideal Republican woman was a "citizen woman," urban and urbane, socially progressive, but also uncomplaining and dutiful at home. Modernity, as defined by the Turkish state, included marriage and children as a national duty for women. Marriage was to be companionate, rather than contractual and segregated, and children were to be raised "scientifically" by mothers educated in the latest childrearing and household techniques from the West. Beyond that, state feminism did not concern itself with what happened behind the closed doors of the home. The welfare and duties of women were discussed almost exclusively as attributes of the national ideal. It is only in recent decades that the state feminist project has been challenged by women with alternative views of what it means to participate in a modern society and by feminists who believe that women should be empowered as individuals, not just as a class. (White 146-147) .

Moreover, in the countryside, the reforms were less readily accepted. When such reforms were implemented by the Republican state for the Turkish citizenry at large, a

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[2] There is much debate about whether or not a feminist state was actually created by Ataturk. For this discussion see Arat, Yesim 1997. "The Project of Modernity and Women in Turkey." In *Rethinking Modernity and National Identity in Turkey*, Sibel Bozdogen and Resat Kasaba, eds., 95-112. Seattle: University of Washington Press.

population more conservative than the urban elite, men acquiesced, but women rarely did. Up until the 1980s few rural young girls attended school beyond primary or secondary education, most continued to marry at an early age, soon after menarche, and most acquiesced to arranged marriages. Moreover, they continued to wear traditional Turkish veils (unlike the white or black Arab inspired chorda worn by 21st century women), participate in Islamic training and rituals, work at home or in the fields, and define themselves primarily as mothers of many children. In other words, the Kemalist Reforms of the 1920s created an urban/rural split between "modern/secular/westernized" women of the cities and "traditional/religious/ethnic" women of the countryside. During Ataturk's time only about 20 percent of the population lived in cities so his Reform of urban women as symbols of the new state was limited. Many rural areas of Turkey were inaccessible and the newly established bureaucracy was too weak to reach the far corners of the country. Ataturk devised a Teacher Training College designed to send city trained teachers to remote regions. He himself even traveled to the borders to urge women to remove their veils

Rural converts to such heavy-handed proselytizing may not have been as numerous as pro-Kemalist narratives lead us to believe. An indication that remote villagers and urban dwellers may have resisted Ataturk's rapid moves toward modernization is revealed when Ataturk recruits a philosopher critical of the Kemalist agenda, and co-opts the critique as his own. From the beginning of Ataturk's Kemalist revolution his major dilemma centered on the public's preconceived notion that modernization and Westernization are the same thing. Ziya Gokalp's critiques answered some of these dilemmas saying the young Republic need not look to the West, "with its dangerous notions of romance and individualism for a model of feminism and egalitarianism, but could look to its own semi-mythic past in pre-Islamic Turkic Central Asia. It was the Turks who had migrated to Anatolia, in central Turkey today, beginning in the 11th century, and from there it was they who consolidated the Ottoman empire in all directions. Seeking to distance "itself from its imperal Islam-tainted Ottoman heritage, the new Republic looked to its nomadic Turkic past for historic roots. Gokalp argued that pre-Islamic Turkic society was, by nature, egalitarian and that the ancient Turks were both democrats and feminists (Kandiyoti 1997: 123). Turks, in other words, had no need to imitate Europeans, but could look to their own past. He believed that Islam had introduced a way of life out of balance with Turkish traditions and need to be purged of the cultural pollutants it had acquired as it spread across the globe. Thus, the great historical tradition of Islam was compatible with a democratic, egalitarian society if it supported 'correct' religious practices in balance with the 'other' great historical tradition of Turkishness. " (White p. 148).

Ataturk inspired by ideals of French revolution—reason and science The state changed the institutions and the physical environment to match that of Europe (Istanbul was rebuilt and Ankara created along the lines of the architecture of Europe). Then people's behavior and attitudes would change as a result. This explains the great emphasis placed on such public symbols as clothing, architecture, and the visibility of women in the public sphere. By the late nineteenth century, the universalistic and liberal projects that defined progtress and modernity in very specific ways , allowing no ambiguities and excluding certain, generally ethnically defined cultures as unsuitable for progress in their present

state (Kasaba 1997: 26-7). In Turkey as well, unity and collectivist purpose rather than universally applicable civil rights, came to define republican citizenship (Keyder 1997: 42). Like the French revolutionaries, Ataturk believed that modernity and law and order were best imposed from a strong center. Despite its strong authoritarian center, Turkey was saved from the excesses of the Soviet and fascist experiements by the state's selective incorporation of legal, economic, and social models from a variety of Western societies, including George Washington. Ataturk was surrounded by intellectuals, like Gokalp, debating different views on the role of regigion, the state, women and the family, and other issues, many inspired by a nationalism that assumed a gender-egalitarian, pre-Islamic Turkic society. In other words, the Turkish state project of modernity has many sources of inspiration, but ultimately these were molded to the powerful and original vision of its charismatic leader. After Ataturk's death in 1938, the military took over as guardian of the democratic, secular, modernist state ideal. (White page149)
Additionally the state's reformation of the ideal Turkish woman in the cities was not always as smooth as official rhetoric proclaims. Though the reforms created a generation of extremely powerful and emancipated women, their freed

Such an emphasis on public expression of national identity has created an interesting contemporary dilemma for the Turkish state and its attitude toward women. It amalgam

In 1950, 82 percent of Turks lived on the land--now it's under 35 percent. The population of Istanbul alone has grown nearly 10 times in that period to a whopping 14 million people. Despite the massive influx of rural migrants, Istanbul has remained a very European city--while most of Turkey is far from being a European country. And as Turkey gets ever closer to joining the European Union, there's never been a better time to be young and single in the big city.

Young people yearning for the bright lights is nothing new--in any country. But in Turkey the phenomenon is also at the forefront of a social revolution that promises to bring the country closer to Europe than any legislation from the government in Ankara. Istanbul's Marmara University recently conducted a nationwide survey of graduating urban high-school students that showed a startling generation gap. Most students questioned thought that the best age to get married was 30, and the best number of kids to have was two; most wanted to stay in Turkey and, just like in Western Europe, the overwhelming majority of female students aimed to have careers before settling down. The big difference: unlike Western Europe, Turkey has a young population, with 21 percent under the age of 24, and a median age of just 25. And that youth bulge is disproportionately concentrated in the cities.

Turkey's big cities are a place of liberation, for young women above all. Many come to escape the rigid social strictures of rural society, especially in Turkey's superconservative southeast, where arranged marriage is common and women are rarely seen unaccompanied in public. The contrast between the two worlds--one urban and sophisticated, the other rural and religious--is increasingly drawn more sharply in Turkey than in any other country. Fortunately, that means the scope for change is also greatest

here. The cities are winning--and their vibrant youth culture is shaping the country Turkey will soon become.

Newsweek International, July 26, 2004 p34
Here and Now; Best country to be young--Turkey. Rural kids are flocking to Istanbul to 'live a modern life'. (Cover Story) *Owen Matthews.*